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Asia in Review

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Dear Readers,

Welcome to this week's issue of the Asia in Review (AIR) covering 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 Norway's Independence Day and Tonga's Emancipation 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: Promotion of Xi Jinping's wife raises leadership stability concerns

(ms) Peng Liyuan, the wife of Chinese President Xi Jinping, has, according to reports of the Jamestown Foundation, taken on a prominent role in the People's Liberation Army (PLA) after being promoted to a senior position in the Central Military Commission's Cadre Assessment Committee. The development, if true, raises questions about the longevity of Xi's ruling and the size of his remaining confidants.

Peng Liyuan, a renowned singer which currently held the rank of major-general in the PLA, the alleged recent promotion to a senior staff position in the Central Military Commission's (CMC) Cadre Assessment Committee, established after the COVID-19 pandemic, makes her co-responsible for evaluating the loyalty

and competence of military cadres, as well as deciding over promotions and the general trajectory of their military careers. Peng's possible new role is seen as part of Xi's broader strategy to consolidate power by prioritizing personal loyalty over professional competence.

Peng Liyuan's increasing public profile and her elevation within the military have drawn comparisons to Mao Zedong's reliance on his fourth wife, Jiang Qing, during the Cultural Revolution. Peng's new role in the CMC's Cadre Assessment Committee suggests she may be involved in vetting the loyalty of up-and-coming military leaders. This move is seen as a response to the apparent lack of fidelity within the "Xi Family Army" and reflects Xi's overall distrust of the top brass.

Despite her prominence, some analysts argue that Peng is unlikely to step into the forefront of Chinese politics in the same way Jiang Qing did. Peng's involvement in military affairs could be limited to behind-the-scenes roles, and there is skepticism about her potential induction into the Politburo.

Since his second tenure, Xi's leadership has been characterized by an increasing centralization of power under his person. This centralization is evident in Xi's restructuring of the State Council, sidelining key economic policymakers like the late former Premier Li Keqiang (see AiR No. 44, October/2023, 5). The rise of the "Xi Family Army," which includes loyalists in top military positions such as General Zhang Youxia and Admiral Miao Hua, raises questions about Xi's leadership strategy and its impact on China's military and political system. However, recent sackings of high military officials, including General Li Zuocheng, former chief of the Joint Staff Department of the Central Military Commission, and General Wei Fenghe, Minister of National Defense, suggest cracks in Xi's control over the upper echelons of the Party-state apparatus.

While the reasons for their and other subsequent dismissals and personnel changes have not been made public, there is speculation. In addition to alleged corruption, the main reason is said to have been "two-facedness" on the part of high-ranking military officials. While the officials formally shared and supported Xi Jinping's ambition to reunify Taiwan with the mainland, there are said to have been internal doubts about the PLA's actual ability to successfully implement this, undermining Xi.

Factional shifts within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) have also played a role in the current power dynamics. Above all, the Fujian clique, a network of

close confidants from Xi's 17 years in Fujian between 1985 and 2002, has been able to expand its presence. Cai Qi in particular, who according to the official protocol is as Secretary of the Secretariat of the Chinese Communist Party only the number five on the Politburo Standing Committee, has increasingly been seen right at Xi's side in recent months and was awarded high-ranking posts in the course of the Two Sessions in March last year. Further high-ranking officials from the Fujian clique include Wang Xiaohong, Minister of Public Security, and He Lifeng, one of the four vice premiers.

One faction that has lost potential influence is the Zhejian faction, officials who worked with Xi during his time in the province between 2002 and 2007. Although Premier Li Qiang, the country's number two, comes from this faction, the investigation into another important member of this faction, former Minister of Justice Tang Yijun, for corruption in April of this year casted doubts about the faction's strength.

Within the military, Xi's removal of top generals and his reliance on people with whom he has personal conections especially in the form of his wife might signal his concerns about loyalty and security. The mysterious disappearances from the public of former defense ministers General Li Shangfu and General Wei Fenghe, even though the later on reappeared in the beginning of May (see AiR No. 20, May/2024, 2) along with the detention of numerous senior military officials on corruption charges, underscore the instability within the PLA's upper ranks. The silent removal of Lieutenant General Zhong Shaojun, a trusted aide of Xi, further illustrates these internal challenges.

Xi Jinping's approach to leadership, characterized by the centralization of power and reliance on personal loyalty, raises questions about the long-term stability of the PLA and the broader political landscape.

As the Third Plenum of the CCP Central Committee approaches, the implications of these developments will be closely watched. The Plenum is expected to address loyalty and policy adherence under "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for the New Era."

In conclusion, Peng Liyuan's rise within the Chinese military underscores the complex dynamics of Xi Jinping's leadership. The promotion reflects Xi's efforts to consolidate power during a time of dwindling numbers of confidants. [Deutsche Welle in Chinese] [First Post] [The Jamestown Foundation]

China: Government announces export controls on aviation and aerospace equipment

(ms) In a move aimed at bolstering national security, China has announced new export controls on certain aviation and aerospace equipment, effective July 1. The restrictions will apply to a broad range of items including aircraft engines, structural parts, and related manufacturing equipment and software, as outlined by the Ministry of Commerce, the General Administration of Customs, and the Central Military Commission's equipment development department.

The newly imposed controls are intended to "safeguard national security and interests" and to meet international non-proliferation obligations, according to official statements. Exporters of the designated items will now be required to obtain export licenses.

This move comes amidst ongoing tensions and mutual trade restrictions between China and the United States. For instance, China has previously sanctioned U.S. aerospace and defense firms in response to American arms sales to Taiwan, while the US led western sanctions against Chinas high-tech semiconductor sector.

The impact of these controls on global trade remains uncertain. China's aviation and aerospace sectors are growing, yet they still depend on foreign technology for certain components. The United States, Germany, and Saudi Arabia have been major importers of Chinese aerospace products, while the U.S., France, and Hong Kong lead in importing Chinese gas turbines and related parts. [ABC News] [China Daily] [South China Morning Post]

China: Former senior banker sentenced to death for accepting USD 151 million in bribes

(ms) A Chinese court sentenced former senior banker Bai Tianhui to death on May 28 for accepting over USD 151 million in bribes. Bai, who was the general manager of China Huarong International Holdings, used his position to facilitate project acquisitions and corporate financing in return for bribes, according to the court's findings.

While China is believed to have over 1000 executions per year, these are rarely made public. Even rarer is

the severity of Bai's sentence in a corruption or embezzlement case. But Bai is already the second official from the state-controlled China Huarong Asset Management to receive such a sentence. In January 2021, Lai Xiaomin, Bai's former boss, was executed for taking bribes totaling USD 277 million, embezzling public assets, and committing bigamy.

The court described Bai's crimes as particularly severe, noting the large amounts of money involved and the negative impact on society. Despite Bai's cooperation with authorities, which led to other arrests, the court decided that the gravity of his actions warranted the death penalty. Bai's political rights have been permanently revoked, and all his personal property will be confiscated.

Bai's sentencing comes as part of a broader anti-corruption campaign led by Chinese President Xi Jinping. Since coming to power, Xi has focused on rooting out corruption in various sectors, especially the financial industry. This year, the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI), China's top anti-corruption body, has detained over 30 senior financial executives and state regulators.

The death sentence handed down to Bai and Lai and especially the publication of it might be interpreted as a deterrence signal, especially directed to the financial sector, coming amidst the country's ongoing economic problems. [Business Insider] [Channel News Asia] [China Daily] [South China Morning Post]

China: Economic indicators signal persistent economic challenges

(ms) In May the official manufacturing Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI) dropped to 49.5 from April's 50.4, indicating a contraction in factory activity. This decline, below expectations, hints at concerns regarding the sustainability of China's economic rebound. Similarly, the new manufacturing export order subindex declined to 47.2, suggesting a slowdown in export demand.

While the non-manufacturing PMI remained in expansion territory at 51.1, it saw a slight decrease from April's 51.2. However, sub-indices within the non-manufacturing sector, such as new orders in construction and business activity in the service sector, experienced declines, underscoring broader economic challenges.

Analysts have highlighted the importance of proactive fiscal policies to stimulate domestic demand amidst an overreliance on exports. Policy interventions, particularly in the property sector, with orders for local governments to buy unsold homes as well as mortgage rate cuts (see AiR No. 21, May/2024, 3), aim to bolster growth. However, the effectiveness of these measures is still to be seen. [National Bureau of Statistics] [South China Morning Post]

So far, despite these efforts, structural imbalances persist, with concerns over deflationary pressures and weakening consumer confidence due to the property market downturn. While the International Monetary Fund (IMF) revised China's GDP growth outlook upwards to "around 5 percent", aligning itself with the goals set by the Chinese government, it stressed the need for additional support, especially regarding housing market vulnerabilities and escalating trade tensions. [Nikkei Asia 1]

Additionally, the depreciation of the Chinese renminbi against the US dollar to a six-month low, reflects divergent monetary policies between the US Federal Reserve and the People's Bank of China, posing challenges for export competitiveness. [Nikkei Asia 2]

Xi Jinping calls for prioritization of youth and migrant worker employment

(ms) China's President Xi Jinping has emphasized the need for increased job creation for young people and migrant workers, making this a key focus of government policy. This announcement was made during a Politburo study session, on May 28.

Xi highlighted that creating jobs for college graduates should be a top priority. The youth unemployment rate for 16–24-year-olds, excluding college students, was 14.7 percent in April, a slight decrease from 15.3 percent in March. The exclusion of colleague students from the survey pool comes after last year's youth unemployment rate rose over 20 percent (see AiR No. 34, August/2023, 4).

Additionally, Xi also addressed the need to support migrant workers by encouraging them to return to their hometowns and start businesses in rural areas. This approach aims to prevent a large-scale return to poverty due to unemployment and to stabilize the incomes of those who have been lifted out of poverty.

China's Ministry of Human Resources reported that 4.36 million new urban jobs were created in the first

four months of this year, achieving 36 percent of the annual job creation target. The government plans to support industries and enterprises with high job creation capabilities to further boost employment.

Xi also noted the importance of aligning higher education with the needs of new technologies and industries to better prepare graduates for the job market. Approximately 11.8 million graduates are expected to enter the job market this year, a 2 percent increase from last year. [Bloomberg] [The World Street Journal] [Xinhua]

China: Easing of restrictions to boost renewable energy sector

(ms) China has recently announced measures aimed at promoting its renewable energy sector by relaxing restrictions on solar and wind installations. The State Council's action plan focuses on enhancing energy conservation and reducing carbon dioxide emissions over the next two years.

The action plan allows solar and wind installations to operate at a utilization rate of 90 percent, down from the previous 95 percent, potentially encouraging more renewable energy projects. Market response to this development has been positive, with leading solar companies such as Jinko Solar Holding experiencing gains in the market.

Furthermore, the action plan aligns with China's broader goals for energy conservation and carbon reduction. It includes measures to curtail wasteful production capacity in sectors such as steel, petrochemicals, non-ferrous metals, and building materials.

The action plan comes as China's wind turbine and solar panel manufacturers face challenges due to oversupply issues exacerbated by import restrictions from the US and EU.

China's emphasis on renewable energy is highlighted by its identification of solar panels, electric vehicles, and lithium batteries as pillars of economic growth. Despite oversupply challenges, the clean energy sector has contributed significantly to China's GDP growth.

China's plans for non-fossil fuel energy sources, including hydrogen energy, reflect its ambition to play a leading role in sustainable energy production. Projections suggest a dominant role for non-fossil energy in China's energy supply by mid-century.

[Global Times] [South China Morning Post 1] [South China Morning Post 2] [State Council]

China: Hong Kong's tightened grip on remembrance during 35th anniversary of Tiananmen Square incident

(ms) June 4, marks the 35th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square crackdown. Traditionally, Hong Kong has been a focal point for commemorating the victims of the 1989 incident. However, the imposition of national security law in 2020, in response to the anti-government protests a year prior, has led to a stark shift in how the city remembers the day.

This year, the Hong Kong authorities' suppression of remembrance activities has been more evident than ever. The annual vigil in Victoria Park, which once drew tens of thousands, has been replaced by a pro-Beijing carnival. Activists and former leaders of the now-disbanded Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements in China, the group responsible for organizing the vigil, are facing prosecution. Chow Hang-tung, a prominent activist and leader of the Alliance, remains in detention, serving a sentence of over 30 months, and could face even longer sentences (see entry below).

In the days leading up to this year's anniversary, authorities detained performance artist Sanmu Chen. Chen, who mimed drinking and appeared to write or draw in the air, was taken to a police station but released unconditionally after causing what police described as "chaos."

The Hong Kong Catholic Diocese, which used to hold annual memorial masses for the victims of Tiananmen, has canceled these services for the third consecutive year. Instead, the Diocese held a service to pray for the Catholic Church in China and the country itself. Cardinal Stephen Chow emphasized forgiveness in a prayer published last week, subtly referencing the 1989 crackdown. He argued that forgiveness could lead to reconciliation and healing, a stance that has drawn mixed reactions given the context of the ongoing suppression of democratic freedoms in Hong Kong.

A Christian newspaper traditionally releasing content about the vigil left its front page mostly blank, a poignant protest against the restrictions. This act of silent defiance highlights the growing constraints on freedom of expression in the city.

Since Beijing imposed the national security law in 2020, the landscape of civil liberties in Hong Kong has dramatically changed, a deterioration that will probably continue with the implementation of the city's own national security law in March of this year (see AiR No. 13, March/2024, 4). Critics argue that the disappearance of the Tiananmen vigil exemplifies the erosion of the freedoms that were supposed to be protected when Hong Kong was handed back to China by Britain in 1997.

The authorities defend the law as a necessary measure to restore stability following the pro-democracy protests of 2019. However, the arrests of activists and the banning of public commemorations tell a different story, one of a city where expressions of dissent are increasingly met with harsh penalties.

As Hong Kong marks the 35th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square crackdown, the ways in which the city remembers and reflects on this tragic event have become deeply polarized. While official narratives focus on stability and order, the silent protests and coded references by activists and media outlets serve as a stark reminder of the ongoing struggle for freedom of expression and democratic values in Hong Kong. [Associated Press] [Hong Kong Free Press 1] [Hong Kong Free Press 2] [VOA News]

China: First arrests under Hong Kong's own National Security Law

(ms) Under Hong Kong's new security legislation, seven individuals, including prominent rights activist Chow Hang-tung, have been arrested for alleged sedition. These arrests mark the first under the Safeguarding National Security Ordinance enacted in March 2024 (see AiR No. 13, March/2024, 4), which increases penalties for seditious activities from a maximum of two years to seven years in prison.

Chow, a former leader of the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements of China, has already been detained since September 2021 under the Beijing-imposed national security law. The recent arrests are linked to a Facebook group created on May 18, 2023, managed primarily from the UK, that supported Chow. Secretary for Security Chris Tang had accused the group of exploiting an "upcoming sensitive date" to incite hatred against the central and Hong Kong governments and the judiciary.

The arrests occurred just days before June 4, the 35th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square crackdown, a

historically sensitive date in China. The Hong Kong Alliance, once led by Chow, organized annual vigils in memory of the Tiananmen victims until 2020, when gatherings were banned by the city government citing public health concerns over COVID-19. The Alliance disbanded in September 2021 following the arrests of its leaders on charges of inciting subversion.

Police allege that the Facebook posts from the group incited netizens to engage in illegal activities, leveraging the sensitive anniversary to fuel dissent. Authorities have conducted searches of the arrestees' homes, seizing electronic devices believed to have been used to publish the seditious content.

Critics, including human rights organizations, have condemned Hong Kong's new security law as overly broad and regressive, arguing that it stifles civil liberties and targets peaceful commemoration and dissent. Nonetheless, Hong Kong authorities defend the law, citing the need to address perceived foreign interference and ensure stability following the 2019 protests.

The Safeguarding National Security Ordinance, also known as Article 23, covers treason, insurrection, sabotage, external interference, sedition, theft of state secrets, and espionage. It allows for pre-charge detention of up to 16 days, and restricts suspects' access to legal counsel, with penalties that can extend to life imprisonment (read more on the implementation on Article 23). This new law is separate from the 2020 Beijing-imposed national security law but is part of Beijing's broader crackdown on dissent. [BBC] [Hong Kong Free Press 1] [Hong Kong Free Press 2]

China: Hong Kong democracy advocates convicted of subversion conspiracy

(ms) Fourteen democrats of the "Hong Kong 47" were found guilty in Hong Kong of conspiracy to commit subversion, while two were acquitted. The trial centered on their involvement in an unofficial primary election in July 2020 and is one of the most prominent cases under the Beijing-imposed national security law.

The sixteen defendants included former lawmakers, district councilors, and a journalist. They were among 47 people arrested in January 2021, accused of plotting to leverage legislative powers to veto bills, such as the budget, ultimately aiming to force the chief executive's resignation and cause a government shutdown. The

remaining 31 of 47 opposition members pleaded guilty before the start of the 118-day trial.

Lawrence Lau and Lee Yue-shun were acquitted, becoming the first individuals tried under the national security law to be cleared of their charges. Despite their acquittal, the director of public prosecutions requested that their bail conditions be extended, pending a possible appeal.

Lau and Lee's acquittals were based on the judges' findings that Lau had not advocated vetoing the budget in his campaign, and Lee had not been involved in key meetings where such strategies were discussed. The judges ruled that the prosecution had not proven that Lee intended to subvert state power.

The fourteen found guilty were taken into custody and now face sentences ranging from short-term detention to life imprisonment, depending on their level of involvement. The court's detailed 319-page document explained the judges' reasoning, dismissing defense arguments that subversion required the use of force and that the defendants believed their actions were lawful.

The national security law, enacted in June 2020, has led to numerous arrests and the dissolution of civil society groups. Authorities claim it has restored stability, while critics argue it undermines political freedoms in Hong Kong. [Hong Kong Free Press 1] [Hong Kong Free Press 2]

China-Hong Kong: Jimmy Lai's national security trial adjourned due to health concerns

(ms) The national security trial of pro-democracy media tycoon Jimmy Lai was adjourned on Monday after Lai appeared unwell in court. Lai, 76, founder of the now-defunct Apple Daily newspaper, has been detained since December 2020 and faces serious charges under Hong Kong's national security law.

On the 87th day of the trial, Lai's lawyer informed the court that his client was feeling unwell and trembling and requested leave for Lai to visit the doctor again. The judge responsible agreed to adjourn the proceedings until June 4, suggesting that Lai undergo a hospital check-up due to his advanced age and the bad weather.

Lai faces charges of conspiring to collude with foreign forces and conspiring to publish seditious materials,

punishable with up to life in prison. These charges stem from the national security law enacted by Beijing in June 2020, which criminalizes subversion, secession, and collusion with foreign forces.

In a related development, the prosecution is considering how to proceed with sedition charges against Lai. His defense argues these charges should be dismissed as they were filed too late under colonial-era legislation. The judges have adjourned to deliberate on this issue, further extending the trial. [Hong Kong Free Press] [South China Morning Post] [The Standard]

China: Four satellites to advance IoT network launched

(ms) China launched four satellites from the sea on May 29, moving closer to completing its first Internet of Things (IoT) satellite constellation by the end of the year. The Tianqi 25-28 satellites were sent into orbit by a Ceres-1S rocket from a mobile platform off Shandong province.

The Tianqi constellation, developed by Beijing-based private commercial space company Guodian Gaoke, will consist of 38 small satellites designed to enhance data connectivity for smart devices. The constellation aims to provide global coverage and near real-time data transmission for government, industrial, and individual users.

The existing Tianqi satellites are already used in emergency communications, environmental monitoring, and hazardous materials transport. Guodian Gaoke's announced last year that future applications will include outdoor emergency response and military uses.

This launch marks the second time Galactic Energy has launched Tianqi satellites for Guodian Gaoke. The Ceres-1S rocket, designed for sea launches, can adapt to different launch and landing areas, and is capable of placing smaller payloads into low and medium Earth orbits. [South China Morning Post]

China: Top anti-espionage agency warns of foreign espionage in country's rare earth industry

(ms) China's Ministry of State Security (MSS) has issued a warning about increasing foreign espionage targeting the country's rare earths industry. The agency reported that foreign agents and organizations have been gathering intelligence and stealing technology related to rare earth elements.

China, holding the world's largest reserves of rare earths, is a major global supplier. However, despite China's dominance, its share of global rare earth exports dropped from 90 percent a decade ago to about 70 percent in 2022.

In its warnings, the ministry highlighted incidents where foreign companies allegedly used their Chinese operations to gather information on the rare earth industry. This is said to have involved “manipulating relationships” and offerings of financial incentives. Additionally, some overseas institutions reportedly used third countries to recruit Chinese experts and transfer controlled technologies, leading to significant technology leaks.

The Ministry also accused Western countries, particularly the United States and its allies, of criticizing Chinese rare earth companies through media campaigns to justify sanctions. It noted that some Chinese individuals have been lured by foreign entities to smuggle rare earth items, posing a threat to national security. [Global Times] [South China Morning Post]

China: Chang’e-6 successfully lands on moon's far side to collect samples

(ms) China has successfully landed the Chang’e-6 mission on the far side of the moon, marking its second landing in this region. The mission, launched on May 3 (see AiR No. 10, March/2024, 1), touched down in Apollo Crater within the South Pole-Aitken June 2, according to the China National Space Administration (CNSA).

Chang’e-6 aims to collect up to 2 kilograms of lunar rock and soil samples from the far side. This mission uses the Queqiao-2 relay satellite for communication between the lander and mission control. The collected samples will be the first from the moon’s far side and will help scientists understand the differences between the two sides of the moon.

Previous samples from the Chang’e-5 mission on the moon’s near side revealed younger volcanic rocks than those collected by US and Soviet missions, indicating

recent geological activity. The new samples from Chang'e-6 are expected to provide further insights into the moon's history.

The Chang'e-6 mission also includes international scientific instruments from the European Space Agency and France, among others, for various experiments. A small rover is also included for surface exploration.

After completing its surface operations, Chang'e-6 will return the samples to Earth, with a landing expected on June 25. Researchers worldwide will have access to these samples for further study.

China plans additional missions, such as Chang'e-7 and Chang'e-8, scheduled for 2026 and 2028, to explore the moon's south polar region and test resource utilization technologies. China also aims to launch crewed lunar missions by 2030 and establish the International Lunar Research Station with partners like Russia, Belarus, and Pakistan. With its increased focus on space travel, China is attempting to challenge the supremacy of the USA in this sector. [South China Morning Post] [Space] [Space News]

Japan: Ruling party withdraws drafts amendment to revise political fund control law

(sh) On May 29, Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) put forward a draft amendment to its bill to revise the political funds control law.

Presented during a meeting of the special political reform committee of the House of Representatives, the amendment proposes suspending state subsidies to political parties if their members violate the law. The subsidy suspension plan was introduced to the bill to address demands from Komeito, the LDP's junior coalition partner, which seeks a more far-reaching revision of the current law.

On May 31, Japan's Prime Minister Fumio Kishida made concessions to the Komeito party leader to advance political funds reform after failing to secure agreements within the ruling coalition. Some members of Kishida's Liberal Democratic Party criticized him for conceding too much to Komeito, seeking to improve his Cabinet's approval ratings, which hit a record low since October 2021. Earlier, Komeito rejected LDP's proposals, accusing Kishida of lacking commitment to reforming political funding rules. Kishida's meeting with Komeito's chief, Natsuo Yamaguchi, led to an

agreement, likely paving the way for the bill's passage by June 23.[Kyodo News].

The row over the reform of Japan's law on political funds comes as the LDP has been engulfed in a scandal since late last year that centers on political funds raised through LDP party event tickets bought by individuals, companies and organizations. LDP lawmakers pocketed profits from ticket sales as kickbacks by falsifying mandatory accounting reports (see AiR No 48, November/2023, 4).

In a latest development, the LDP canceled its plan to pass a bill revising the political funds control law through the House of Representatives. The LDP and the main opposition, the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan, agreed to hold a full Lower House vote on June 6.

The LDP withdrew its previous bill version during a board meeting of the Lower House special committee on political reform. They later submitted a new version, accommodating demands from Nippon Ishin no Kai (Japan Innovation Party).

Nippon Ishin had previously opposed the bill but expressed support for the revised version. The LDP changed a provision regarding the disclosure of policy activity funds, removing a requirement to disclose expenses over 500,000 yen. [Nippon]

Japan: Nuclear reactors' operation extended

(sh) On May 28, Japan's Nuclear Regulation Authority (NRA), the country's nuclear regulator, approved Kansai Electric Power Company's request to extend the operation of two aging reactors at its Takahama plant in central Japan by 20 years.

In Japan, the operational life span of nuclear reactors is limited to 40 years, but extensions of up to 20 years are possible. The No. 3 and No. 4 reactors at the Takahama plant in Fukui Prefecture will reach the 40-year limit next year.

During the meeting, the NRA secretariat reported that special checks on the reactors and key equipment were conducted properly and confirmed they met the standards for the extension.

With this approval, eight reactors in Japan have now been allowed to operate beyond the 40-year limit. [NHK]

Japan: Communication system on Moon to be built

(sh) On May 30, Japanese telecommunications operator KDDI announced plans to build a communications system on the Moon.

The company aims to start services by 2030 as lunar exploration increases globally. KDDI stated it will create lunar infrastructure for high-speed data communication between astronauts and rovers. By 2028, the firm plans to establish high-volume optical and radio wave networks connecting the Moon and Earth. The project will also see the development of technology to enable laser beams to span the 380,000-kilometer distance between Earth and the Moon, along with accelerated robot development for building a base station. In addition, partnerships with startups will be established to launch new space businesses.

The US-led Artemis project aims to send astronauts to the Moon by 2026 or later, with Japanese astronauts among them. KDDI's Managing Executive Officer, Matsuda Hiromichi acknowledged that prior investment is essential to monetize future space business projects. [NHK]

Japan: New speed limit initiative to increase road safety unveiled

(sh) On May 30, the National Police Agency (NPA) unveiled a new initiative to reduce the maximum allowed speed on narrow residential roads from 60 kilometers per hour to 30 to enhance pedestrian safety. The agency plans to revise the Road Traffic Act and other regulations, aiming to implement these changes by September 2026 after public hearings.

The move comes in response to studies confirming a significant increase in fatal injuries to pedestrians caused by vehicle speeds exceeding 30 kph. An NPA expert panel even recommended reducing speed limits on pedestrian-heavy roads to 30 kph or lower.

Additionally, the agency adjusted regulations for pedestrian crossings, increasing the maximum allowable distance between white lines from 50 centimeters to 90 centimeters to improve visibility and durability. These changes are expected to be in place by the end of July this year. [Japan Times]

Japan: Intervention in Forex market to support yen

(sh) Japanese authorities spent JPY 9.79 trillion (USD 62.23 billion) over the past month intervening in the foreign exchange market to support the yen.

These moves prevented the currency from hitting new lows but are unlikely to reverse longer-term declines. The Ministry of Finance data, released on May 31, confirmed suspicions that Tokyo entered the market twice - once after the yen hit a 34-year low on April 29, and again on May 2.

Finance Minister Shunichi Suzuki reiterated the government's readiness to intervene if necessary, emphasizing their close monitoring of the currency markets. While officials have not confirmed specific interventions, they have consistently warned of potential action to counter excessive volatility. [Reuters]

Mongolia: Resolution on light industry revitalization initiated

(dql) On May 28, Mongolian President Khurelsukh Ukhnaa launched a draft resolution for the implementation of the “White Gold” National Program that seek a revitalization of the country’s light industry through stimulating the economic circulation of animal-originated raw materials to create new jobs in the light industry sector, increase the production of value-added goods, and to increase herders' incomes.

The draft resolution defines the legal framework, organization, and intersectoral cohesion in the implementation of the program, with completion expected within three years. [Montsame]

North Korea: Unification-related names for children banned

(rl) North Korea has banned the use of names containing references to unification or a unified Korea, according to South Korea's unification ministry. Names such as "Tongil" (unification), "Hana" (one), and "Hankook" (Republic of Korea) are now prohibited.

This directive aligns with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un's recent characterization of inter-Korean

relations as those "between two hostile states." Kim has dismissed the idea of unification with South Korea and ordered the dissolution of state agencies handling inter-Korean affairs.

The country has also removed references to a unified Korea from its foreign ministry website and eliminated books with unification themes from its overseas missions.

These actions are part of a broader effort to erase unification references. [Yonhap News]

North Korea: Leaders undergo ideological reeducation

(rl) North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has initiated an ideological reeducation program for top officials in the country's elite Politburo, according to state media. This move is part of Kim's ongoing efforts to enforce obedience to his directives and bolster his personality cult.

The Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) reported that Kim was seen overseeing top officials learning about "The Fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism" and the origins of Juche in a new "in-service retraining" course. This marked his fourth public appearance at the new Workers' Party of Korea (WPK) Central Cadres Training School since April. [KCNA Watch]

The attendees included two members of the Politburo Presidium – Jo Yong Won and Kim Tok Hun – as well as foreign minister Choe Son Hui, top propaganda official Ri Il Hwan, and munitions industry department head Jo Chun Ryong, among others. [NK News]

North Korea: Satellite development after failed launch to be continued

(rl) May 29, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un addressed the recent failed satellite launch in a speech at the Academy of Defense Science (ADS) on May 28, promising to continue developing military reconnaissance satellites in response to perceived threats from the U.S. and South Korea, state media reported.

Kim criticized South Korea's reaction to the launch, calling it "hysterical" and "provocative." He emphasized the necessity of enhancing military capabilities instead of focusing on civilian projects.

In response, South Korean military conducted air force drills later that day as a show of strength.

The satellite launch on the night of May 27, intended to place three military satellites into orbit this year, failed when the rocket exploded shortly after liftoff. Initial reports pointed to engine problems, with Kim attributing the failure to an "abnormality in the first-stage engine."

Despite the setback, state media portrayed Kim's visit to the ADS as a celebration of the academy's 60th anniversary. Kim encouraged defense scientists, stating that failure is a necessary step towards success and suggesting that another launch attempt would happen soon.

Kim highlighted that the launch was conducted transparently, with prior notification to prevent negative impacts on neighboring countries. He pointed to increasing regional instability due to U.S. and South Korean military activities near North Korea's border, reinforcing the need for continued military development on the side of his regime.

During his visit, Kim inspected new weapon developments and models of military vehicles, including guided glide bombs and a new 105mm assault gun. Analysts noted significant advancements in North Korea's military technology.

Kim's last public visit to the ADS was in November 2022 to celebrate an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) launch. The ADS area is known for preparing missile and satellite launches. [Reuters] [NK News] [38 NORTH]

South Korea: Parliament kicks off 22nd four-year session under "divided government"

(ac) On May 30, the South Korean National Assembly began its 22nd four-year session, with the main opposition party Democratic Party (DP) commanding the majority of 175 seats in the 300-member while the ruling People Power Party of President Yoon Suk Yeol holds only 108 seats following the outcome of the April 10 legislative elections (see AiR No. 16, April/2024, 3)

Concerns are raising on whether the rival parties would cooperate in dealing with national affairs under such a "divided government" in the country's

presidential system. [The Korea Herald][The Korea Times]

These concerns were reinforced after on May 29 Yoon vetoed four bills presented by the parliament that all passed by the DP and other opposition parties. These latest vetoes are among 14 since Yoon assumed power in 2022.

The political opposition protested Yoon's decisions and stated that the continuous exercise of presidential rights to veto would only weaken his administration. The PPP in return stated that the bills are not suitable to be passed in current stage, as they "lack sufficient legal review, societal discussion, and bipartisan consensus." [Hankyoreh]

South Korea: Space satellite vehicle to be sent to moon by 2032

(ac) On May 30, South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol announced a space project to send a space expedition vehicle to the Moon by 2032 and plant a national flag on the Mars by 2045.

Yoon also pledged to increase the budget and investment in space and aerospace industries by investing USD 72.5 million by 2045 in the opening remarks of the new national space agency, the Korea AeroSpace Administration (KASA) in Sacheon, out of Seoul.

The budget plan will be expanded to KRW 1.5 trillion (USD 1.83 billion) by 2027 while the aerospace industry is expected to attract about KWR 100 trillion (USD 72.5 billion) in investment by 2045, according to Yoon. [Yonhap News]

South Korea: President approves exploratory oil drilling

(ac) On June 3, President Yoon Suk Yeol authorized the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy to conduct exploratory oil drilling and gas prospects off the country's east coast, Pohang, an industrial port city in the southeastern.

Yoon affirmed that there is a very high possibility for the area to contain 14 billion barrels of oil and gas. The project will begin at the end of 2024 with an estimated cost of more than USD 363 million.

The estimated success rate for the project is 20 percent based on the data the government received. Minister of Energy Ahn Duk-geun announced that commercial production is set to kick off in 2035. [Reuters]

South Korea: Tariff reduction to be extended for fruit and food importation

(ac) On June 4, Finance Minister Choi Sang-mok announced that South Korea will extend tax reduction on fruit and other food imports to reduce inflation.

Acknowledging the raising inflection of food prices, Choi called on companies to join the efforts. The tax reduction will be extended to the end of 2024. The tariff reduction includes 28 kinds of fruits, including bananas and pineapples, and 12 other food imports, such as sugar and coffee beans.

According to the data gathered by Statistics Korea, consumer prices rose 2.7 percent on-year in May, while 2.9 percent on-year rose a month earlier. [Yonhap News]

South Korea: Security alert level ahead of South Korea-African nations summit to raised

(ac) On May 31, South Korea announced that the security alert for the Seoul metropolitan area will be raised before and during the upcoming South Korea-Africa Summit. The move aims to ensure the safety of the attending political leaders.

The Office for Government Policy Coordination declared the terror alert level for Seoul and Gyeonggi Province will be lifted from 'attention' to 'caution' on June 1 and further lifting to 'warning' from June 2 to 5.

The South Korea-African nations summit will be held from June 4-5 in Ilsan, north of Seoul. 48 countries will join the summit. [Yonhap News]

Taiwan: Controversial legislative reform bills pass third hearing

(fg) On 28 May, the controversial reform that extends the powers of the Legislative Yuan was passed in

Taiwan during the third reading. For weeks, these bills have been the subject of dispute between the ruling Democratic Progressive Party and the opposition parties Kuomintang (KMT) and Taiwan People's Party (TPP). On the day of the first hearing, there were even scuffles between the parliamentarians (see AiR No. 21, May/2024, 3).

The amendments that have now been adopted include the introduction of an annual "State of the Nation" address by the President, extended investigative rights for Parliament and stricter rules for the behavior of officials during hearings (see AiR No. 22, May/2024, 4). The fact that these amendments were passed despite the controversy comes at no small surprise, as the opposition parties together have an absolute majority in parliament. [Taiwan News 1] [Focus Taiwan 1]

The opposition praised the passage of the amendments as a “historic milestone.” TPP Chairman Ko Wen-je emphasized that the reforms are crucial for strengthening democracy in Taiwan through effective separation of powers and control mechanisms. He rejected the DPP's criticism that the changes had not been sufficiently discussed. According to Ko, discussions about changes have been going on for 30 years, during which the DPP had supported in its own time as an opposition party. [Taiwan News 2] [Ko Wen-je via Facebook, in Chinese]

The DPP and President Lai Ching-te are concerned about the way the laws were passed and possible violations of the constitution. The DPP plans to seek a constitutional interpretation of the amendments. Lai has affirmed his commitment to further dialogue with the opposition parties and expressed hope that an additional review of the laws by the Cabinet will address the concerns that have arisen.

However, he stressed the importance of the parliament as a symbol of democracy and the president's responsibility for democratic and constitutional governance. In fact, the Executive Yuan has the power to veto the bills and send it back to the legislature. However, as the DPP has already announced its intention to challenge the reform through a constitutional interpretation, a veto seems unlikely for now. [Focus Taiwan 2]

On the day of the vote, tens of thousands of protesters once again gathered to demonstrate against the bills’ passage in parliament. This was called for by civic groups and small parties not represented in parliament. They called themselves the 'Bluebird Movement' as they had accompanied the three

hearings on the amendment on the streets. [Taiwan News 3]

Taiwan: Court allows transgender men to change legal gender without surgery

(fg) The Taipei High Administrative Court made a landmark decision in favor of the rights of transgender people. The court ruled that transgender men can change their legal gender without having to undergo gender confirmation surgery.

This decision was made as part of a legal dispute in which transgender man Nemo challenged the decision of the household registration office in Taipei after unsuccessfully applying for a gender change on his national identity card in 2022.

The Taiwan Alliance to Promote Civil Partnership Rights, which legally represented Nemo, sees the ruling as a victory for transgender rights and a precedent that allows people who identify as men to change their legal gender without having to undergo surgery. [Taipei Times]

Taiwan: New defense innovation unit to be established

(dql) Taiwan is set to create a military technology development unit as part of efforts to integrate research on the development of military and civilian defense technology, as announced by Wellington Koo, Taiwan's new defense minister during a media roundtable with military beat reporters. The move is aimed at strengthening Taiwan’s asymmetrical warfare capabilities to cope with growing military threats from China.

Koo, who assume his post on May 20, disclosed that a new military unit would be similar to that of the United States Department of Defense's Defense Innovation Unit (DIU) and operate as a platform to combine the resources and capabilities of the National Chung-Shan Institute of Science and Technology – the defense ministry’s research unit – and other civilian-run defense technology companies. He added that the new unit will focus on investing in relatively mature defense technologies, such as next generation UAVs and unmanned ships, to allow Taiwan to maintain its current edge in terms of asymmetrical warfare in the defense of the Taiwan Strait. [Focus Taiwan 1]

Meanwhile, Taiwan's Air Force is reportedly considering spending USD 31 million and more for an upgrade its existing C-130 military transport aircraft fleet starting next year and running until 2030. The move aims at enhancing its collision avoidance and sea rescue capabilities among other systems.

The Air Force's 19 C-130Hs and another C-130HE, a modified electronic warfare aircraft, were first purchased from the US in the early 1980s with a first batch of 12 C-130Hs entering service in Taiwan in 1986. [Taipei Times] [Focus Taiwan 2]

Taiwan: New Coast Guard warship launched

(dql) A 600-ton Coast Guard Anping-class missile corvette, the Yong Kang CG610, was launched on June 2, in a latest effort to increase the number of Taiwan's Coast Guard vessels.

The new vessel is part of the government's pledge to spend USD 1.31 billion on building 141 Coast Guard ships over ten years, from 2018 to 2027.

The vessel is 65.4 meters long, 14.8 meters wide, capable of a maximum speed of 44 knots (81 kph) and carrying Hsiung Feng anti-ship missiles. The on-board weapons include the Zhenhai Rock System and a 20mm remote-controlled turret. [Taiwan News]

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

Bangladesh: Government denies protection to former police, army chiefs amid corruption investigations

(sg) The Bangladeshi government will not provide protection to former Inspector General of Police (IGP) Benazir Ahmed and former army chief General (retired) Aziz Ahmed amid ongoing investigations into allegations of corruption and asset accumulation beyond known sources. The Prime Minister's Private Industry and Investment Adviser Salman F Rahman emphasized that the law would take its own course. [The Buisness Standard]

Benazir Ahmed, who reportedly left for Singapore in early May, served as IGP from April 2020 until his retirement in September 2022. The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) suspects that Benazir and his family may have amassed substantial assets abroad that exceed his known sources of income. The ACC has requested the Bangladesh Financial Intelligence Unit (BFIU) to investigate and document any overseas assets held by Benazir and his family in Dubai, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada. Additionally, the ACC is probing allegations of money laundering involving Benazir's family, with a committee already formed to investigate his assets beyond known sources of income.

Notably, Benazir and his family withdrew approximately USD 5.95-6.8 million from their 33 bank accounts within a month before these accounts were frozen. [The Daily Star 1]

Against this backdrop, Bangladesh's main opposition party, the BNP, has questioned how Benazir and his family managed to leave the country without obstruction despite allegations of amassing illegal assets. The party also questioned the effectiveness of court orders to confiscate Benazir's assets and freeze his accounts, as well as the ACC's actions against him. The BNP accused the government of using trickery to rule the country and suggested that their claims of fighting corruption are mere eyewash. [The Daily Star 2]

Meanwhile, Aziz Ahmed, who served as Chief of Army Staff from 2018 to 2021, was blacklisted by the U.S. Department of State on May 20 due to his involvement in serious corruption. This includes interfering in public processes, helping his brother evade accountability for criminal activities, improperly awarding military contracts, and accepting bribes in exchange for government appointments. [AiR No. 21, May/2024, 3]

Bangladesh: Chattogram Councillor implicated in illicit tobacco trade

(sg) An investigation by *The Daily Star* has uncovered notable involvement of Chattogram City Corporation (CCC) Councillor Abdus Sabur Liton and his brother in the illicit tobacco trade, with their companies suspected of controlling a substantial portion of Bangladesh's illegal cigarette market. The ongoing probe by the NBR's Central Intelligence Cell (CIC) suggests that these companies may have been affixing counterfeit banderoles on cigarette packs and distributing them nationwide. Moreover, they are accused of producing and selling various cigarette brands, including counterfeit versions of foreign brands. [The Daily Star]

Simultaneously, Bangladesh has witnessed a significant increase in tobacco production per hectare over the past five years, marking a rise of nearly 21 percent. Observers attribute this surge to the concerted efforts of major tobacco companies to boost profits, despite the well-documented health and environmental risks associated with tobacco. Despite these risks, farmers, lured by the profitability facilitated by tobacco companies, often overlook these negative consequences, receiving support in the form of loans, seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides. [The Daily Star 2]

Bangladesh: RMG workers demand wages, Eid bonus by June 10

(lm) The Bangladesh Garment Sramik Sanghati, a platform representing RMG (Ready-Made Garment) workers, held a demonstration in Dhaka, demanding full salaries with overtime and Eid bonuses by June 10. They also called for the government to curb excessive bus fares and ensure safe travel arrangements for garment workers during the Eid journey. [The Daily Star]

The protest included a procession from Purana Paltan and a rally in front of the Jatiya Press Club. Taslima Akhter, the president of the organization, highlighted that garment workers, who contribute nearly 80 percent of Bangladesh's foreign exchange earnings, face significant challenges during Eid celebrations, including delayed bonus payments and mistreatment when protesting for arrears.

Bangladesh: 215 shanties go up in flames at Rohingya refugee camp

(lm) A devastating fire at the Ukhiya Rohingya refugee camp in Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar district on June 2 destroyed at least 215 makeshift shelters and 130 shops. This incident marked the second fire in the camp within a week, with a previous blaze already having destroyed over 200 shelters. [The Daily Star]

The incident coincided with a visit from Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal, Inspector General of Police Chowdhury Abdullah Al Mamun, and Refugee, Relief and Repatriation Commissioner Mohammad Mizanur Rahman. Rohingya leaders reported heightened tensions in the camp following the visit, suspecting that a Myanmar-based armed rebel group might have set the fire.

Bangladesh: Woman commits suicide after alleged gangrape by loan sharks

(lm) Police in Bangladesh have arrested two men on charges of raping a woman who later died by suicide. According to the woman's family, she and her husband had taken a loan of roughly USD 170 but were unable to repay it. As a result, the loan shark and three others allegedly raped her repeatedly over a period of two months. [The Daily Star 1]

In separate developments, police have arrested three men, including the son of a sub-district chairman, on charges of attempting to rape a madrasa student. [The Daily Star 2]

Bangladesh: Meta removes pages linked to Awami League for "inauthentic behaviour"

(sg) Meta, the parent company of Facebook, has announced the removal of numerous accounts and pages linked to Bangladesh's ruling Awami League, citing violations of its policy against "coordinated inauthentic behaviour." This action was detailed in Meta's Quarterly Adversarial Threat Report for Q1 2024. [The Daily Star]

The company removed 50 Facebook accounts and 98 pages originating from Bangladesh. These accounts

and pages targeted domestic audiences using fake identities to post content and manage pages. Some posed as fictitious news entities, while others used the names of existing news organizations in Bangladesh. A few pages used the name of the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and posted content critical of the BNP.

The accounts and pages collectively had about 3.4 million followers, with an ad spend of approximately USD 60, paid mostly in Bangladeshi takas.

Bangladesh: Government likely to restructure taxes, VAT likely to increase on certain commodities

(sg) Bangladesh's government plans to increase the value-added tax (VAT) on over 13 goods and services, including LED bulbs and tube lights, refrigerators, and air conditioners. Finance ministry officials indicate that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has advised the government to withdraw various tax exemptions, prompting the National Board of Revenue (NBR) to plan these VAT increases for the next financial year. [The Business Standard 1]

Of note, the electronics sector, which previously enjoyed VAT exemptions, will face increased operational costs. This increase is likely to be passed on to consumers, impacting affordability amid high inflation. In light of this, industry leaders express concerns that the electronics industry, which has grown as an import-substitute industry, may lose competitiveness against imported products.

Additionally, the NBR plans to expand the scope of VAT deduction at source in the upcoming fiscal year 2024-25. This new plan aims to collect an additional USD 43 million in revenue. Currently, only certain government bodies, financial institutions, and registered companies are required to deduct VAT at source. The new plan will extend this requirement to more entities, covering payments for 43 specified services with VAT rates ranging from 5 percent to 15 percent. [The Business Standard 2]

Moreover, the NBR plans to increase the source tax on the interest income of educational institutions, including public universities and schools under monthly pay orders (MPOs), as well as the income of the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) from mobile phone companies. This rate may be doubled from the current 10 percent in the upcoming budget. [The Business Standard 3]

Bangladesh: USD 876 billion needed for implementation of climate action plans

(lm) Bangladesh needs USD 876 billion to implement its ambitious climate action plans, according to Environment, Forest and Climate Change Minister Saber Hossain Chowdhury. Speaking at a workshop, he explained that the National Adaptation Plan (NAP) estimates an investment of USD 230 billion for adaptation until 2050. The implementation of the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) requires USD 175 billion. Additionally, the Mujib Climate Prosperity Plan (MCPP) and the Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100 estimate USD 471.72 billion for priority projects. [The Daily Star]

Chowdhury emphasized the importance of partnerships and mobilizing climate finance to support Bangladesh's transition to a low-carbon, climate-resilient economy. He highlighted the need to leverage private sector investments, international climate funds, and innovative financing mechanisms. Robust institutional frameworks and enhanced technical capacities are essential for effectively accessing, managing, and deploying climate finance. Chowdhury called on developed countries to honor their commitments and provide predictable, adequate, and accessible financial support. He also suggested exploring innovative sources of finance, such as green bonds, climate insurance, and public-private partnerships.

Bangladesh is one of the most climate-vulnerable countries in the world due to its low-lying geography, high population density, and exposure to natural disasters like cyclones, floods, and rising sea levels.

Bangladesh: Foreign Direct Investment slips but stays above USD 3 billion in 2023

(lm) Foreign direct investment (FDI) in Bangladesh decreased to USD 3.004 billion in 2023, a 14 percent drop from USD 3.5 billion in 2022, highlighting investor concerns amidst the country's severe foreign exchange issues. Equity capital inflows fell 31 percent to USD 705.83 million, while reinvested earnings declined by 12.1 percent to USD 2.21 billion. However, intra-company loans rose to USD 88.91 million from a negative USD 57.65 million in the previous year. [The Daily Star 1]

M Masrur Reaz, chairman of Policy Exchange Bangladesh, expressed disappointment, emphasizing the need for foreign currency to address ongoing macroeconomic challenges and diversify the economy. He cited weaknesses in business climate, trade policy, logistics, and regulatory framework as contributing factors to the decline in FDI.

Bangladesh's foreign reserves have plummeted, exacerbating the situation. They fell below USD 19 billion earlier this month, down from USD 40.7 billion in August 2021, leading the central bank to limit imports of luxury and non-essential goods. The taka has depreciated by 35 percent against the US dollar over the past two years.

Gross FDI inflows for 2023 were USD 3.97 billion, a 17.8 percent decrease from 2022. The financial account, covering claims related to FDI, loans, and investments, remained in deficit, standing at USD 9.25 billion for July-March 2023-24.

The United Kingdom was the largest source of net FDI at USD 613.93 million, followed by the Netherlands (USD 366.96 million), the United States (USD 314.9 million), China (USD 259.54 million), South Korea (USD 181.43 million), and Norway (USD 176.87 million). The manufacturing sector received the most net FDI at USD 1.26 billion, with the power, gas, and petroleum sector attracting USD 581.27 million.

FDI stock in Bangladesh was USD 20.55 billion at the end of 2023, down 5.1 percent from the previous year, marking the second consecutive year of decline. Zaved Akhtar, president of the Foreign Investors' Chamber of Commerce & Industry, highlighted the adverse impact of current tax provisions on investment growth, urging for tax reforms to reduce the financial burden on businesses and create a more supportive business environment.

In related but separate developments, Bangladesh's business environment slightly deteriorated in 2023 compared to 2022, primarily due to sluggish regulatory reforms, weak infrastructure, and difficulties in accessing finance, as per the Bangladesh Business Climate Index (BBX). The index, measured on a scale of 0-100, dropped to 58.75 in 2023 from 61.95 the previous year. The survey included responses from 520 small, medium, and large enterprises. [The Daily Star 2]

Bangladesh: Treasury bond yields climb to 15-year high

(lm) The interest rate on treasury bonds in Bangladesh recently surged to a 15-year high of 12.75 percent, signaling costlier government borrowing ahead. This surpasses the previous high of 13 percent in 2009. The increase follows a hike in treasury bill interest rates, now at a record 12 percent, as the government ramps up internal borrowing to address the budget deficit. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Third USD 1.15 billion tranche from IMF likely in late June

(lm) Bangladesh is expected to receive USD 1.15 billion as the third installment of the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) loan in late June, which will help alleviate the country's declining foreign exchange reserves. The proposal for this tranche will be reviewed by the IMF's executive board on June 24 or 25. [The Daily Star]

The IMF approved a USD 4.7 billion loan to Bangladesh in January last year, and over USD 1 billion has already been disbursed in two installments. An IMF team completed the second review of the program last month and reached an agreement with the government on necessary policies. While Bangladesh met all conditions for the third tranche, except for the foreign exchange reserve target, the IMF mission lowered this target after the central bank's reserves fell short by over a billion dollars in December 2023.

Bangladesh sought IMF assistance in 2022 after its forex reserves dropped critically due to high import bills, causing significant depreciation of the local currency, inflation, and economic instability. Reserves have recently fallen to USD 18.4 billion from USD 41 billion in August 2021.

Bangladesh: Turnover at Dhaka Stock Exchange declines to five-month low

(lm) Shares on the Dhaka Stock Exchange (DSE) experienced a significant decline, with daily market turnover dropping to a five-month low of approximately USD 2.6 million, a 30.42 percent decrease from the previous day. The textiles sector led the turnover, accounting for 13.61 percent. [The Daily Star]

The DSEX, the main index, fell by 50.35 points (0.95 percent) to 5,228.53, its lowest point in over three years. The DSES index for Shariah-based firms

decreased by 13.59 points (1.18 percent) to 1,138.96, and the DS30 blue-chip index – a stock market index that represents the performance of the top 30 companies – dropped by 16.79 points (0.89 percent) to 1,869.93.

While mutual funds, telecom, and travel sectors closed positively, sectors like information technology, ceramics, and non-bank financial institutions (NBFI) closed negatively, with the NBFI sector experiencing the highest loss of 2.22 percent.

Bangladesh: Loans, deposits rise in Islamic banks despite severe liquidity crisis

(lm) In February, outstanding loans and deposits in 10 full-fledged local Islamic banks increased despite six of them facing a severe liquidity crisis for over a year. Outstanding loans reached approximately USD 3.87 billion, a rise of about USD 54.84 million from the previous month, while deposits grew to around USD 3.23 billion, up by about USD 40.48 million from January, according to the country's central bank. [The Daily Star]

The six troubled banks—Islami Bank Bangladesh, Social Islami Bank, First Security Islami Bank, Union Bank, Global Islami Bank, and ICB Islamic Bank—are severely affected by massive loan irregularities. The remaining four banks—Al Arafah Islami Bank, Standard Bank, Exim Bank, and Shahjalal Islami Bank—are performing relatively well.

Experts attribute the increase in loans and deposits partly to accrued interest. Despite their financial troubles, the six problematic banks continue to issue loans, further inflating their outstanding loans. These banks have also been struggling to meet the cash reserve ratio and statutory liquidity ratio requirements and often rely on liquidity support from the central bank.

Mohammed Nurul Amin, former chairman of the Association of Bankers Bangladesh, highlighted that poor corporate governance due to loan irregularities has worsened the situation for these banks.

Bangladesh: Slow progress raises doubts over BEZA's goal of 100 economic zones by 2041

(lm) Since the Bangladesh Economic Zones Authority (BEZA) initiated its extensive industrialization plan in 2015, only 10 economic zones (EZs) have become operational, raising doubts about the feasibility of its goal to establish 100 enclaves on time. Over the past decade, BEZA has approved 97 EZs, with 68 planned by the government and 29 by the private sector. The original deadline of 2030 was extended to 2041 due to the complexity of project execution and land acquisition issues. [The Daily Star]

Of the 10 operational EZs, two are government-run (Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Shilpa Nagar in Chattogram and Sreehatta Economic Zone in Sylhet), and eight are private. In the state-run zones, 13 companies are producing goods, and infrastructure development is ongoing for 36 more factories. BEZA has given final licenses to 12 private EZs, with eight already operational and 17 factories under construction.

BEZA has received investment proposals worth USD 28.75 billion, with actual investments at USD 6.05 billion between 2020 and mid-2023. The operating zones have created approximately 60,000 jobs and produced USD 14.47 billion worth of goods in the last fiscal year.

Bangladesh: Remittance crosses over USD 2 billion dollars in May

(sg) Inward remittances to Bangladesh has crossed over USD 2 billion dollars, which is almost 38 percent increase compared to the last year same period. In April as well, the nation received remittances amounting to USD 2.04 billion dollars. [The Buisness Standard]

Bangladesh: National flag carrier confirms purchase of Airbus aircraft over Boeing

(sg) Bangladesh's national flag carrier, Biman Bangladesh Airlines, has decided to purchase aircraft from the European aerospace company Airbus, instead of its American rival Boeing, to expand its fleet. Currently, 16 out of Biman's 21 aircraft are from Boeing, but the shift to Airbus was made to diversify the fleet and mitigate risks associated with over-reliance on a single supplier. The decision to purchase from Airbus was made last year, following a competitive bidding process. [bdnews24]

Bhutan: Government allocates USD 24 million from stimulus program to tourism sector

(ps) The Bhutanese government plans to inject Nu 2 billion (approximately USD 24 million) from its Nu 15 billion (USD 180 million) economic stimulus program (ESP) into the tourism industry to revitalize the sector hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic. [Kuensel 1]

The ESP is a program designed to help Bhutan's economy recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. The program aims to create jobs, increase exports, and substitute imported goods. Bhutan has become increasingly reliant on imports in recent years, and the ESP hopes to reverse this trend. The program will be overseen by a secretariat and steering committee led by the Prime Minister's Office. [AiR No. 21, May/2024, 3]

The Ministry of Industry, Commerce, and Employment (MoICE) aims to attract 300,000 tourists annually, generating Nu 2.56 billion (USD 30.7 million) in revenue. For this year, the target is 200,000 tourists, with 70 percent from India and 30 percent paying in USD. By 2025, the ministry aims for a 60:40 ratio of Indian to USD-paying tourists, and a 50:50 ratio the following year.

Along with the funds given to tourism industry, the Department of Tourism launched the golden jubilee campaign, celebrating 50 years since the country opened highlighting Bhutan's commitment to sustainable tourism through its "high value, low volume" policy. The department, in collaboration with various stakeholders, has planned a series of events and activities throughout the campaign period, including Bhutan's first-ever tourism awards, a TEDx Talk, a fashion show, and content showcasing Bhutan's tourism journey over the past 50 years. [Kuensel 2]

Bhutan: Increasing domestic revenue suggested by World Bank

(ps) Bhutan faces significant challenges in raising sufficient domestic revenue due to its narrow tax base and complex tax structure, as highlighted in a recent World Bank report, "Public Expenditure Review." The report states that more than 50 percent of Bhutan's total revenue comes from external grants and non-tax revenue, surpassing the average for similar countries,

which is less than 25 percent. This dependence on external sources creates revenue fluctuations and hinders long-term financial sustainability. [Kuensel]

Key issues identified include a narrow tax base and stagnant revenue. Personal income tax, sales tax, excise duties, and customs duties all fall below expected levels based on Bhutan's GDP per capita. Bhutan's tax effort is reportedly 70 percent lower than other similar countries. A tax gap analysis revealed that Bhutan could have increased its total tax collections by 5.4 percent of GDP in the fiscal year 2020-21. Revenue from personal income tax has remained stagnant from 2015 to 2022.

The World Bank recommends several measures to address these issues, including lowering the personal income tax (PIT) threshold from Nu 300,000 (approximately USD 3,600) to Nu 100,000 (approximately USD 1,200), which would expand the tax base and reduce the maximum marginal rate to 25 percent. This change would increase the number of taxpayers by an additional 85,832 individuals.

Bhutan: Civil service commission proposes new ‘para regular’ status for contract civil servants

(ps) Bhutan’s Royal Civil Service Commission (RCSC) has proposed transitioning from the current contract employment system to a new "para regular" status for civil servants on contract. The proposal introduces a fixed term "para regular" employment type, merging the existing consolidated and regular contract types into this single category. It recommends extending full provident fund benefits to para regular employees, replacing the current 30 percent contract allowance. [Kuensel]

This move aims to address disparities in benefits and job security between contract and regular employees. As of March 2024, Bhutan has over 5,000 contract employees compared to 24,000 regular civil servants. The regularization push is expected to resolve long-standing concerns about fairness and financial security for contract employees, who often face challenges in obtaining loans and other financial support due to their employment status.

Bhutan: Businesses ask for independent committee to assess loan deferment

(ps/lm) In response to the government's recent decision to delegate loan deferment responsibilities to individual banks and the upcoming end of the deferment scheme allowing borrowers to defer repayments until June, the Bhutan Chamber of Commerce and Industry (BCCI) is advocating for a standardized operating procedure for loan deferments. The BCCI is concerned that, without government oversight, banks may prioritize profits over the welfare of borrowers. [Kuensel 1]

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted Bhutan's economy, leading to reduced business activities, lower revenues, and financial hardships for many individuals and enterprises. This situation necessitated government intervention to provide financial relief, including loan deferments, to support economic recovery and stability. Initially, the deferment strategy was managed collaboratively by the finance ministry, the central bank, and the private sector, aiding many businesses in their recovery efforts.

In this context, the BCCI has requested that the government extend loan deferments and provide incentives for businesses that resume repayments, suggesting a 2 percent incentive to encourage responsible repayment behavior and improve bank liquidity. Additionally, the BCCI urged a review of the 91-day cap for loans entering non-performing status and an increase in the NPL threshold from 5 percent to 8 percent.

In separate updates, the Bank of Bhutan (BoB) has launched a new digital lending platform, BoBloan, enhancing the accessibility and interactivity of its loan services. Unlike the previous loan portal that only allowed document submission and approval, BoBloan enables borrowers to request and manage loans from anywhere with internet access at any time. [Kuensel 2]

Bhutan: Ministry to address nursing shortages at national referral hospital with foreign hires

(ps) Bhutan's Ministry of Health plans to address nursing shortages at the Jigme Dorji Wangchuck National Referral Hospital (JDWNRH), the country's premier healthcare facility, by hiring foreign nurses. The ministry's primary concern is ensuring quality healthcare for the people, particularly as JDWNRH faces a 30 percent attrition rate among its nursing staff. [The Bhutanese]

Bhutan: Difficulties in tackling scams based abroad, minister says

(ps) During the 4th Meet-The-Press, the Minister of Home and Cultural Affairs highlighted the significant challenge in combating financial scams, especially when key suspects operate from outside the country. Victims are often deceived with false promises of business returns, complicating the social implications of charging local participants who are often victims themselves. The lack of advanced investigative technology and difficulties in obtaining mutual legal assistance further complicates efforts. Sensitization programs and aggressive awareness campaigns are essential to educate the public about identifying and avoiding scams. [The Bhutanese]

Between 2020 and May 2024, the police recorded 96 cases of pyramid schemes and online scams in Bhutan, with Thimphu alone seeing 55 victims lose a total of USD 72,000. Thimphu police managed to recover and return USD 32,400 to victims. These scams, including Ponzi schemes like Puth, QNet, Tallwin, and Enveer, spread rapidly through word of mouth, luring people with promises of quick money. [Kuensel]

Bhutan: Environmental trust fund to boost climate resilience

(ps)To enhance resilience and reduce vulnerability to climate variability and extremes, the Bhutan Trust Fund for Environmental Conservation (BTF) has proposed a USD 10 million project to the Green Climate Fund (GCF), a global initiative established under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The project, titled “Climate Adaptation, Resilience and Engagement in Local Governance” (CARE-LG), aims to be implemented over the next five years in 120 sub-districts (gewogs), pending GCF approval in July. [Kuensel]

The BTF, an autonomous organization accredited by the GCF and Adaptation Fund, currently funds 15 ongoing projects worth USD 12 million, supporting both government and private initiatives to promote environmental conservation and climate resilience. The project will be co-executed by the Department of Planning, Budget and Performance (DPBP) and the Department of Local Governance and Disaster Management (DLGDM).

Bhutan: EV cars expansion funded by Green Climate Fund

(ps) Bhutan's Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay announced efforts to expand electric vehicle (EV) projects in Bhutan with investment from the Global Environment Facility, Green Climate Fund, and the Government of India's project-tied assistance. Currently, EVs constitute only 0.3% of the 126,501 registered vehicles in the country. The previous EV project offered a 20% subsidy on the EV cost, a 70% loan facility, and required taxi drivers to pay only 10% upfront. A successful pilot project replaced 300 taxis with EVs. The government aims to continue providing support and tax concessions for EV purchases. The initiative aligns with Bhutan's commitment to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and promoting sustainable transport. However, the high cost of EVs and the country's reliance on fossil fuels for transportation remain challenges. [Kuensel]

India: Prime Minister Modi expected to win historic third term, but may miss out on landslide

(lm) At the time of writing, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi was on track to secure a third term in power. With half of the 640 million votes counted, Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its political allies have clinched 290 seats, sufficient to form a majority government for the next five years. However, this outcome marks a decline from the BJP's resounding victory in 2019, with the party projected to lose nearly 70 seats. It also diverges significantly from the overwhelming two-thirds majority that numerous exit polls had predicted just over the weekend. [The Guardian]

In a surprising turn, the opposition alliance, known as INDIA, has outperformed expectations, securing a collective total of 234 seats according to the early count. Comprising more than 20 national and regional opposition parties, this alliance united for the first time in this election with the explicit aim of challenging Modi's leadership, which has been in place since 2014.

Should these results hold steady as the vote counting continues, it could herald significant changes in India's political landscape. For the past decade, Modi and his Hindu nationalist BJP party have enjoyed a dominant majority, while the opposition, particularly the

Congress party, has been perceived as weak and unable to effectively counter the BJP's influence.

However, the India coalition has demonstrated greater resilience than anticipated, buoyed by strong performances from regional parties such as the Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh, the Trinamool Congress in West Bengal, and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam party in Tamil Nadu.

Notably, In Indian-administered Kashmir, Sheikh Abdul Rashid, won the Baramulla constituency as an independent candidate. Rashid, a former legislator jailed since 2019 on terror funding charges, defeated former chief minister Omar Abdullah of the Jammu and Kashmir National Conference party.

India: Local parties dominate Sikkim state assembly elections

(lm) In the 2024 Sikkim state assembly elections, the local parties dominated, with the Sikkim Krantikari Morcha (SKM) securing a landslide victory, winning 31 out of 32 seats in the legislative assembly. The Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF) managed to secure only one seat. National parties like the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) of Prime Minister Modi, or the Indian National Congress, India's main opposition party on the federal level, were unable to gain ground in the state. [The Indian Express]

After the inaugural meeting of newly elected legislators, incumbent Sikkim Chief Minister Prem Singh Tamang formally submitted a resolution to Governor Lakshman Prasad Acharya, declaring himself as the Chief Minister from his party. [The Hindu businessline]

India: BJP maintains dominance in Arunachal Pradesh legislative assembly elections

(lm) In state elections in India's Arunachal Pradesh state, held on in April but with results released on June 2, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) maintained its dominance by securing 46 out of the 60 legislative assembly seats. This outcome marked an improvement for the BJP, as they gained five more seats compared to the previous elections held in 2019. [The Indian Express]

While the BJP emerged as the clear winner, other political parties also made their mark in the elections. The National People's Party (NPP) secured the second position by winning five seats, while the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) managed to secure three seats. Similarly, the People's Party of Arunachal (PPA) obtained two seats, maintaining its presence in the state assembly.

The Indian National Congress, India's main opposition party on the federal level and once a dominant political force in the region, experienced a setback as it could only secure one seat in the elections. Additionally, three seats were won by independent candidates.

India: Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal returns to prison

(sg/wh) Arvind Kejriwal, Delhi Chief Minister and prominent critic of India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi, return to prison on June 2 after 21 days interim bail granted to him by the Supreme Court. Detained in March over corruption charges related to a 2021 liquor sale policy, Kejriwal was released last month to campaign in the Indian elections. [Mint] [Deutsche Welle]

Prior to his return to prison, Kejriwal submitted a plea for bail at a trial court. The court, however, declined his request for an urgent hearing of the plea. The Supreme Court's office stated that since Kejriwal could seek regular bail from the trial court, his petition for an extension of the interim bail was not maintainable, marking a legal setback for the AAP leader. [Hindustan Times]

On June 2, then, a Delhi court sent Kejriwal to judicial custody until June 5. This development followed Kejriwal's surrender at Tihar Jail after his Supreme Court-ordered interim bail expired. The court noted that the Enforcement Directorate (ED) had recently filed an application seeking Kejriwal's judicial custody, which had been pending due to his interim bail. [The Times of India]

India: BRS leader K Kavitha's judicial custody extended

(wh) The Rouse Avenue Court in Delhi has extended the judicial custody of K. Kavitha, a leader of the Bharat Rashtra Samithi (BRS) and daughter of Telangana Chief

Minister K Chandrasekhar Rao, until July 3. Kavitha, who had been arrested on March 15, was produced before the court on June 3, as her previous custody period ended. [Mint]

The extension is related to an ongoing Enforcement Directorate investigation into the Delhi Excise Case, which revolves around allegations of corruption and money laundering linked to the Delhi government's excise policy for the fiscal year 2021-22. The policy, which was later scrapped, reportedly involved irregularities in the formulation and implementation phases, leading to financial misappropriation.

India: Supreme Court calls for stakeholders meet to address Delhi's demand for more water amid heatwave

(wh) India's Supreme Court on June 3 ordered the central government to convene a meeting of stakeholders to address the Delhi government's request for additional water supply from Himachal Pradesh via Haryana. This directive came during a hearing of the Delhi government's petition seeking water supply facilitation from Haryana. The case is adjourned until June 6. [Bar and Bench]

India: SP leader Azam Khan sentenced to 10-Year jail term in property grab case

(wh) Azam Khan, senior leader of the Samajwadi Party, which is primarily based in the state of Uttar Pradesh, has been sentenced to 10 years in prison for a property grab case back in 2016. This is his sixth conviction in the past 18 months. The court also sentenced Khan's associate, Barkat Ali, to seven years. Both were found guilty of multiple charges, including robbery and house-trespass. Khan, currently in Sitapur district jail, and his lawyer plan to appeal the judgment. [The Indian Express]

India: Central bank fines HSBC for violating FEMA regulations

(wh) The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) fined HSBC approximately USD 43,656 for violating the Foreign Exchange Management Act (FEMA). HSBC failed to comply with reporting requirements under the Liberalised Remittance Scheme of FEMA, 1999. The RBI

had issued a show cause notice to HSBC, to which the bank responded with a written reply and oral submission. [The Times of India]

India: Meta reveals China's role in hosting fake accounts propagating pro-Khalistan sentiments

(sg) Meta, the parent company of various social media platforms, has revealed that a network based in China operated fake Facebook and Instagram accounts targeting the Sikh community worldwide to propagate pro-Khalistan sentiments. This network, originating in China, was involved in creating fictitious events such as "Operation K," which called for pro-Sikh protests in countries like New Zealand and Australia. [WION]

Maldives: Members of 20th Parliament sworn in

(lm) In the Maldives', members of the 20th Parliament were sworn in at a ceremony on May 28. [avas 1]

In the April 21 parliamentary elections, members were elected to 93 seats. The People's National Congress (PNC), led by President Mohamed Muizzu, secured a majority with 66 seats. Additionally, eleven independent candidates won seats, most of whom are now aligned with the PNC. Since the election, several independents have joined the ruling party, increasing PNC's representation to 75 members in the 20th Parliament.

Earlier last month, the PNC appointed Ibrahim Falah as the leader of its parliamentary group for the 20th Parliament. Falah, who previously served in the 18th Parliament, now serves as the majority leader. [avas 2]

Meanwhile, the opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), led by former President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, has seen a significant reduction in its influence in the current Parliament. The MDP, which held 65 seats in the previous Parliament, managed to win only 15 seats this time around. The party elected Ibrahim Nazil as the parliamentary group leader, which consists of 12 members. In this role, Nazil has become the minority leader of the 20th Parliament. [avas 3]

During Parliament's first sitting, Falah proposed including 13 MPs in the Committee on National Security Services and 11 MPs in all other committees.

This motion was unanimously approved by the 88 MPs in attendance. [The Sun]

Notably, Deputy Speaker Ahmed Nazim announced on May 28 that the PNC is considering the formation of a dedicated parliamentary committee on housing. The proposal for the new committee was not introduced at Parliament's sitting earlier the same day due to time constraints in fixing the mandates for the standing committees. However, Nazim believes the committee can be established by amending the parliament's standing orders through the General Purpose Committee, with the expectation that this will be completed by the end of June. [The Sun]

Currently, housing issues fall under the Committee on National Development and Heritage, which reviewed cases related to Hiyaa housing flats during the 19th assembly. President Mohamed Muizzu has prioritized resolving housing concerns, highlighting the need for a comprehensive solution following national security matters.

Maldives: High Court halts case involving ex-president Yameen's USD 1 million funds

(lm) In the Maldives, the High Court has ordered the Civil Court to halt any further proceedings in a case involving USD 1 million that entered former President Abdulla Yameen's personal account. The case, filed by the Bank of Maldives (BML) against Yameen and the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), centers on an escrow account opened at BML to hold questionable funds. [avas]

The USD 1 million, alleged to be laundered funds intended for the Maldives Marketing and PR Corporation (MMPRC), was deposited into Yameen's personal account at Maldives Islamic Bank (MIB) through two cheques in November 2015. Yameen initially refused to surrender the funds to the ACC, leading to an agreement to hold the funds in an escrow account at BML, signed in March 2018.

However, it was later revealed that the funds in the escrow account were not the original USD 1 million from Yameen's MIB account. In February 2024, the Civil Court ruled that BML was responsible for matters related to the escrow account. Following this ruling, BML appealed to the High Court, questioning the Civil Court's jurisdiction over the case.

Maldives: President Muizzu dissolves Presidential Commission on Deaths and Disappearances

(hgh) In the Maldives, President Muizzu has dissolved the Presidential Commission on Deaths and Disappearances, a body established in 2018 by his predecessor, Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, to investigate cases of unresolved murders, enforced disappearances, and abductions from January 2012 to November 2018. The President's resolution stated that the commission had completed its work. [the edition]

However, despite the initial two-year mandate, many cases remained unresolved, and victims' families had appealed for an extension, which was granted until the end of May. Additionally, civil organizations had called for the commission's findings be made public, even in redacted form.

Maldives: USD 50 Million deposited in Sovereign Development Fund thus far

(hgh) In the Maldives, Minister of Finance Mohamed Shafeeq announced that a total of USD 50 million has been deposited in the Sovereign Development Fund (SDF) thus far, with a goal to reach USD 100 million by year-end. [the edition]

The SDF was established in 2017 under a presidential decree as a fund to finance the repayment of large external debts. Maintained at the Maldives Monetary Authority (MMA), the SDF has been funded by earmarking a portion of the airport development fees collected in USD from arriving tourists. The fund started the year with USD 480 million and primarily invests in treasury bills and other avenues.

Maldives: Government allocates USD 845,000 in loans to local farmers

(hgh) The Maldivian government, through the Ministry of Agriculture and Animal Welfare, has allocated approximately USD 845,000 in loans to local farmers, with over USD 262,000 going to individuals and more than USD 524,000 to companies. The loans, part of the "Dhanduveri Kamuge Nafaa" scheme, aim to bolster farming infrastructure by facilitating the acquisition of modern agricultural technology. The loans, ranging from approximately USD 6,500 to USD 65,000, are offered without requiring collateral. [Sun.mv]

Maldives: Revamped efforts to expedite Ras Male project begin

(lm) The Maldives' Construction Minister Abdulla Muththalib announced that the Ras Malé project, launched in December last year, is not progressing as planned. This ambitious project aims to develop Fushi Dhiggaru Falhu into a modern mega-city, covering 1,150 hectares of reclaimed land, designed to address the housing crisis in the Malé region by providing 65,000 housing units. [avas]

The project has faced significant hurdles due to the failure of Sri Lanka's Capital Marine and Civil Construction Company (CMCC) to secure necessary funding and parliamentary budget cuts, which rejected a proposal to allocate approximately USD 26 million (MVR 400 million) for the project in this year's budget. Despite these setbacks, the government has managed to make some progress in accelerating dredging work through alternative means.

Additionally, the government has arranged to expedite the construction of 15,000 housing units by the China State Construction Engineering Corporation (CSCEC), which will manufacture the required supplies and equipment within the Maldives. The first factory for this production will be built on the initially dredged land in Fushi Dhiggaru.

Maldives: Mal, Vilimale to be linked by Thilamale' Bridge by December 2025

(lm) The Maldives' Infrastructure Ministry announced that the segment of the Thilamale' Bridge project linking Male' and Vilimale' will be completed by December 31, 2025. Additionally, the segment connecting Male' and Gulhifalhu is scheduled for completion by March 31, 2026, with the entire project set to be finished by September 30, 2026. [The Sun]

The Thilamale' Bridge project, which connects Male', Vilimale', Thilafushi, and Gulhifalhu, is funded by an Indian grant of USD 100 million and a USD 400 million concessional credit line from India's Exim Bank. The project, awarded to India's Afcons Infrastructure in August 2021, faced criticism for its slow progress under the former administration, with only 29 percent completed by November last year. However, the Infrastructure Ministry reported that 38.88 percent of

the project is now complete and segments will be opened for public use upon completion.

A critical pending task is arranging funding for the contractor, with the project's total cost to be determined once the contractor submits a proposal.

Maldives: STO decreases fuel prices for first time since December 2023

(hgh) In the Maldives, the State Trading Organization (STO) has once again lowered fuel prices, citing a decrease in global fuel prices. As a result, diesel will now be priced at USD 0.906 per liter, and petrol at USD 0.909 per liter. This marks the first price adjustment since December last year. Despite fluctuations in global fuel prices, the impact on the public is mitigated by government fuel subsidies, which amounted to USD 123.5 million in 2023 and USD 50.05 million this year. [the edition]

Maldives: Transport Ministry proposes amendments to cap vehicle numbers

(hgh) The Maldives Ministry of Transport and Civil Aviation has proposed amendments to cap the number of vehicles in the country to tackle traffic congestion and promote environmental sustainability. These changes will include stricter regulations on vehicle imports and controls on registration and licensing. [the edition]

Maldives: President calls for foreign cooperation in digital economy transformation

(hgh) Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu has appealed for increased foreign cooperation to support the digital transformation of the country's economy. He highlighted the potential benefits of integrating advanced digital technologies and infrastructure to enhance economic growth and improve public services. [Sun.mv]

Maldives: Ministry ensures textbooks for all schools, launches 'Cool School' initiative

(hgh) The Ministry of Education announced a provision of textbooks to all schools across the country to improve educational outcomes by ensuring that all students, regardless of their location, have access to the necessary learning materials. Previously, many schools, particularly in remote and rural areas, faced challenges in obtaining adequate textbooks, which hindered the educational progress of students. [the edition]

In a further effort to improve the educational environment, the ministry launched the 'Cool School' initiative, which aims to install air conditioning units in all public schools. The project, which will increase state expenditure by 38 percent, will incorporate renewable energy sources for 20 percent of its implementation, with plans to utilize solar panels to ensure cost-effectiveness.

Maldives: Emergency motion highlights water supply woes in Addu City, calls for swift action

(hgh) On June 3, an emergency motion was presented in Parliament regarding water supply interruptions on the connected islands of Addu City. The motion, initiated by a lawmaker of the opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), calls for immediate action to address the issue, emphasizing the importance of clean water as a basic service. The MDP attributes the deteriorating water supply to insufficient repairs and upgrades over the past five years. [the edition]

Maldives: Shari'ah-compliant credit card launched

(hgh) The Bank of Maldives (BML) launched an Islamic shari'ah compliant credit card. This financial product that runs on American Express network adheres to Islamic banking principles, offering customers a credit solution that aligns with their religious values.[Avas]

The newly introduced card is designed to meet the growing demand for ethical financial services among the Maldivian population. Unlike conventional credit cards, the Shari'ah compliant card ensures the transactions are free from interest (riba in Islam), adhering to the ethical standards outlined in Shari'ah law.

Maldives: Police reports notable decline in crime rates

(hgh/lm) The Maldives Police Service has reported a significant reduction in crime rates across the country. [avas]

In December, robbery was the most frequently reported crime with 777 cases. However, from May 1 to 16 this year, the number of reported theft cases decreased to 356, with a total of 2,952 theft cases recorded between January 1 and May 16. Assaults, the second most reported crime in December with 117 cases, also saw a decline, dropping to 62 reported cases from May 1 to 16 this year. Similarly, snatching incidents fell from 117 cases in December to 38 cases during the same period this year. Kidnapping cases decreased significantly, with five cases reported in December last year compared to just one case from May 1 to 16 this year.

At the same time, however, Police Commissioner Ali Shujau has expressed concerns regarding the inadequate police presence in the Maldives, highlighting this issue as a significant factor affecting public safety and confidence in the police force. Shujau noted that the lack of visible police patrols, particularly during business hours and in key urban areas, has been raised by various community stakeholders.

To address these concerns, Commissioner Shujau announced plans to conduct a special audit focusing on instances of police negligence in investigations and court cases. This audit aims to identify and rectify procedural lapses that contribute to the release of individuals accused of serious crimes, thus improving overall law enforcement effectiveness. [the edition]

Nepal: Government unveils budget for fiscal 2024-2025

(ps) Nepal's Finance Minister Barsha Man Pun on May 28 announced a USD 14.2 billion budget for the fiscal year 2024/25, representing a 6.2 percent increase compared to the previous year. This ambitious financial plan aims to stimulate economic growth, enhance investment, and drive infrastructure development. 61.31 percent is allocated for recurrent expenditure and 18.94 percent is allocated for capital expenditure, and the remaining is for financing. The plan includes increased spending on agriculture, energy, and job creation. The government has placed emphasis on sectors like agriculture, energy, IT,

tourism, and domestic production. [The Kathmandu] [My Republica]

Nepal: Supreme Court directs government to regulate rising number of expeditions on Mount Everest

(lm) Against the larger backdrop of an intensifying commercialization of expedition to Mount Everest, Nepal's Supreme Court has issued a mandamus order directing the government to regulate the rising number of expeditions on the world's tallest mountain to preserve the heritage for future generations. [The Kathmandu Post]

The apex court's order followed increasing traffic jams on the world's highest peak, and the trash people leave on its slopes. More than 600 people, including 200 foreigners, successfully reached the summit of the Mount Everest this spring climbing season, which ended last week. Eight people died on the mountain—including three who have been reportedly missing but presumed dead—this season.

Nepal: Kathmandu mayor accuses ex-premier Oli in tea estate land scam

(lm) The Kathmandu Metropolitan City Mayor, Balendra Shah, has leveled accusations against KP Sharma Oli, a former prime minister and chair of the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist) (CPN-UML), implicating him in a land scam involving the *Giri Bandhu Tea Estate*. The plantation, located in Koshi province in eastern Nepal, has become the focal point of increasing tensions between the main opposition Nepali Congress and the coalition core CPN-UML [see AiR No. 21, May/2024, 3]. [The Kathmandu Post]

Shah's allegations center around what he terms "policy corruption," suggesting that Oli was involved in facilitating illegal land swapping related to the estate. According to Shah, during Oli's second tenure (2018-2021), provisions in the Land Act were revised in January 2020 to allow the owners of the Giri Bandhu Tea Estate to swap a significant portion of land. This allegedly occurred under the guise of addressing the estate's financial liabilities in case of liquidation. However, Shah contends that this was a pretext for fraudulent activity, implicating Oli directly in what he estimates to be a roughly USD 757 million scam.

It is worth noting that the decision by the government to purchase land from the tea estate was later challenged in court, leading to a Supreme Court ruling this February overturning the government's decision. The court deemed the decision to contravene land laws and highlighted the need for proper assessment and compliance with legal provisions regarding land transactions.

Still, Shah criticized Oli for failing to fulfill promises made to individuals who had made advance payments to purchase land from the Giri Bandhu Tea Estate. Shah called for Oli to rectify the situation by returning the advance payments to those affected. He warned of potential repercussions if corrective action was not taken, insinuating that Oli's past legal troubles could resurface.

Nepal: Bill giving prime minister decisive vote in Constitutional Council moves ahead

(lm) The State Affairs and Good Governance Committee of Nepal's House of Representatives has unanimously endorsed a bill to amend the Constitutional Council (Functions, Duties, Powers, and Procedures) Act. This endorsement came after the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist) (CPN-UML), a key member of the ruling coalition government, softened its stance on the bill. The amendment stipulates that the council can only make decisions with the agreement of the prime minister and a majority of the existing members. [The Kathmandu Post]

The bill, initially registered by the Pushpa Kamal Dahal government in February last year, proposed that the six-member council nominate office-bearer candidates for constitutional bodies with the approval of the chairperson and at least half of the members. While other parties supported the bill, the CPN-UML had insisted that decisions should be made by a majority of the council members, with or without the chairperson's approval. However, the CPN-UML changed its position as it is now part of the government, leading to the bill's unanimous endorsement.

As per the amendment, the council, headed by the prime minister, requires the prime minister's consent and the agreement of at least 50 percent of the remaining members to make decisions. The bill will now be presented in both Houses for further endorsement. The council includes the prime minister,

chief justice, Speaker of the House, National Assembly chair, leader of the opposition, and deputy Speaker. The Minister for Law, Justice, and Parliamentary Affairs participates when nominating a candidate for chief justice.

The amendment aims to streamline decision-making within the council, ensuring the involvement of the prime minister and a majority of members. This change addresses the earlier ordinance by the KP Sharma Oli administration, which allowed decisions with just the chairperson and two members present, a move criticized and legally challenged by the Nepali Congress and the Maoist Centre at the time.

Nepal: Intraparty rift in coalition-member Unified Socialist party manifests ahead of convention

(lm) Separate meetings held by two top leaders of the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Socialist), a coalition member with currently 10 seats in the 275-member lower House, with Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal and main opposition Nepali Congress leader Sher Bahadur Deuba have ignited discussions about possible factional divisions within the party, led by Madhav Kumar Nepal and Jhala Nath Khanal. This come as a time when the party is preparing for its general convention from June 30 to July 4, where Nepal and Khanal may compete for the party's top post. [The Kathmandu Post]

On May 29, Madhav Kumar Nepal attended a meeting of opposition parties at Deuba's residence aimed at realigning the coalition for the Madhesh provincial government. Meanwhile, Jhala Nath Khanal met with Prime Minister Dahal on May 30 to discuss ongoing political developments and strategies to maintain the leftist alliance in federal and provincial governments.

Recent decisions clearly indicate a division between the two senior leaders along ideological lines. Khanal is advocating for the party to remain aligned with the current leftist coalition, which includes the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre) led by Prime Minister Dahal. This coalition focuses on maintaining a unified front among left-leaning parties in Nepal, historically working together to push a progressive, socialist agenda. Nepal, on the other hand, has shown a tendency to align with the Nepali Congress, the main opposition party. This alignment suggests a strategic shift away from the traditional leftist coalition, potentially to create a broader, more centrist alliance that can address governance and stability issues.

It is important to note that the Unified Socialist party was founded in 2021 after Nepal and several other leaders split from the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist) (CPN-UML), led by then-prime minister KP Sharma Oli, due to disagreements.

Since its establishment, the party has been engaged in ongoing debates about its ideological stance and political strategy. These debates often center around the legacy of People's Multiparty Democracy (PMD), an ideological line developed by the late Madan Bhandari and historically followed by the CPN-UML. Party chair Nepal has tried to integrate this ideology into the new party, but there are differing views within the leadership about its relevance and application in contemporary politics.

In the context of these debates, the party has struggled to retain its members, with many leaders and cadres returning to the CPN-UML. Significant defections have included district leaders and high-ranking members who were disillusioned with the party's direction and leadership.

Nepal: Opposition parties seek support of Unified Socialist party to stabilize Madhesh provincial government

(lm) On May 29, leaders from three opposition parties and one ruling party convened to discuss the current political situation and the functioning of central and provincial governments in Nepal, particularly focusing on Madhesh province. Nepali Congress President Sher Bahadur Deuba hosted the meeting, which included Janata Samajbadi Party Nepal (JSP-N) Chairman Upendra Yadav, Loktantrik Samajbadi Party Chairman Mahantha Thakur, and Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Socialist) Chairman Madhav Kumar Nepal. [The Kathmandu Post]

The meeting took place ahead of an anticipated vote of confidence sought by Saroj Yadav, the current Chief Minister of Madhesh, on June 5. Yadav lost his majority in the provincial assembly after the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist) (CPN-UML), the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre), and the Janamat Party—a breakaway faction of the JSP-N—withdrew their support. As Yadav seeks a vote of confidence, the three opposition parties sought the support of the Unified Socialist to sustain his government. Together, the Nepali Congress, JSP-Nepal, Unified Socialist, and Loktantrik Samajbadi Party hold 56 votes in the 107-member provincial assembly, surpassing the simple majority threshold of 54.

Amid this backdrop, Unified Socialist chief Nepal expressed dissatisfaction with the current coalition despite his party's role in the federal government. This discontent potentially provides the opposition parties an opportunity to weaken the Pushpa Kamal Dahal-led government. At the meeting, Nepal voiced his frustration with the Dahal government's approach and the sidelining by CPN-UML chief KP Sharma Oli, despite having two ministers in the government.

The leaders also discussed the potential implications if the Supreme Court invalidates the Election Commission's decision to register the Janata Samajbadi Party, which currently supports the federal government. Should the registration of the new party be invalidated, a withdrawal of support from the Unified Socialist could further destabilize the Dahal government.

Nepal: Pandey reinstated as Gandaki chief minister after Supreme Court order

(lm) Surendra Pandey, parliamentary party leader of the main opposition Nepali Congress, was appointed as the Chief Minister of Gandaki province on May 29, forming the fourth government since the 2022 general elections. Province Head Dilliraj Bhatta appointed Pandey following a Supreme Court ruling that declared the previous Chief Minister, Khagaraj Adhikari of the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist) (CPN-UML), had obtained his vote of confidence unconstitutionally. [The Kathmandu Post]

However, despite Pandey's appointment, the stability of his government remains uncertain due to the lack of a clear majority in the 60-member provincial assembly. The Nepali Congress party, holding 27 seats, needs additional support from other assembly members to maintain a stable government. Current negotiations are ongoing with the Rastriya Prajantra Party (RPP), independent members, and the Nepal Samajbadi Party.

The political dynamics shifted earlier in March when the CPN-UML and Maoist Centre formed a coalition, displacing the Nepali Congress-led government. Pandey must secure a majority during a trust vote within 30 days of his appointment, by June 27, to solidify his position.

Nepal: KMG chair Kailash Sirohiya released

(lm) Kailash Sirohiya, chair of Nepal's largest media group, *Kantipur Media Group* (KMG), was released on May 30 after being held in custody for nine days. [The Kathmandu Post 1]

Sirohiya was detained last week over allegations concerning the authenticity of his citizenship certificate. The arrest followed a complaint by a member of the Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP). This occurred alongside Kantipur Daily's reports on a scam involving the embezzlement of funds by the *Gorkha Media Network*, which is associated with RSP leader Lamichhane, who currently serves as deputy prime minister and home minister. [AiR No. 22, May/2024, 4]

In light of this, the arrest had drawn widespread condemnation from national and international media and human rights organizations, who described the government's actions as retaliatory. Sirohiya, for his part, criticized the arrest as an attempt to weaken *Kantipur Media Group*'s journalism and intimidate other media outlets.

Recently, the European Union also expressed serious concern to Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal regarding Sirohiya's arrest. EU Ambassador to Nepal, Veronique Lorenzo, highlighted the potential reputational risk to Nepal's press freedom record, noting that the arrest appeared disproportionate given the nature of the citizenship issue. [The Kathmandu Post 2]

Nepal: Different dress codes between foreign workers and locals

(ps) In Nepal, the Ministry of Home Affairs has approved a separate uniform for immigrants and Nepaleses in 15 different offices, including the Department of Immigration (DoI). The decision was made to address the challenge of distinguishing between Immigration staff and employees from other agencies. [The Himalayan Times]

Nepal: Government introduces green tax on imported petroleum products

(ps) In a move to combat carbon emissions and promote sustainable practices, the Nepalese government has implemented a green tax on imported petroleum. This move is outlined in the Financial Act

for the fiscal year 2024-25. The tax aims to promote equitable taxation based on economic transactions. Additionally, the budget includes measures to encourage domestic industries, such as reducing import duties on raw materials. [The Kathmandu Post]

To attract foreign direct investment, the government is offering a reduced income tax on interest from loans obtained from international financial institutions. In a bid to modernize and streamline tax administration, electronic invoicing will be implemented for all taxpayers associated with value-added tax (VAT) to streamline tax administration and enhance transparency by enabling digital invoicing and record-keeping. Recognizing the health risks associated with tobacco consumption, the budget introduces health risk taxes on bidi, whether imported or domestically produced. This measure aims to discourage the use of these hand-rolled cigarettes and promote public health.

Nepal: Customers shy away as gold price soars

(lm) Nepal's government has increased the customs duty on gold from 15 percent to 20 percent, effective immediately, as part of the new fiscal year 2024-25 budget announced last week. This move aims to address the steady rise in gold prices in the international market, which has led to a significant increase in domestic gold prices. [The Kathmandu Post]

As a result, gold prices surged by approximately NPR 6,000 per tola, reaching NPR 140,500 (around USD 1,054) on May 30, up from NPR 136,900 (around USD 1,027) per tola the previous week. Traders predict that prices could hit NPR 150,000 (around USD 1,125) per tola once the new tax is fully accounted for.

Pakistan: Election Commission gains authority to appoint judges to election tribunals without consultation

(ss/lm) In a notable development, the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) now has the authority to appoint judges to election tribunals, including retired high court judges, without consulting high court chief justices. This change follows a recent ordinance that restored Section 140 of the Election Act 2017 to its original form, enabling the ECP to establish new

tribunals and transfer pending cases to these tribunals. unya News]

Previously, the ECP could only appoint serving judges to election tribunals and was required to consult the relevant high court's chief justice for such appointments. The parliament had previously removed these powers from the ECP, but they have now been reinstated.

The changes come at a time when the ECP is in a deadlock with the high court in Lahore, the capital of Punjab province, over the establishment of election tribunals. The ECP holds that a high court chief justice should propose a panel of judges, from which the ECP can select. A total of 180 petitions challenging the election results of National Assembly seats in Punjab and Islamabad have been filed, including those related to the Punjab Assembly. Currently, the ECP has established one tribunal in Islamabad and four in Punjab, with more delayed due to the deadlock.

Against this backdrop, Pakistan's main opposition party, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), has opposed the inclusion of retired judges in election tribunals for Form 47-related cases, warning of "serious political and legal repercussions." The issue centers around the PTI's allegations that the consolidated election results from the parliamentary elections held in February recorded in so-called Form 47 were manipulated by the election officials to favor certain candidates, particularly those aligned with the ruling Pakistan Muslim League (N). These challenges are part of broader electoral disputes and are currently being addressed by election tribunals. [DAWN 1]

Against the backdrop of the new ordinance empowering the ECP to appoint retired judges as election tribunals, all three declared winners of National Assembly seats from Islamabad have requested the transfer of election petitions against them from the sole election tribunal in the federal capital to another tribunal. The winners have also requested a stay on the proceedings until their transfer applications are resolved. They express concerns about not receiving fair justice from the current tribunal. Crucially, however, there is only one election tribunal in Islamabad, and under the law, cases cannot be transferred outside the capital. [DAWN 2]

Additionally, the ordinance allowing the appointment of retired judges has been challenged in the Lahore High Court. [Business Recorder]

Pakistan: Court acquits ex-premier Khan, aide in state secrets case

(ss) The Islamabad High Court has acquitted former Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan and his foreign minister, Shah Mahmood Qureshi, of charges related to leaking state secrets. The court overturned their previous conviction in the high-profile "cipher case," which had sentenced both politicians to 10 years in prison. However, government officials have indicated that they may appeal the high court's decision to the Supreme Court. [Arab News] [Bloomberg] [Reuters]

The case revolved around accusations that Khan and Qureshi had mishandled and made public the contents of a secret diplomatic cable from Pakistan's then-ambassador to the United States. It allegedly detailed a meeting between the ambassador and Donald Lu, the U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs. According to the cable, US officials suggested that Pakistan could expect better relations with Washington if Khan was removed from office, due to his perceived neutrality on the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Khan was in Moscow meeting Russian President Vladimir Putin on the day the invasion began, which raised eyebrows in Washington.

The original trial, conducted by a special court under the Official Secrets Act, found Khan and Qureshi guilty of using the classified document for political purposes and not returning the decoded message to the foreign office. They were sentenced to a decade in prison in January last year. However, Khan and Qureshi maintained that the charges were politically motivated, aimed at undermining their credibility.

Despite their acquittal in the cipher case, Khan and Qureshi remain in custody. Khan has been imprisoned since August for an unrelated conviction involving an illicit marriage. Qureshi is still facing multiple charges related to the violent protests that erupted in May 2023, when PTI supporters stormed military and government installations following Khan's arrest.

Pakistan: Ex-prime minister Nawaz Sharif reelected as president of ruling Pakistan Muslim League-N

(lm) Pakistan's former three-times premier Nawaz Sharif was reelected as president of the ruling Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) party on May 28. He previously held the position until 2017, when he was forced out amid corruption allegations. The PML-N

came to power following the February 8 elections, which Sharif's rival, former premier Imran Khan, claimed were rigged. Currently, Sharif's younger brother, Shehbaz Sharif, leads a coalition government, and Nawaz Sharif is a member of Parliament. [Associated Press]

Nawaz Sharif was ousted in 2017 after the Supreme Court disqualified him from holding public office for concealing financial assets, a charge he denies. His conviction was overturned last year, enabling him to hold public or party office again. Sharif returned to Pakistan in October from self-imposed exile in London, where he had gone for medical treatment in 2019 during Khan's tenure. Imran Khan was ousted in 2022 through a no-confidence vote and is currently serving multiple prison terms.

Pakistan: Peoples Party forms committee to decide on joining federal, Punjab provincial cabinets

(ss) A committee has been formed to deliberate whether the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) will join the federal and Punjab cabinets. However, the final decision will be made by the PPP's Central Executive Committee. [DAWN]

Although the PPP, which secured 54 seats in the 33-member lower House, supported the Pakistan Muslim League (N) (PML-N) in forming the federal government after the February 8 general elections, it did not join Prime Minister Shehbaz's cabinet. The PPP currently holds significant constitutional positions, including the presidency, upper House (Senate) chairmanship, lower House (National Assembly) deputy speaker, and governorships in Punjab and Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa provinces.

In this context, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif recently extended an invitation to the PPP to join the federal government. However, the PPP delegation informed the prime minister that the decision rests with PPP co-chairperson and Pakistani president Asif Ali Zardari and his son, party chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari.

Recent reports suggested a potential power-sharing deal between the PML-N and PPP, with Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari possibly returning as the foreign minister. Additionally, Senate Chairman Yousuf Raza Gilani mentioned that the PPP might consider joining Punjab Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz's cabinet if given adequate space. However, PPP sources denied these claims, indicating that the party would not join the

federal cabinet before or immediately after the budget presentation in parliament.

Pakistan: ‘Missing poet in police custody in case spotlighting enforced disappearances

(lm) Ahmed Shah Farhad, a Kashmiri poet and journalist reported missing by his wife on May 14, is in police custody in Azad Kashmir, as revealed by Attorney-General Mansoor Usman Awan to the Islamabad High Court (IHC). Farhad's wife had accused Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) of abducting him and filed a petition for his recovery. [Arab News]

Farhad, who had recently criticized Pakistan's military on social media, was arrested while attempting to travel to his ancestral village from Islamabad. The police stopped his car near Kohala bridge in Azad Kashmir, where he allegedly misbehaved with officers, leading to his arrest under section 186 of the Pakistan Penal Code, which deals with obstructing government operations.

This incident highlights the ongoing issue of enforced disappearances in Pakistan, where families claim that individuals taken by security forces often disappear without explanation. Despite repeated denials from Pakistani security agencies regarding such disappearances, rights organizations frequently accuse them of illegal detentions and torture of dissenters.

Pakistan: Christian attacked by blasphemy mob dies of injuries

(lm) A Pakistani Christian accused of blasphemy and attacked by a mob last month, died from his injuries on June 3. Police in Punjab province arrested over 100 Muslim men under anti-terrorism laws for the attack on the man and his son, following allegations that they desecrated pages of the Qur'an. [Arab News]

This incident echoes a severe attack in 2023 in Jaranwala, Punjab, where thousands set churches and Christian homes on fire over similar blasphemy allegations. Blasphemy accusations in Pakistan, though often leading to violence and unrest, rarely result in executions but can incite riots, lynchings, and killings.

Pakistan: Industrialists urge government to tackle high energy prices, interest rate in next budget

(lm) Pakistan's leading industrial and trade body, the Federation of Pakistan Chambers of Commerce & Industry (FPCCI), has highlighted exorbitant energy costs, high interest rates, and multiple taxations as major hurdles to industrial growth. They hope these challenges will be addressed in the upcoming federal budget for 2024-25, to be unveiled by Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb this week. [Arab News]

As Pakistan faces an economic crisis with declining reserves, a weakening currency, and surging inflation, the FPCCI has submitted budget proposals to the government, expecting 80 percent of their demands to be met. These demands include reducing interest rates and energy costs, which have soared due to reforms demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in exchange for a USD 3 billion loan.

Energy costs have significantly increased, with gas and electricity charges rising by 318.74 percent and 71.12 percent, respectively, since April 2023. This has driven inflation to a historic high of 38 percent in May 2023, although it has eased to 17.3 percent by April 2024. The central bank projects annual average inflation at 23-25 percent for the current fiscal year, with expectations of further decline.

The central bank has raised the policy rate by 1,500 basis points during FY22 and FY23, maintaining it at 22 percent. The FPCCI urges the government to lower interest rates to reduce borrowing costs and revive industrial growth.

The finance ministry reports a "promising" economic outlook, citing improving industrial activities, declining inflation, and stability in the external sector. The ministry also notes that GDP growth is increasing, and recent fiscal consolidation efforts are proving effective. Agriculture has been a significant contributor to the economic upswing, driven by government initiatives.

The FPCCI has also called for reducing import duties and sales tax on various items and reviving zero-rating of sales tax for five export-oriented sectors: sports, surgical, leather, textiles, and carpets. The FPCCI is confident that their proposals will be considered and largely fulfilled by the government.

Pakistan: Suspected militants burn girls' school in former Pakistan Taliban stronghold

(lm) In northwest Pakistan, suspected militants burned a girls' school in North Waziristan, a former stronghold of the Pakistani Taliban, late on May 28. The attackers, using kerosene, destroyed furniture, computers, and books. Fortunately, no one was injured in the incident. This attack is part of a series of similar assaults, with two other girls' schools in the region being bombed earlier this month. [abc news] [Arab News]

Authorities initially suspected militants, known for targeting girls' schools in the past, but are now also investigating a man who recently had a dispute with the school's owner. The Pakistani Taliban, or Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, a close ally of the Afghan Taliban, have been emboldened since the latter's takeover of Afghanistan in 2021.

Pakistan: Cop shot dead by suspected militants in Peshawar amid wave of police killings

(ss) Unidentified gunmen shot dead a police officer in Peshawar, northwest Pakistan, early on May 29. Although no group has claimed responsibility, the banned Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) is suspected given its history of similar attacks in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. [Arab News]

The incident brings the total number of officers killed in ambushes and targeted attacks to 55 this year. Over the past two years, more than 200 policemen have been killed in targeted killings and ambushes in the region.

Sri Lanka: Government rejects proposals to postpone presidential election

(hgh/lm) Sri Lanka's Prime Minister Dinesh Gunawardena has rejected a proposal from President Ranil Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP) to hold a referendum to postpone the presidential and parliamentary elections by two years. The UNP proposed this postponement to allow more time for economic reforms. Gunawardena emphasized that the government had not discussed such a postponement and stated that the constitution mandates the Election

Commission to call elections within the specified dates. [The Hindu]

UNP General Secretary Palitha Range Bandara argued that extending the terms of the President and Parliament is essential to avoid wasting resources on elections during a critical economic recovery period. He claimed that this extension is not undemocratic if it involves parliamentary approval followed by a referendum. Bandara also cited historical precedents, such as Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike's decision to postpone elections in the 1970s, suggesting that legal amendments could facilitate the current proposal if required [Newswire]

The proposal was met with widespread criticism. Besides Prime Minister Gunawardena and opposition leaders, the Election Commission also expressed dismay over any attempts to delay the elections, reiterating their commitment to conducting them as scheduled. R.M.A.L. Ratnayake, the Election Commission chief, confirmed that they were fully prepared for the presidential election, with funds already allocated, and the date would be announced between late July and early August. Additionally, the People's Action for Free & Fair Elections (PAFFREL) warned of legal action against any efforts to postpone the elections. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: President orders emergency funds for weather relief

(hgh) Sri Lanka's President Ranil Wickremesinghe has directed immediate financial support to be distributed to regions impacted by severe weather conditions affecting several parts of the country. He instructed the Secretary to the Ministry of Finance to promptly allocate necessary funds to District Secretaries to ensure swift and efficient assistance to those in need. [Daily Mirror]

The severe weather conditions have been affecting communities across Sri Lanka, leading to significant disruptions and hardships for residents. Heavy rains and strong winds have caused flooding in several areas, resulting in the displacement of many families and damage to homes and infrastructure. The Meteorological Department has issued warnings of continued adverse weather, urging the public to take necessary precautions.

In the western and southern regions, flash floods have inundated roads and agricultural fields, disrupting daily life and transportation. The Disaster Management

Center has reported several incidents of landslides and fallen trees, further complicated rescue and relief efforts. Additionally, the government has set up temporary shelters and is distributing essential supplies to displaced families. Health officials are also monitoring for potential outbreaks of waterborne diseases in flooded areas.

Sri Lanka: IMF's second review for Extended Funds Facility set for June 12

(hgh) Sri Lanka's State Minister of Finance Shehan Semasinghe announced that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) Executive Board is set to review Sri Lanka's progress under the Article IV consultation and the second review of the Extended Fund Facility (EFF) on June 12. [Newswire] [Business Standard]

Sri Lanka's current financing situation with the IMF involves a 48-month EFF arrangement approved in March last year, totaling approximately USD 2.9 billion. This program aims to support Sri Lanka in addressing its ongoing economic crisis by providing capital to fund essential imports, stimulate economic growth, and facilitate structural reforms.

Last month, the multilateral lender confirmed that it had reached a staff-level agreement with the Sri Lankan government to conclude the second review under the EFF program and the 2024 Article IV Consultation. This agreement, once approved by IMF Management and the Executive Board, will allow Sri Lanka access to about USD 337 million in financing.

Sri Lanka: Suspected ISIS handler arrested after coordinating terrorist travel to India

(hgh) On May 31, the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) in Colombo arrested a suspect wanted for coordinating the travel of four alleged ISIS terrorists from Sri Lanka to India. A reward of roughly USD 6,600 had been announced earlier for information leading to his arrest. [Daily Mirror]

Constitutional Law and –Politics, Human Rights

and National Security in Southeast Asia

Cambodia: Prime minister calls for prevention of extremist ideologies

(lvw) Prime Minister Hun Manet urged citizens to work together to prevent extremist ideologies, which he identified as primary causes of war and religious conflict, during the inauguration of the Cambodian Buddhist Cultural Center in Kampong Speu province on May 30.

Emphasizing the need for religious unity, he highlighted the peaceful coexistence of different faiths in Cambodia and the importance of education in preventing extremism. He cited examples from Cambodia's history, namely the Pol Pot era and ensuing genocide, to illustrate the dangers of extremist ideologies.

Religious leaders in Cambodia echoed these sentiments, praising the country's secular education system and calling for continued efforts to maintain harmony and avoid extremism, which is illegal. [Khmer Times]

Cambodia: Funan Techo Canal construction to start in August, prime minister announces

(lvw) Prime Minister Hun Manet announced on May 30 that the Funan Techo Canal megaproject will begin construction in August, funded primarily by local investors. The project, expected to take five to six years, aims to enhance national unity and Cambodia's economic independence, despite opposition from some foreign nations and concerns about environmental impacts.

Spanning 180 kilometers and costing USD 1.7 billion, the canal aims to improve agricultural productivity, create jobs, reduce transportation costs, and provide Cambodia with more diplomatic independence by enhancing self-reliance.

Manet stressed local commitment, stating that Cambodians will proceed with or without foreign investment, though negotiations with a Chinese company for technical support are ongoing. Senate President Hun Sen supported swift construction, countering claims of potential Chinese military use and affirming Cambodia's constitutional stance on independence and sovereignty. [Khmer Times] [Phnom Penh Post]

Cambodia: Environmental activists to face trial for conspiracy

(lvw) The trial of ten environmental activists from Mother Nature Cambodia began on May 29 in Phnom Penh. They face charges of plotting against the government, potentially resulting in five to ten years in prison. Five activists attended the court session, wearing traditional Cambodian burial attire.

The activists had previously served time in prison and were released on bail in 2021 under conditions that barred further activism. Mother Nature Cambodia's activism, dating back to 2012, fights against environmental destruction, logging, pollution, and resource exploitation by powerful elites. The group's activism has led to repeated confrontations with the government and the legal system. [Mongabay]

Indonesia: Top officials' resignations cast doubt on Indonesia's new capital project

(jb) The recent resignations of two key officials overseeing Indonesia's new capital project in East Kalimantan have raised serious concerns about its future, analysts say. Bambang Susantono and Dhony Rahajoe, head and deputy head of the Nusantara National Capital Authority, stepped down without explanation on June 3, just months before the planned Independence Day celebrations at the site.

Analysts suggest these resignations may signal deeper issues within the ambitious USD 32 billion project aimed at replacing Jakarta. Persistent construction

delays, land acquisition hurdles, and funding challenges have already plagued the initiative.

President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo, whose term ends in October 2024, has heavily promoted the new capital as his legacy. However, investor confidence is wavering amid the project’s setbacks. Public Works Minister Basuki Hadimuljono, now acting head of the Authority, acknowledged the urgency in resolving land and investment issues to regain momentum. Despite these efforts, skepticism remains regarding the project's feasibility and planning adequacy. [Benar News] [Reuters]

Indonesia: Workers oppose new salary deductions for public housing fund

(jb) Indonesian labor unions have strongly criticized a new presidential regulation mandating a 3 percent salary deduction from all employees to fund a national housing program. The regulation, signed by President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo, requires a 2.5 percent deduction from employees and a 0.5 percent contribution from employers. Unions argue this adds financial strain amidst rising inflation and modest wage increases.

Asosiasi Serikat Pekerja Indonesia (Association of Indonesian Trade Unions, ASPEK Indonesia) Secretary General, Sabda Pranawa Djati, condemned the regulation as an additional burden on workers, asserting that saving should be voluntary. President Jokowi defended the policy, citing its long-term benefits, similar to the initial resistance against state-run health insurance.

Critics like Andy Ahmad Zaelany at Badan Riset dan Inovasi Nasional (National Research and Innovation Agency, BRIN) or the National Research and Innovation Agency argue that high housing inflation makes it unrealistic for lower-middle-class workers to afford homes through the scheme. The Employers’ Association (APINDO) also opposed the regulation, highlighting existing financial obligations on entrepreneurs. The government has pledged to review the policy amid widespread backlash. [Benar News]

Indonesia: Health advocates call for reforms to address high male smoking rates

(jb) Health advocates in Indonesia are calling for urgent reforms to tackle the country's high male smoking rates, which are among the highest in the world. About 70 percent of Indonesian men over 15 smoke tobacco, significantly contributing to rising rates of lung cancer and heart-related diseases. Olivia Herlinda from the Center for Indonesia's Strategic Development Initiatives highlights the cultural portrayal of smoking as masculine and cool, heavily promoted by the tobacco industry.

Despite some local governments banning cigarette billboards, Indonesia remains one of only six countries with increasing tobacco use and is not a party to the WHO's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control. Advocates are pushing for larger warning labels on cigarette packs and higher taxes on tobacco products, which currently account for half the price of popular brands. They also urge tighter regulations on tobacco industry influence in policymaking to protect public health. [Voice of America]

Indonesia: Inflation rate eases in May 2024, below forecast

(jb) Indonesia's annual inflation rate eased to 2.84 percent in May 2024, down from 3 percent in April, according to data from the statistics bureau. This figure came in below the 2.94 percent expected by analysts, staying within Bank Indonesia's target range of 1.5 percent to 3.5 percent.

The core inflation rate slightly increased to 1.93 percent in May from 1.82 percent the previous month, higher than the predicted 1.86 percent. Despite the rise in core inflation, the overall decline was attributed to a seasonal drop in demand post-Eid al-Fitr and falling rice prices amid ample supplies.

Inflation has remained within the central bank's target range since mid-2023, following a series of cumulative rate hikes totaling 275 basis points since mid-2022. Bank Indonesia continues to monitor the rupiah's performance against the US dollar, with recent declines posing a risk of imported inflation.

Monetary policymakers remain vigilant to ensure economic stability. [The Star] [Reuters]

Indonesia: Security forces deployed to hospital in Papua following rebel threat

(rm) Indonesia's XVII/Cendrawasih Regional Military Command has deployed a joint team of army and police personnel to Madi Public Hospital in Paniai district, Central Papua, following an alleged rebel threat.

Lt. Col. Candra Kurniawan claimed that members of the Free Papua Movement's (OPM's) armed wing operating in Paniai had threatened to burn down Madi Public Hospital. To protect local residents, medical staff, and patients in the hospital from the threat, members of the 527 Infantry Battalion and local police were deployed to the hospital.

The XVII/Cendrawasih Regional Military Command is responsible for the provinces of Papua, South Papua, Central Papua, and Highland Papua.

Their deployment in Paniai reflects the ongoing tensions between Indonesian security forces and OPM. [Antara News]

Indonesia: Police Chief and Attorney General summoned over alleged espionage

(rm) President Joko Widodo 'Jokowi' summoned on May 27 National Police Chief General Listyo Sigit Prabowo and Attorney General ST Burhanuddin to discuss allegations of espionage involving the Attorney General's Office's (AGO) junior special crimes prosecutor by Densus 88, the police's anti-terror squad.

The junior special crimes prosecutor, Febrie Adriansyah, was reportedly surveilled by Densus 88 members while dining at a restaurant in South Jakarta on May 19. Adriansyah is currently leading several investigations into high-profile corruption cases, with one notable case involving the state-owned tin miner and manufacturer Timah.

A member of Densus 88 was arrested on May 25 in connection with the alleged espionage. The identity of the arrested member of Densus 88 has been revealed as Iqbal Mustofa, a 2nd Brigadier, the lowest rank in the regular police hierarchy. The motive behind the alleged stalking has not been officially released by the National Police or Attorney General's Office.

Jokowi did not provide further details about the meeting. However, a statement from the National Police stated that Mustofa was not charged with a crime and noted that both the Attorney General's

Office and the police have agreed to treat the matter as a closed issue. [The Jakarta Post] [Jakarta Globe]

Indonesia: Top court revises age requirements for regional elections

(rm) The Supreme Court has approved changes to the age restrictions for candidates in the 2024 regional elections. The petition, submitted by minnow party Garuda, called for the removal of the 30-year old minimum age requirement for regional election candidates.

As a result, the court has ordered the General Elections Commission to overturn the 2020 rule that stipulated candidates for governor or deputy governor must be 30 years old before running in an election. Under the new change, candidates must now be 30 years old by the time they are inaugurated.

The court's decision has sparked new fears for political interference in the judiciary with speculations spreading that President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo's youngest son, 29-year old Kaesang Pangarep, will run in the upcoming regional election. Before the change, he would not have been eligible to run in the Jakarta gubernatorial race. [Asia News]

Laos: Water scarcity worrisome as climate impacts spread

(lvw) Laos is facing a severe water scarcity crisis exacerbated by climate change, according to Sengphasouk Xayavong, Deputy Director of the Policy Division at the Water Resource Department of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment. This scarcity particularly affects rural and agricultural communities, worsening poor harvests, food insecurity, and power outages due to pressure on hydro-generated electricity.

Speaking at the 10th World Water Forum in Bali, Indonesia, Sengphasouk highlighted how prolonged droughts and changing weather patterns are impacting the country's agriculture and energy production, key economic drivers.

In response, the Lao government is investing in water infrastructure and collaborating with international partners, including the UN Development Programme, the Food and Agriculture Organisation, and the Australian Water Partnership, to ensure sustainable

and equitable water distribution across the country. [Laotian Times]

Malaysia: Prime minister pushes for expanding social insurance framework

(ba) Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim underscores that the fortification of the national social insurance framework extends beyond employment, embracing both individual and national development. Chairing the Malaysian Social Protection Council (MySPC) meeting, he advocated for a shift from welfare-centric assistance to comprehensive risk protection tailored to Malaysians' life stages.

On May 30, he expresses optimism on Facebook about further enhancing and broadening the reach of the country's social safety net to benefit those entitled to it. The meeting delved into strategies to reinforce social insurance programs, crucial as Malaysia braces for the challenges of an aging population by 2030. Anwar highlighted looming risks such as poverty, healthcare burdens, inadequate retirement savings, and diminishing labor productivity, which could significantly impact the nation's fiscal outlook. [The Malay Mail]

Malaysia: Former UMNO leaders propose code of conduct for ministers

(ba) Two former leaders of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) have suggested the implementation of a code of conduct for ministers, aimed at enhancing transparency within the Cabinet and mitigating issues of nepotism and cronyism.

This proposal arises in the wake of a controversy surrounding a project linked to the spouse of Youth and Sports Minister Hannah Yeoh which indicated nepotism had occurred. Shahril Hamdan, former UMNO information chief, emphasized the necessity of such guidelines, drawing parallels to similar protocols in Singapore and the UK where the public is kept informed about business affairs of partners of ministers. He highlighted the importance of managing potential conflicts of interest, acknowledging the legitimate career aspirations of individuals like Ramachandran Muniandy, Yeoh's husband.

Echoing these sentiments, former UMNO Youth chief Khairy Jamaluddin deemed calls for Yeoh and

Ramachandran to resign as "extreme and unfair." He proposed that the code should mandate spouses of politicians in official capacities to declare their interests in companies, particularly those engaged in business with the government. Furthermore, he stressed that politicians should refrain from involvement in government decisions related to their spouses, directly or indirectly.

Recent allegations of preferential treatment in a tender process involving Ramachandran, the CEO of Asia Mobility Technologies Sdn Bhd, have put the Selangor government on the defensive. Ng Sze Han, Selangor's investment, trade, and mobility committee chairman, refuted claims of direct negotiations in the selection of Asia Mobility and Badanbas Coach Sdn Bhd for a new demand-responsive transit system in the Klang Valley.

While some have raised concerns about potential conflicts of interest, Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission chief Azam Baki stated that the agency will not investigate the matter, citing that the contract awarded to Yeoh's husband was by the Selangor government and not directly linked to her ministry. [Free Malaysia Today]

Malaysia: Prime Minister plans to initiate measures to prevent diesel theft

(ba) Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim has directed all relevant enforcement agencies to intensify operations against the misuse and theft of diesel across Malaysia. He also affirmed his commitment to taking strict action against those involved in diesel theft which often occurs and is very detrimental.

Anwar made this pledge in an address at the Community Engagement Session at the Labuan Marine Department on May 31, emphasizing that curbing diesel theft is crucial to protecting the interests of the people in Sabah, Sarawak, and Labuan, which heavily rely on diesel. He also encouraged the public to report any incidents related to diesel theft and misuse to the authorities to help address the issue. Furthermore, the prime minister reiterated his stance on the diesel rationalization program, noting that Sabah and Sarawak are exempted from the new scheme announced on May 21.

Anwar explained that nearly all families in these states depend on diesel, and changes to subsidies would burden them. To mitigate the potential impact of inflation on the price of goods and services in Peninsular Malaysia, the Prime Minister announced

that the government would provide cash diesel subsidies directly to individual owners of commercial vehicles. He added that the rationalization program will target 10 types of public transport vehicles and 23 types of goods carriers. [Astro Awani]

Malaysia: Kelantan state drafts new Syariah Court administration bill

(ba) The Kelantan state government is in the process of drafting the new Syariah Court Administration Bill (RUU), which will replace the Administration of the Syariah Court Enactment (Kelantan State) 1982.

State Islamic Development, Dakwah, Information and Regional Relations Committee chairman Mohd Asri Mat Daud stated that the draft amendment had already been presented at a meeting of the Kelantan Islamic Religious and Malay Customs Council (MAIK). He mentioned that the meeting also decided to form a working committee specifically to review and refine the draft proposals.

Asri made these remarks in response to a question from Zameri Mat Nawang (Member of Parliament for Jelawat) during the Kelantan state legislative assembly session at Kompleks Kota Darulnaim on June 4.

Further elaborating, Asri said that this initiative provides space and ensures justice in Syariah cases through the judicial institution of the Syariah Court, comparable to the Civil Court's judicial institution. [The Star]

Malaysia: Prosecution wraps up trial of former prime minister's 1MDB case after 235 days

(ba) The prosecution has concluded its case in the 1MDB corruption trial of former Prime Minister Najib Razak after presenting 50 witnesses. Ahmad Akram Gharib, the deputy public prosecutor leading the prosecution team, stated they would provide 49 witnesses to Najib if directed to enter his defense. "We are notifying the court of the closure of the case, which commenced in 2019," Akram said, noting that the prosecution had utilized 235 days to present its entire case. Najib was initially charged in the sessions court on September 20, 2018. His trial commenced in the High Court on August 28, 2019.

During the trial's outset, the late Gopal Sri Ram, the lead prosecutor, alleged that Najib utilized his positions as prime minister, finance minister, and chairman of 1MDB's board of advisers to influence abnormal transactions hastily. "A sophisticated charade unfolded, enacted across four phases with various players," Sri Ram stated. "His aim was self-enrichment." Fugitive businessman Low Taek Jho, also known as Jho Low, was highlighted as a significant figure in the alleged scheme. The prosecution aimed to establish that Low and Najib acted in concert throughout.

Justice Collin Lawrence Sequerah acknowledged the trial's length as a "challenge" and set deadlines for written submissions, with oral submissions scheduled for August 19 over four days. Additional time in September was allocated for completion if necessary. Sequerah will decide whether the prosecution has established a prima facie case, potentially leading to Najib's defense.

Najib faces 25 charges related to abuse of power and money laundering, involving alleged 1MDB funds totaling USD 480 million deposited into his AmBank accounts from February 2011 to December 2014. [Free Malaysia Today]

The 1MDB fund scandal centers on a corruption, bribery and money laundering in which the Malaysian sovereign wealth fund 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) established by then Prime Minister Najib was systematically embezzled, with assets diverted globally by the perpetrators of the scheme.

Malaysia: CBT trial of former prime minister postponed

(ba) The USD 1.4 billion criminal breach of trust (CBT) trial involving former Prime Minister Najib Razak and Mohd Irwan Serigar Abdullah at the High Court has been rescheduled to June 19. The trial was originally set to commence on June 4.

Justice Muhammad Jamil Hussin set the new date after granting an application from lawyers K. Kumaraendran and Tan Sri Muhammad Shafee Abdullah to postpone the trial. The delay will allow both parties to prepare and organize the necessary documents. The court was informed that 100 documents had not yet been provided to the defense.

On October 25, 2018, Najib, 70, and Mohd Irwan Serigar, 66, pleaded not guilty to six charges of CBT

involving USD 1.4 billion in government funds related to payments to the International Petroleum Investment Company (Ipic). Najib and Mohd Irwan were jointly accused of committing the offenses at the Finance Ministry Complex in Putrajaya between December 21, 2016, and December 18, 2017. They were charged under Section 409 of the Penal Code, read together with Section 34 of the same Code, which provides for a maximum of 20 years in jail, whipping, and a fine upon conviction. [The Star]

Malaysia: Former Prime Minister Mahathir ordered to attend Batu Puteh RCI proceedings

(ba) On May 31, former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad confirmed that he has been ordered to attend the proceedings of the Royal Commission of Inquiry (RCI) concerning the Batu Puteh, Batuan Tengah (Middle Rocks), and Tubir Selatan (South Ledge) sovereignty case on June 12. [Astro Awani]

In 2008, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) determined that the island Batu Puteh belonged to Singapore, Middle Rocks to Malaysia, and South Ledge to the state in the territorial waters where it is located. Malaysia sought an interpretation of the judgment from the ICJ in 2017.

However, in 2018, the administration led by Mahathir chose to retract an application aimed at challenging the International Court of Justice's decision that granted legal jurisdiction of Batu Puteh to Singapore. Last year, a dedicated task force, established to scrutinize the case, discovered that Mahathir might have erred in withdrawing the application. During that period, then Attorney General Idrus Harun characterized the decision to retract the application as "inappropriate" and "improper" (see AiR No. 5, January/2024, 5).

Malaysia: Citizen pleads not guilty in displaying picture of King case

(ba) An elderly man pleaded not guilty in the Kuala Kubu Baru Magistrate's Court on May 30 to a charge of displaying a picture of His Majesty, the King of Malaysia, Sultan Ibrahim, during the recent Kuala Kubu Baru (KKB) by-election campaign.

The man is accused of displaying the King's picture while carrying an Alliance of Hope/ Pakatan Harapan (PH) banner in a four-wheel drive vehicle around Taman Bukit Bunga on May 4. He allegedly did this to create enmity among different voter groups and to persuade them to vote for the PH candidate. He was charged under the Election Offences Act 1954, which is punishable by up to five years imprisonment or a maximum fine of USD 2,100, or both, upon conviction. [The Malay Mail]

Myanmar: Democracy champion Thura Tin Oo dies at 98

(jb) Thura Tin Oo, a key figure in Myanmar's pro-democracy movement and patron of the National League for Democracy (NLD), passed away at 98. He died on the morning of 1 June 2024 at Yangon Hospital, where he had been admitted due to deteriorating health.

Thura Tin Oo was a founding member of the NLD, alongside Aung San Suu Kyi, and a former Commander-in-Chief of the Myanmar army. His legacy includes enduring imprisonment and house arrest for his political activism.

The junta, which overthrew the NLD in a 2021 coup, refused Aung San Suu Kyi permission to attend his funeral, though she was allowed to send flowers. NLD members and democracy supporters mourn his loss, noting the significant challenges the party faces under the current regime. [Radio Free Asia]

Myanmar: Dozens dead following junta's mass arrests, ethnic army reports

(jb) In a escalation of violence, more than 50 civilians were killed by Myanmar junta forces during a raid in Rakhine State, according to the Arakan Army, an ethnic insurgent group. The attack on Byain Phyu village near Sittwe resulted in the deaths of 48 men and five women aged 15 to 70. The Arakan Army has been engaged in fierce battles with junta forces, seeking self-determination for Rakhine and Chin States.

Residents reported horrific scenes of brutality, including torture and executions, with corpses piled high in what they described as a "killing field." The junta's press release claimed the operation was a response to insurgent activity, but independent

verification of their claims is lacking. The Arakan Army alleges ongoing abuses, including the detention of thousands of villagers. The situation remains tense as junta forces continue their occupation of the village. [Radio Free Asia]

Myanmar: Junta promotes training chief to deputy defense minister amid scandal

(jb) On May 29, Myanmar's junta promoted Major General Ko Lay to deputy defense minister following the dismissal of his predecessor, Major General Aung Lin Tun, over involvement in online scams in northern Shan State.

Ko Lay, previously the commandant of a Military Advanced Training School in Karenni (Kayah) State, has been serving as the military's training deputy since 2020. He also chaired the annual Armed Forces Day parade committee.

Aung Lin Tun, now the highest-ranking junta member under investigation for online scams, led the Bureau of Special Operations 4 in Laukkai and forged close ties with influential Kokang families. His arrest followed a joint crackdown with China on scam operations. He has reportedly received a 10-year jail sentence.

The junta's recent cabinet reshuffle also saw the removal of Aung Naing Oo and Maung Maung Win from their positions in the Cabinet Office and Ministry of Planning and Finance. [The Irrawaddy]

Myanmar: Junta threatens to block aid to Rohingyas who refuse military training

(jb) Myanmar's junta is forcibly recruiting Rohingya from displaced persons camps in Sittwe, threatening to block international aid supplies if they refuse military training. According to reports, the junta demands each camp provide around 30 young men aged 18-30 for conscription.

This coercion comes amid increasing battlefield losses and mass surrenders within the military. Human rights groups warn that both the junta and the Arakan Army (AA) have subjected Rohingyas to violence and forced recruitment, exacerbating ethnic tensions in Rakhine state.

International organizations are urging the junta and AA to pause fighting and allow humanitarian aid. The UN

High Commissioner for Human Rights highlighted the risk of further atrocity crimes and called for restraint and protection of civilians. [Radio Free Asia]

Myanmar: Arakan Army responds to Rohingya abuse allegations

(jb) In response to international accusations of abuses against the Rohingya, the Arakan Army (AA), a prominent armed opposition group in Myanmar, has issued a detailed rebuttal. Tun Myat Naing, the commander-in-chief of the AA, emphasized the group's commitment to protecting the rights of all communities in Arakan, including the Muslim Rohingya.

The AA denied allegations of forced relocations, home burnings, and looting, attributing these incidents to misinterpretations and actions by the Myanmar military and other extremist groups. The AA also refuted claims of forcibly conscripting Rohingya men, stating that they have sufficient voluntary manpower.

The AA acknowledged the complex historical context of the Rohingya issue, citing colonial-era migration as a source of tension. However, they affirmed their policy of equal rights and services for all residents of Arakan, including citizenship rights for current Muslim residents. The AA called for balanced attention to civilian suffering across Myanmar and reiterated their commitment to addressing any verified wrongdoing. [The New Humanitarian]

Myanmar: Military control weakening as rebel forces gain more ground

(jw) The Special Advisory Council for Myanmar said in a report released on May 30 that the overall trajectory of the conflict in Myanmar since 2022 had been one of "expanding resistance control versus corresponding military junta losses." They furthered that the process had "escalated rapidly from October 2023."

Overall, Myanmar's junta had lost complete authority over townships covering 86 percent of the country's territory, where approximately 67 percent of Myanmar's 55 million people live.

In the 51 townships with international borders, the Council noted that only one was under stable junta control.

A report by Crisis Group, a nonprofit that tracks conflicts, highlighted similar developments. The group reported that the ethnic armed groups have gained significant ground over the last seven months. The report additionally urged Myanmar's neighbors, as well as the international community, to engage with the combatants "while keeping conflict risks and human rights concerns in mind."

The Special Advisory Council for Myanmar report also accused the military junta of being the primary source of violence in the country, having committed extensive violations of international human rights law.

Indeed, the regime has been accused of war crimes over its air attacks on civilian villages and intentional burnings of homes. Several ethnic armed groups have also been accused of atrocities. Recently, the Arakan Army was accused of abuse against the Rohingyas. They have since denied those claims. [Al Jazeera]

The Philippines: Vice president Duterte requests Supreme Court decision confidential and intelligence funds

(ms/tl) Vice President Sara Duterte has asked the Supreme Court to dismiss the petitions challenging the constitutionality of the USD 2.5 million confidential and intelligence funds (CIF) of the Office of the Vice President (OVP) for 2022.

Starting point of the controversy was the transfer of USD 2.5 million by the Office of the President to the OVP in 2022, which was then spent in just 11 days. In reaction a group of legal and economic experts filed a petition with the Supreme Court, in the end of last year, arguing that the transfer of confidential funds to the Office of the Vice President (OVP) was a "clear usurpation of power of Congress." The petitioners argued that the transfer of funds from the national budget to the OVP is an exercise of legislative power, adding that Congress has the mandate to decide how the budget will be spent.

In a 19-page consolidated comment, Duterte's lawyers argued that the petitions do not present an actual case or controversy nor assert a legally enforceable right. The vice president's camp claimed that the allegations made by the petitioners are mere apprehension and speculation about contingent funds or confidential funds, which does not constitute a justiciable controversy. They argued that there must be claims of

abuse or violation of rights anchored on real acts, and not merely hypothetical scenarios. [The Philippine Star] [Rappler]

The Philippines: Ombudsman suspends Tarlac mayor Alice Guo and two others over POGO scandal

(ms/tl) The Office of the Ombudsman has ordered the preventive suspension of Alice Guo, Mayor of Tarlac located in Bamban, along with two other local officials, pending an investigation into allegations of corruption and graft linked to the Philippine Offshore Gaming Operators (POGOs) in their town.

The suspension was issued after the Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG) filed an administrative complaint against Guo, Edwin Ocampo, and Adenn Sigua, citing grave misconduct, serious dishonesty, gross neglect of duty, and conduct prejudicial to the best interest of the service.

According to the DILG, Guo had allowed illegal POGOs to operate in Bamban, despite knowing that they were involved in illegal activities. The agency also accused Ocampo of processing permits for POGO operators without complete documents, while Sigua failed to investigate allegations of negligence by local officials.

Guo has denied any wrongdoing and maintains her innocence, while her lawyer has welcomed the opportunity to answer allegations against her in court. Senators have also been investigating Guo's ties to the POGO industry and her alleged connections to criminals and foreign entities, especially from China. The Office of the Solicitor General has also formed a team to investigate filing a quo warranto case against Guo for allegedly misdeclaring herself as Filipino when she ran for mayor, as new documents suggest that her real biological mother is Lin Wen Yi, a Chinese national. [The Manila Times] [The Philippine Star] [Philippine News Agency]

Philippines: Commission on Elections to ban the use of AI and deepfake materials for the upcoming 2025 midterm elections

(ms/tl) The Philippine Commission on Elections (Comelec) is considering a ban on the use of artificial intelligence (AI) and deepfake technology in campaign materials for the 2025 midterm elections. Comelec

Chief George Garcia has urged the commission to ban access to deepfake videos and proposed filing disqualification and election offense cases against candidates who use AI and deepfake technology. Garcia warned that allowing these technologies could lead to chaos and undermine the integrity of the elections. [Rappler 1] [Inquirer.net] [The Philippine Star]

The Philippines: Comelec releases calendar of activities for 2025 elections

(ms/tl) The Commission on Elections (Comelec) has released the calendar of activities for the 2025 Philippine midterm elections, which will elect a new set of leaders in the Senate, down to city and municipal councils across the country.

The last day of voter registration is set on September 30, 2024, while the filing of certificates of candidacy for election aspirants will take place from October 1 to October 8, 2024. The election period begins on January 12, 2025 and will bring a number of policy changes effective for the election period, including a gun ban, a ban on the suspension of elected officials and a ban on the transfer of civil servants.

Candidates for the Senate and party-list system will be allowed to officially campaign beginning February 11, 2025, while local aspirants can start wooing voters on March 28, 2025. The campaign period will end on May 10, 2025. Overseas voters will be allowed to vote a month in advance, beginning April 13, 2025, while Filipinos here in the Philippines are scheduled to cast their ballots on election day, May 12, 2025.

The Comelec has also announced that it will not allow the substitution of candidates who voluntarily withdraw their candidacy after October 8, doing away with the spectacle that gripped the country in the 2016 and 2022 polls. [Rappler]

The Philippines: Marcos to Sign Bill Doubling Teaching Supply Allowance to USD 170

(ms/tl) After 13 years of advocacy, President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. is set to sign a bill into law that will double the teaching supply allowance for public school teachers from USD 85 to USD 170 starting School Year 2025-2026.

The bill was approved by the House of Representatives in December 2023 and by the Senate in May 2023. The increased allowance will not be subject to tax, allowing teachers to utilize the full amount for better education. [Rappler] [BusinessWorld Online] [The Philippine Star]

Philippines: Approval to reduce tariffs on rice and other commodities

(tl) President Marcos Jr. is set to issue an executive order to adjust tariff rates until 2028 to ensure access and affordability of essential commodities like rice.

The National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) Board approved the Comprehensive Tariff Program for 2024-2028, including a 15 percent duty rate reduction for rice. This move aims to lower rice prices and make it more affordable. According to the Philippine Statistics Authority's most recent inflation report, rice made up more than half of the headline inflation, or almost two percentage points.

Socioeconomic Planning Secretary says that Arsenio Balisacan there is upward pressure on rice prices due to the effects of the El Niño phenomenon and rising demand brought on by the country's continuously expanding population and economy.

The NEDA chairman stated that lowering rice tariffs is anticipated to lower consumer rice costs while bolstering domestic production through tariff cover and greater budgetary support to improve agricultural productivity, particularly given the continued high price of rice on the international market.

The NEDA Board also agreed to merge tariff lines on certain chemicals, textiles, machinery, and transport equipment. The reduced tariff rates on corn, pork, and mechanically deboned meat will remain until 2028. [Philippine News Agency] [XM Group Companies]

Philippines: Ex-President Duterte ordered to transfer USD 800 million for COVID-19 funds

(tl) Former Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte authorized a USD 800 million transfer to the Procurement Service of the Department of Budget and Management (PS-DBM) for the purchase of COVID-19 protective equipment.

Former Health Secretary Duque III stated that the transfer was necessary and aboveboard, citing Executive Orders 385 and 285, a Letter of Instruction, Administrative Order 17 of 2011, and Section 53 of the procurement law as basis. The decision was based on the Inter-Agency Task Force and the National Task Force against COVID-19. Iloilo Rep. Janette Garin expressed dissatisfaction with Duque's responses and raised concerns over the government's handling of COVID-19 loans, pointing to the burden it created on taxpayers and the lack of accountability for borrowed funds.

The government secured a total of USD 2.21 billion for the Philippine COVID-19 Emergency Response Project and the Health System Enhancement to address and limit COVID-19 in 2021 and 2022. The Office of the Ombudsman ordered the filing of graft charges against Duque and former budget undersecretary Christopher Lao. More than one-fourth of the contract with PS-DBM was bagged by Pharmally Pharmaceuticals Corp., which was linked to Michael Yang, Duterte's former economic adviser.[Inquirer.net][The Philippine Star]

Singapore: Digital Enterprise Blueprint launched to help at least 50,000 SMEs

(sm) In 2022, Singapore's digital economy contributed to S$106 billion to its GDP, comprising 17% of the total economic output. To build on this success, Singapore launched the Digital Enterprise Blueprint (DEB), with the purpose to accelerate digital transformation for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) over the next five years. According to observers, the DEB is expected to benefit at least 50,000 SMEs. [The Independent Singapore]

With the aims to expand on previous digitalization initiatives, the DEB will particularly support SMEs and their employees in four main areas: smarter enterprises, faster scaling, safer operations, and upskilling workers. To achieve these, the DEB will encourage AI adoption, promote cloud-based and integrated digital solutions, enhance cybersecurity standards, and focus on upskilling SMEs employees. As of now, the DEB has successfully garnered the supports from seven partners such as Singapore Business Federation (SBF), Singapore Computer Society (SCS), SGTech, Amazon Web Services (AWS), Google, Microsoft and Salesforce. [Ministry of Communications and Information]

Singapore: Updated Novavax COVID-19 vaccine available for free despite PPP calls to halt vaccinations

(ms/sm) Singapore's Ministry of Health (MOH) has announced that the updated Novavax COVID-19 vaccine is effective immediately available for free under the national vaccination program. This initiative comes as the country faces a significant spike in COVID-19 cases, primarily driven by the new KP.1 and KP.2 strains of the virus. [Channel News Asia] [The Strait Times]

The updated Novavax/Nuvaxovid XBB.1.5 vaccine, recommended by the Expert Committee on Immunisation and approved by the Health Sciences Authority, offers an alternative to the mRNA vaccines from Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna. It is particularly recommended for individuals aged 12 and above who cannot receive mRNA vaccines, except those who have experienced myocarditis or pericarditis following an mRNA dose.

This decision follows the discontinuation of the previous Novavax vaccine formulation earlier this year due to the expiration of local stock. With a recent surge in infections, the MOH urges the public to book vaccination appointments via the Health Appointment System and locate the nearest participating GP clinics online. This measure is crucial as about 80 percent of the population have not received a vaccine dose within the past year, leading to waning immunity.

The MOH has also countered calls by the People's Power Party (PPP) to suspend COVID-19 vaccinations due to alleged adverse effects. The PPP cited purported significant adverse effects associated with the vaccines, echoing concerns raised by a group of self-proclaimed experts. However, the MOH swiftly rebutted these claims, dismissing them as unfounded and misleading. The ministry emphasized the robust scientific evidence supporting the safety and efficacy of COVID-19 vaccines, underscoring the crucial role vaccination plays in mitigating the spread of the virus and preventing severe outcomes.

Despite the MOH's strong rebuttal, the PPP's call for a suspension of vaccinations has fueled public discourse, with segments of the population expressing apprehension and seeking clarity on vaccine safety. Thereby adding an additional challenge in the wake of rising infection numbers.

Singapore: Boosts data center capacity by 35 percent to meet growing demand

(ms) Singapore is set to boost its data center capacity by 35 percent, with a focus on energy-efficient facilities and sustainable growth. The city-state aims to allocate at least 300 megawatts of additional capacity, with potentially another 200 MW powered by green energy. This move is part of a broader effort to achieve net zero carbon emissions by 2050. [Bloomberg] [Nikkei Asia]

Singapore currently hosts over 70 data centers, making it one of the biggest hubs in the world. However, the country has been exploring ways to reduce its environmental impact, including restrictions on new data center construction. The new roadmap aims to allocate more power for data centers while promoting energy-efficient facilities and partnerships with low-carbon energy providers.

Singapore: Introducing new AI governance framework for generative AI

(sm) On May 30, Singapore launched the Model Governance Framework for Generative AI to address concerns exacerbated by generative artificial intelligence (gen AI) and its ability to create realistic contents. To promote safety, responsibility, and inclusivity in the use of gen AI, the new framework outlines nine key areas, including accountability, misinformation, content provenance, and trusted data for AI training. [The Straits Times]

Singapore: Two shipping companies charged over discharging oil into city-state's waters

(sm) Two shipping firms faced court charges for allegedly discharging about 100 liters of oil each into Singapore waters. The two firms, Hellenic Overseas Maritime Enterprises and Leth Incargo Marine Services, were charged separately under the Prevention of Pollution of the Sea Act. For discharging oil into Singapore waters, the master, owner, and agent of the ship can face up to two years in jail, fines between roughly USD 742 and USD 742,539, or both. Reportedly, the two cases will be heard again in July. [CNA]

Singapore: USD 7.4 billion casino resort expansion set to boost tourism and economy

(ms) Singapore is set to embark on the second phase of its casino resort development, with a combined investment of over USD 7.4 billion from Marina Bay Sands and Resorts World Sentosa. The two resorts will add new hotels, arenas, and expanded casino areas.

Genting Singapore will tender out construction contracts for two new hotels with 700 rooms by September, while Marina Bay Sands will add a fourth hotel tower and a 15,000-seat arena. The expansion plans were approved in 2019 but were delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The increased investment cost is attributed to inflation and other economic factors.

The casinos are expected to generate significant revenue for the resorts, with additional floor space allocated to Marina Bay Sands and Genting Singapore. The resorts have contributed significantly to Singapore's economy, with the Ministry of Trade and Industry stating they contribute 1 percent to 2 percent of the country's annual gross domestic product. The expansion is expected to boost tourism further, with tourist arrivals doubling to 19.1 million over the past decade. Construction is expected to start in July 2025 and be completed by 2029. [Nikkei Asia]

Singapore: Google's investment reaches USD 5 billion with new data center

(ms) Google has announced the completion of its fourth data center in Singapore, increasing its total investment in the country's technical infrastructure to USD 5 billion. The new data center joins three existing ones, which employ over 500 people and power services such as Google Search and Maps. [Reuters]

The new data center is part of Google's efforts to expand its presence in Southeast Asia, with a recent announcement of a USD 2 billion investment in Malaysia to develop its first data center. The company operates data centers in 11 countries, including Singapore, where it has been operating since 2014.

Thailand: Constitutional Court rejects petition against Election Commission over MFP's campaign platform

(lm) Thailand's Constitutional Court has dismissed a petition accusing the Election Commission (EC) of negligence for allowing the main opposition Move Forward Party (MFP) to include amending the royal defamation law in its campaign platform during the May 2023 election. [Bangkok Post]

The petitioner sought the court's ruling on whether the EC violated Section 49 of the constitution by not intervening to prevent the MFP from advocating for changes to Section 112 of the Criminal Code. The petitioner argued that the EC's inaction could be interpreted as supporting efforts to undermine the constitutional monarchy. However, the court rejected the petition, citing technical deficiencies in the submitted documents. The court ruled that the petition did not explicitly request an order under Section 49, rendering it invalid.

It is worth remembering that the issue may become irrelevant as the EC filed its own complaint with the Constitutional Court on March 12 of this year. The EC alleged that the MFP's stance on royal defamation violated Section 92 of the organic law on political parties, which empowers the Constitutional Court to dissolve parties deemed to threaten the constitutional monarchy. In a unanimous decision on January 31, the court ruled that the MFP must cease all efforts to amend Section 112, deeming such campaigning as an attempt to overthrow the constitutional monarchy. The party has until June 2 to submit its defense in the case.

Thailand: Constitutional Court rejects petition alleging Thaksin's dominance in Pheu Thai Party

(msz/wt) Thailand's Constitutional Court on May 29 unanimously rejected a petition against the ruling Pheu Thai Party and Thaksin Shinawatra, the father of party chairwoman Paetongtarn Shinawatra and a former prime minister. [Thai PBS World] [The Nation Thailand]

The petition, filed by Kongdecha Chairat, a former deputy managing director of the SME Development Bank, accused the Pheu Thai Party of using the proposed 10,000-baht per person digital wallet scheme to distort voters' intentions and attempting to overthrow the constitutional monarchy. It also alleged that Thaksin dominated the party's policymaking.

The court ruled that the petition and supporting documents failed to establish how the defendants acted to topple the democratic system. The court

concluded that the allegations were merely Kongdecha's opinions and dismissed the petition.

Thailand: Election Commission's decision to invalidate upper House candidates deemed 'illegal'

(lm) The decision by Thailand's Election Commission (EC) to disqualify candidates for the ongoing upper House elections in seven districts, where only one of the 20 professional groups has applicants, may be unlawful, according to legal experts. They suggest that instead of invalidating these candidates, the EC should extend the registration period for those districts before the vote on June 9. [Bangkok Post]

In the ongoing elections for the Senate, candidates had until May 13 to apply to one (and only one) of 20 specified occupational groups. Around 48,000 people have registered to compete in the upcoming elections for 200 seats in Parliament's upper House, less than half the number the poll body had hoped for. [AiR No. 22, May/2024, 4]

Against this backdrop, Sawang Boonmee, the EC secretary-general, noted on May 27 that seven out of 928 districts nationwide had only one group of applicants, although EC regulations require a cross-group election. Therefore, in districts lacking other groups for such an election, candidates are deemed invalid. Additionally, he mentioned 10 "at-risk" districts with only two groups of applicants, where the failure of one group to participate would render none eligible for the vote.

Thailand: Ex-prime minister Thaksin to be indicted on royal defamation charges

(msz/bk) Thailand's Attorney-General has decided to indict Thaksin Shinawatra, a former prime minister and the de facto leader of the ruling Pheu Thai Party, on charges of royal defamation stemming from a 2015 interview. This decision has sparked questions about whether the indictment will lead to Thaksin's parole being revoked and his return to prison. [Bangkok Post 1] [Reuters]

Thaksin is alleged to have defamed the monarchy during an interview with a South Korean newspaper in May 2015, where he claimed that privy councilors supported the 2014 coup that ousted his sister

Yingluck Shinawatra's government. Police allege that his comments violated Section 112 of the Criminal Code, known as the lese-majeste law, as well as the Computer Crimes Act.

After being paroled on February 18, the Technology Crime Suppression Division took over the lese-majeste and computer crime charges and approved Thaksin's temporary release. The indictment decision, initially expected on April 10, was postponed by the attorney-general due to the need for an additional interrogation report. Prosecutors have now ordered Thaksin to appear at the Office of the Attorney General on June 18 for the indictment process.

In response to the indictment, some have argued that Thaksin, now an alleged offender, should be returned to prison immediately, as the new charges impact his parole conditions. However, the justice minister has stated that Thaksin, currently on parole, is presumed innocent of the new charges until proven guilty. [Bangkok Post 2]

Meanwhile, Chaithawat Tulathon, leader of the main opposition Move Forward Party (MFP) and a member of the House of Representatives Ad-hoc Committee on Studying Guidelines for Drafting the Amnesty Bill, acknowledged after a committee meeting on May 30 that the royal defamation indictment against Thaksin might complicate efforts to seek a general amnesty for political detainees and other royal defamation suspects. However, Chaithawat noted that the meeting did not specifically discuss Thaksin's case but focused on mechanisms for advancing political amnesty. [The Nation]

To understand why Thaksin's forthcoming indictment could complicate the push by the MFP for a general amnesty, it is crucial to remember that previous attempts to grant amnesty, particularly during the Yingluck Shinawatra government (Thaksin's sister), included provisions that could benefit Thaksin. These attempts led to massive protests and were seen as self-serving moves to absolve him of corruption charges and convictions, ultimately contributing to the 2014 military coup.

Thailand: Former deputy prime minister Wissanu returns as government legal advisor

(msz) Thailand's Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin has appointed former deputy prime minister and legal expert Wissanu Krea-ngam as a legal advisor to the

Cabinet Secretariat, days after the Constitutional Court on May 23 decided to launch an ethics probe, which could see Srettha removed from office over a disputed cabinet appointment. [Bangkok Post] [The Nation Thailand]

The petition against Srettha was filed by forty caretaker members of Parliament's upper House of over his appointment of Pichit Chuenban as minister of the Prime Minister's Office. Pichit was jailed for six months in 2008 on contempt of court charges after he attempted to bribe a judge presiding over former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's land purchase case with USD 55,000 in a grocery bag. The petition alleged his appointment breached Section 160 of the constitution, which stipulates ministers must be "of evident integrity" and blocks those who fail to meet the grade. [AiR No. 22, May/2024, 4]

Wissanu, who had been consulted by Prime Minister Srettha on the case before, dismissed the speculations that his appointment stemmed from Constitutional Court's acceptance of the hearing of the impeachment petition against Srettha. Since the post is not a political office without a salary, Wissanu is not obligated to submit a declaration of assets and liabilities to the National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC).

Thailand: Move Forward MP calls for Foreign Minister's explanation of policy

(msz) Chulapong Yukate, a lawmaker with the main opposition Move Forward Party (MFP) and deputy chairperson of the lower House Committee on Foreign Affairs, has urged Foreign Minister Maris Sangiampongsa to clarify the government's vision and direction for foreign policy. Chulapong specifically asked for details on Thailand's roles in global and ASEAN contexts, the country's stance on United States-China relations, and how Thailand will seek international support to address the civil war in Myanmar and its resulting refugee crisis. [Thai PBS World]

Thailand: House Secretariat faces nearly USD 45 million in lawsuits

(bk) The Secretariat of the House of Representatives in Thailand is facing three lawsuits in the Central Administrative Court, with plaintiffs demanding a total

of THB 1.66 billion (approximately USD 44.82 million) in damages. [The Nation]

The first lawsuit involves a breach of contract related to the improvement of a gym and training room at the Secretariat's building and a press room at the Parliament Complex, with a compensation demand of THB 65.5 million (approximately USD 1.77 million). The second lawsuit pertains to a breach of contract concerning the construction of the new Parliament Complex, with damages amounting to THB 1.59 billion (approximately USD 42.93 million) plus 7.5 percent annual interest. The third lawsuit is a class action filed by plaintiffs affected by the Secretariat's orders, seeking THB 3.23 million (approximately USD 87,210) in damages.

The cases are being deliberated by the Central Administrative Court, which could either dismiss the lawsuits or order the Secretariat to pay the damages, in amounts that could be higher or lower than those demanded by the plaintiffs.

Thailand: Srisuwan petitions court to suspend decade-old rice auction

(bk) Well-known activist Srisuwan Janya has requested the Central Administrative Court to issue an injunction to halt the Commerce Ministry's auction of 15,000 tons of rice from the Yingluck Shinawatra government's rice pledging scheme, citing that the rice, stored for over a decade, is likely inedible, lacks nutritional value, and may be infested with insects, despite tests by the Department of Medical Sciences showing otherwise. [Thai PBS World]

Srisuwan questions the authenticity of the tested samples and highlights that the auction terms do not clarify if the rice will be exported or sold domestically. He expresses concerns that exporting the old rice could damage Thailand's rice reputation, while domestic sales could pose health risks to consumers.

Thailand: Supreme Court suspends jail term for 2014 election disrupter

(lm) Thailand's Supreme Court has handed down an eight-month jail term, suspended for two years, to a protest leader involved in obstructing the general election in 2014. [Bangkok Post]

On May 28, the Criminal Court delivered the ruling against Sonthiyan Chuenruethainaitham, a former key member of the now-defunct People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC), along with three others: Sakoltee Phattiyakul, a former Democrat Party MP for Bangkok; Sombat Thamrongthanyawong, a former rector of the National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA); and Seri Wongmontha, a well-known media and marketing expert.

The four were charged with insurrection, criminal association, illegal assembly, inciting strikes, and election obstruction. These charges stemmed from their involvement in the PDRC protests against then-Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra between November 2013 and May 2014. The protests significantly disrupted the snap election held on February 2, 2014, which the Constitutional Court annulled the following month.

Initially, the lower court acquitted the defendants. In 2021, the Court of Appeal upheld the acquittals but found Sonthiyan guilty of violating the Elections Act by conspiring to disrupt advance voting at a school in Bangkok. The Court of Appeal sentenced him to one year in jail, reduced to eight months for his cooperation, and suspended his voting rights for five years.

On May 28, the Supreme Court upheld the eight-month jail term for Sonthiyan but suspended the sentence for two years and fined him THB 20,000 (approximately USD 580).

Thailand: Sidelined police chief Torsak to meet anti-corruption investigators

(lm) Thailand's sidelined national police chief, Torsak Sukvimol, and his wife are set to address charges related to failing to report two properties in London worth approximately THB 20 million (around USD 580,000) to the National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC). Transferred to the Prime Minister's Office in March, Torsak maintains his innocence, stating that he informed the NACC about the London assets in 2022. However, the NACC asserts that Torsak had previously claimed the properties were an investment by his wife. [Bangkok Post]

Torsak, who is set to retire this September, was transferred to the Prime Minister's Office in March due to ongoing investigations into high-profile criminal cases. The transfer was part of a broader effort to address internal conflicts within the Royal Thai Police

and to ensure impartiality during the investigations. This move followed reports and allegations against his deputy, Surachate Hakparn, related to money laundering and online gambling networks.

Thailand: *Red Bull* tycoon sues senator, TV host over bribe claim

(lm) In Thailand, Chalerm Yoovidhya, a prominent member of the family which owns the *Red Bull* energy drink empire, is suing a senator and a TV host for defamation, seeking THB 50 million (approximately USD 1.35 million) in damages. The lawsuit comes after allegations surfaced that his family paid a THB 300-million bribe (approximately USD 8.1 million) to shield his son, Vorayuth Yoovidhya, from legal repercussions following a fatal 2012 hit-and-run incident involving Vorayuth's Ferrari and a Thong Lor police officer. The Yoovidhya family, ranked second on Forbes' "Thailand's 50 Richest" list, denies the accusations, claiming they are baseless and damaging to their reputation. Additionally, the lawyer representing Chalerm is seeking charges against the defendants for disseminating false information and demands public apologies across various platforms. Vorayuth remains at large, with the statute of limitations on the remaining charge set to expire in 2027. [Bangkok Post] [Khaosod English]

Thailand: Government to give market watchdog power to probe fraud in bid to boost confidence

(lm) Thailand plans to empower its market regulator, the Security and Exchange Commission (SEC), to investigate criminal activities in the securities markets following a series of corporate scandals that have undermined investor confidence. Proposed legal changes will grant the SEC authority to probe suspected illegal conduct, aiming to expedite charges and punishment. Currently, the SEC can only file complaints to police, leading to lengthy investigations due to limited resources. [The Business Times]

Thailand: Bangkok police officer receives 125-year sentence for bail funds embezzlement

(lm) A Bangkok police officer has been sentenced to 125 years in prison for embezzling bail funds totaling THB 720,000 (approximately USD 19,440), according to a ruling on May 30. However, due to cooperation with the investigation, her term was reduced by one-third to 83 years. The law limits jail terms to 50 years. [Bangkok Post 1]

The Central Criminal Court for Corruption and Misconduct Cases found her guilty on 25 counts of embezzlement, each carrying a five-year sentence. While admitting to non-compliance with regulations, she claimed no malicious intent. Ministry of Finance rules mandated daily bail fund deposits and presentation of deposit slips to the station chief. Observers noted she held around THB 200,000 (about USD 5,400) in cash in her office cabinet for an extended period. Upon discovery of a shortfall during internal and State Audit Office audits, she returned THB 450,000 (approximately USD 12,150). The court deemed her actions as embezzlement and ordered the return of the remaining THB 270,000 (around USD 7,290).

Thailand: Government to allow suspects awaiting trial to wear EM bracelets, reducing prison overcrowding

(lm) In an effort to alleviate chronic overcrowding in Thailand's prisons, the Justice Ministry plans to amend regulations to allow suspects whose cases have not yet reached court to remain out of jail, provided they wear Electronic Ankle Monitoring (EM) bracelets. Justice Minister Pol Col Tawee Sodsong highlighted that Thai prisons have a maximum capacity of 180,000 inmates, yet currently house over 280,000 individuals, with about 50,000 awaiting trial. [Bangkok Post]

Pol Col Tawee stated that the ministry is working on amending Section 89/1 of a ministerial regulation to empower the court to consider alternative measures for offenders in certain cases. These measures include home confinement with the use of EM bracelets. The ministry aims to finalize this initiative within the year.

Thailand: Police break up a network that illegally helped foreigners stay in Thailand

(wt) Thai police have dismantled a large network that illegally facilitated long-term

stays for foreigners, mainly Russians, using company nominees or shell companies. A Russian woman and a Thai woman, who was listed as an executive or shareholder in over 270 companies in Phuket, operated the scheme. This network allowed foreigners to either be listed as shareholders in businesses with Thai partners or be employed by shell companies to obtain work permits. [Independent]

A total of 98 foreigners, including 68 Russians, have been accused of operating businesses without a permit, which carries a maximum sentence of three years in prison and a THB 1 million (approximately USD 27,000) fine. Additionally, 37 Thais were charged with offenses related to the network. The operation is believed to have been active since 2016, with a sharp increase in customers following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Phuket, a popular tourist destination, has seen a significant rise in Russian company registrations, with over 1,600 companies registered from 2023 to early 2024, compared to about 30 per year from 2016 to 2022. At least 50 of the foreigners have been officially charged so far.

Thailand: Sex workers rights violations remain unaddressed

(msz) Sex workers in Thailand's capital Bangkok have voiced concerns about the risks of reporting sexual assaults to the police due to the fear of being prosecuted for prostitution, which is illegal in Thailand. [Bangkok Post]

A 2023 report from the Public Health Ministry documented 31,866 cases of rape, although the actual number is expected to be much higher. Surang Janyam, chief executive of Swing (Service Workers IN Group), a non-profit organization advocating for better treatment of sex workers in Thailand, emphasized the numerous unreported cases of sexual assault, particularly affecting migrant sex workers from Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam.

Under the Criminal Code of Thailand, individuals over 16 who "subsist on earnings as a prostitute" face imprisonment for 7 to 20 years and fines ranging from THB 14,000 to THB 40,000 (approximately USD 381 to USD 1,090). Those who coerce others into prostitution may face life imprisonment. Additionally, sex workers are not protected by the Labor Protection Act, which ensures workers' welfare and safety.

Thailand: HIV tests for would-be monks set to be scrapped

(wt) In Thailand, the Sangha Supreme Council, the highest governing body of the country's Buddhist monastic community, has agreed with the National Human Rights Commission's (NHRC) proposal to stop requiring HIV tests for men seeking ordination. The NHRC argues that HIV is not a chronic infectious disease and mandatory testing could lead to discrimination. Last year, the NHRC requested the National Office of Buddhism (NOB) to inform all affiliated temples to cease such tests. The Sangha Supreme Council also stated that only individuals with serious contagious diseases like tuberculosis should be prohibited from ordination. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Central bank forecasts growth surge in second quarter following 1.5 percent expansion

(msz) The Bank of Thailand (BOT) anticipates an uptick in Thailand's economic growth for the second quarter of this year following a better-than-expected performance in the first quarter, where growth reached 1.5 percent against an earlier projection of 0.8 percent. Sakkapop Panyanukul, the director of the BOT's Financial Markets Department, expressed optimism about this growth trend, noting a historical tendency for second-quarter growth to increase year on year. [Thai PBS World]

April saw a slight inflation increase of 0.19 percent, ending six consecutive months of negative inflation, partly attributed to price reductions in fresh food and pork. The BOT, closely monitoring approximately 400 product prices, observed stability in most prices, suggesting consumer purchasing power is not as impacted as anticipated.

For the entire year, inflation is projected at 0.6 percent, below the 1 percent-3 percent framework. April's

export figures rebounded from a 10 percent contraction in March, but the BOT predicts only a modest 2 percent increase in exports for the entire year, reflecting relatively low growth expectations.

Thailand: Government explores small modular nuclear reactor technology, prime minister says

(msz) Thailand is exploring small modular nuclear reactor (SMR) technology to diversify its energy mix amidst dwindling natural gas reserves, which currently power much of the country. Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin announced this initiative as part of Thailand's ambitious green transition goal, aiming for 50 percent of energy production to be renewable by 2040. [Reuters]

SMRs are advanced nuclear reactors generating around one-third of the electricity produced by traditional nuclear reactors. Thailand's previous plan to start its first nuclear power plant in 2020 was delayed after Japan's Fukushima nuclear accident in 2011. Currently, Southeast Asia has no operational nuclear reactors, although several countries are pursuing civilian nuclear projects, including SMR technology. While SMRs have lower upfront capital costs, their economic competitiveness is yet to be proven once deployed.

Thailand relies heavily on natural gas, accounting for two-thirds of its electricity generation. The country has increased liquefied natural gas (LNG) imports due to declining domestic reserves. Renewable energy makes up about 23 percent of Thailand's total installed capacity, primarily from solar, wind, and hydropower, with additional imports of hydropower from Laos. According to Thailand's power development plan (2018-2037), the country aims to meet 53 percent of its energy needs from natural gas, 36 percent from renewable sources, and 11 percent from coal and other fossil fuels.

Earlier on May 29 at the Bangkok Post Conference 2024, Finance Minister Pichai Chunhavajira also announced that the government is preparing tax incentives to promote a low-carbon economy and encourage investment in climate friendly businesses. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Exports must shift to cleaner production, deputy finance minister says

(lm) Thailand's Deputy Finance Minister, Paopoom Rojanasakul, emphasizes the urgency of transitioning to cleaner production methods, cautioning against potential setbacks if the country fails to align with global trends favoring eco-friendly practices. [Bangkok Post]

Against the backdrop of escalating climate change and increasing environmental regulations worldwide, Paopoom highlights the emergence of approximately 18,000 stringent environmental trade measures implemented by governments globally, with an average annual growth of 16 percent from 2013 to 2022. These measures are notably prevalent in Thailand's major export destinations, comprising the United States, European Union, Japan, China, and India, which collectively contributed 51 percent of Thailand's total export value in 2023.

However, Thailand's exports categorized as environmentally sustainable represent only 7.6 percent of the total as of 2021, trailing behind developed nations such as Germany, Japan, China, and South Korea. Clean energy usage, a pivotal component of environmentally friendly production, constitutes merely 14 percent of Thailand's total energy consumption, compared to 19 percent in Vietnam.

In a bid to alleviate financial burdens for entrepreneurs transitioning towards greener practices, the Export-Import Bank of Thailand (Exim Bank) has initiated Thailand's inaugural green certificate of deposit (CD) project, valued at THB 5 billion (approximately USD 135 million USD. The funds raised will be utilized by Exim Bank to extend loans to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) seeking to incorporate eco-friendly approaches into their production processes.

Meanwhile, the Government Savings Bank, a state-owned financial institution, has successfully approved credit loans under the Green Finance promotion for four large-sized enterprises with ESG excellence recognition, totaling approximately THB 7.85 billion (equivalent to around USD 212 million USD). [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: Lack of title deeds complicates land expropriation for "Land Bridge" project

(bk) Private companies interested in investing in Thailand's Land Bridge project, which aims to link the Pacific and Indian oceans via deep-sea ports in Chumphon and Ranong, have raised concerns about potential delays due to legal issues related to land title deeds. During a market-sounding seminar for the megaproject hosted by the Transport Ministry, investors expressed worries that some privately owned plots in the project area lack land title deeds, complicating the expropriation process and potentially leading to lawsuits that could delay land delivery. [The Nation]

Deputy Transport Minister Manaporn Charoensri acknowledged the concerns and stated that the ministry is negotiating with landowners to secure their cooperation. She mentioned that most local residents support the project, though some seek higher compensation. The ministry is also working on the Environmental and Health Impact Assessment (EHIA) report, expected to be completed by the end of the year.

Furthermore, the ministry plans to propose the draft Southern Economic Corridor Act to the Cabinet in September, aiming to provide legal clarification, investment privileges, and tax benefits to investors. The act is expected to be enacted before 2025.

Thailand: Government targets nearly USD 1.5 billion in PPP projects in 2024

(wt) The Thai government plans to accelerate public-private partnership (PPP) projects this year, with an investment target of THB 47 billion (approximately USD 1.42 billion), according to the State Enterprise Policy Office (SEPO). An additional THB 10 billion (approximately USD 302 million) in PPP projects is expected to gain approval by June. The PPP investments aim to ease the government's fiscal burden, with THB 18 billion (approximately USD 542 million) already approved by February, focusing on berths B3, B4, and B5 development at Laem Chabang Port. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Songkhla operators call for cruise ship terminal

(lm) The Songkhla Tourism Association is urging the Thai government to enhance tourism by constructing a cruise ship terminal and establishing direct flights from

Chinese cities to Hat Yai, the largest city in Songkhla province and a major commercial and transportation hub. The initiative aims to prevent a decline in tourism, particularly in Hat Yai, due to decreasing visitors from Malaysia and Singapore during rainy seasons. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Army, Air Force hold joint drill to simulate border conflict

(lm) In Thailand, a collaborative drill between the army and air force took place in Sukhothai province on May 30. The exercise aimed to integrate ground forces with air support in a simulated conflict scenario, focusing on addressing potential border tensions. Notably, given the ongoing civil unrest in neighboring Myanmar, the drill also included a simulated battle scenario where a hypothetical 'Red' nation conducted a purge of minorities and opposition groups near the border, pushing them into 'Blue' territory. [Bangkok Post]

Vietnam: Police probe singer for video showing South Vietnamese flag

(lm) Vietnamese police are investigating a female singer after a video showing her with a small South Vietnam flag in the background went viral. The flag, used by South Vietnam until the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, is still displayed by South Vietnamese expatriates as a symbol of pride. [Radio Free Asia]

Vietnam: Two political prisoners push for better conditions

(lm) Two Vietnamese prisoners-of-conscience are protesting harsh prison conditions in different ways, as reported by their families. [Radio Free Asia]

Bui Van Thuan, 43, started a five-day hunger strike on May 25 to protest his eight-year sentence for posts deemed a threat to national security and to demand better conditions, including outdoor socialization for political prisoners.

Climate activist Dang Dinh Bach, 45, is petitioning for improved prison conditions. Bach and his cellmate, Tran Huynh Duy Thuc, who is serving a 16-year sentence for criticizing Vietnam's one-party state, have previously staged hunger strikes. Thuc recently went

on a week-long hunger strike in February due to denial of food from the prison canteen, and Bach endured a two-week hunger strike in March after running out of food and not receiving prison rations since September 2023.

Vietnam: Rapid growth in cashless payments raises security concerns

(wn) Non-cash payments are rapidly growing in Vietnam, with 182 million personal payment accounts recorded by the end of 2023 and 87 percent of adults owning payment accounts. Internet and mobile banking transactions increased significantly, with QR code payments rising by 170 percent. However, security remains a critical concern, which is why the State Bank of Vietnam mandates biometric authentication for online transactions of VND 10 million (roughly USD 390,000) or higher. [Vietnam News]

Vietnam: Hanoi's economy shows strong growth in first five months of 2024

(wn) Vietnam's capital Hanoi experienced a significant economic upswing from January to May, with notable growth in trade, services, and tourism. Total retail sales of goods and consumer services reached VND 336.5 trillion (USD 13.13 billion), a 10 percent increase from the previous year. [The Star]

Retail sales of goods were VND 215.8 trillion (USD 8.41 billion), up 10 percent year-on-year. Hotels and restaurants generated VND 43 trillion (USD 1.68 billion), up 12.4 percent. Travel and tourism services surged 48.9 percent to VND 10.6 trillion (USD 414 million). Other services grew 4.3 percent to VND 67.1 trillion (USD 2.62 billion).

International Relations, Geopolitics and Security in Asia

China warns of retaliation over EU's potential tariffs on electric vehicles

(rl/ms) On May 30, China issued a warning against the European Commission's ongoing investigation into subsidies for imported electric vehicles (EVs), which could result in new tariffs. The probe, nearing completion, is scrutinizing the lower prices of China-made EVs, attributing them to significant state aid.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry urged the European Union (EU) to halt the investigation to avoid disrupting economic and trade cooperation, threatening countermeasures if the probe continues. Possible Chinese retaliations include raising tariffs on European large-engine vehicles and targeting sales of French brandy. Viewing France as backing the EU's investigations into Chinese EVs, Beijing had launched an anti-dumping investigation into European wine-based liquors, primarily targeting French cognac producers (see AiR No. 2, January/2024, 2).

hina's Chamber of Commerce to the EU has already indicated that such measures could escalate tensions, potentially affecting European carmakers dependent on the Chinese market. The investigation follows concerns over fair competition, with Chinese EV brands rapidly gaining market share in Europe.

In an attempt to counter the probe, China's Commerce Minister Wang Wentao appealed to Spain's Economy Minister Carlos Cuerpo during a meeting in Madrid on June 3. Wang articulated the hope that Spain will persuade the European Union to support and promote the new energy industry in order to deepen cooperation and create a fair and predictable development environment. In return, China would be willing to intensify trade, promote two-way investment and expand cooperation with Spain. [Reuters]

The EU's final decision on imposing provisional duties is expected after the European Parliament elections from June 6 to 9. EU member states remain divided,

with countries like Germany expressing doubts and Hungary opposing the probe, while Sweden and Ireland emphasize the risks of a trade war.

China's EV imports to the EU have surged in recent years, with the value jumping from USD 1.6 billion in 2020 to USD 11.5 billion in 2023. As the EU deliberates its response, it faces pressure to match the U.S.'s recent 100 percent tariff hike on Chinese EVs (see AiR No. 21, May/2024, 3). [Euronews] [DW]

China signals possible absence from Ukraine conference in Switzerland

(rl/jm) China has indicated it may not attend the upcoming conference on the Ukraine conflict in Switzerland, citing unmet conditions and expectations.

“There is still a gap between the arrangements for the peace conference and China’s demands as well as the general expectations of the international community,” the foreign ministry stated on May 30. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC 1]

The ministry elaborated on Beijing's position, stating that China advocates for negotiations where both Russia and Ukraine are equally represented and highlighting three essential elements for any international peace conference: the presence of both conflicting parties, equal participation of all sides, and fair consideration of all peace proposals. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC 2]

The Kremlin, for its part, affirmed that China's decision underscores the futility of conducting such discussions without Russia's involvement underscoring that seeking a resolution to the Ukrainian conflict without Russia's participation is illogical and a waste of time, aligning Russia's position with that of China. [TASS] [Reuters]

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, furthermore, stated that China could potentially host a peace conference involving Russia and Ukraine, as part of Beijing's ongoing efforts to address the Ukrainian crisis. Lavrov emphasized that resolving the root causes of the conflict and protecting the legal interests of all parties are crucial, advocating for agreements based on equal and indivisible security.

Lavrov reiterated Russia's stance on negotiations, which include the precondition that Kyiv and the West must recognize Russia's territorial gains in Ukraine, a proposal rejected by Kyiv. He criticized the US for its

support of Ukraine, labeling it as an accomplice in the actions of the Kyiv regime. Specifically, Lavrov condemned the planned supply of nuclear-capable F-16 fighters to Ukraine and views it as a provocative move by NATO.

He expressed hope that the ongoing Russian-Belarusian drills involving non-strategic nuclear weapons would serve as a deterrent, reminding opponents of the severe consequences of further nuclear escalation. [The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation] [Reuters]

The conference, scheduled for June 15-16, does not include Russia among the invitees. China has emphasized that any peace conference should involve both Russia and Ukraine. U.S. President Joe Biden will not attend the event, while China and Brazil are considering an alternative initiative.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy has urged global leaders to participate, accusing China of assisting Russia in "sabotaging" the peace summit in Switzerland in his address at the Shangri-La Dialogue forum in Singapore. [Independent]

China maintains a complex stance, presenting itself as neutral despite deepening ties with Russia. Trade between the two nations reached a record USD 240 billion in 2023. Last month, during a visit to Beijing, U.S. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen warned of potential sanctions on Chinese banks aiding Russia's war efforts. [Bloomberg]

China reaffirms support for Palestine and enhances cooperation with Arab States at Beijing summit

(jm/rl) On May 30, at the China-Arab State Cooperation Forum in Beijing, Chinese President Xi Jinping reiterated his support for the establishment of an independent Palestinian state and pledged increased humanitarian aid for Gaza. Addressing the summit, Xi emphasized the need for an international peace conference to resolve the Israel-Hamas conflict and announced a humanitarian aid package of RMB 500 million (USD 69 million) for Gaza, along with a USD 3 million donation to a UN agency assisting refugees. [The State Council, PRC 1]

China has consistently supported Palestinians and criticized Israeli settlements in occupied territories, though it has not condemned the Hamas attack on

October 7, which resulted in the deaths of around 1,200 Israelis.

Beyond the Gaza conflict, the summit focused on expanding economic ties and cooperation between China and Arab states in areas such as trade, clean energy, space exploration, and healthcare.

Officials from 22 Arab states attended the meeting, including Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, Bahrain's King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, Tunisian President Kais Saied and United Arab Emirates President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan as well as the foreign ministers of Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Sudan, Syria, Iraq, Algeria and Morocco attended the forum. Also participating were Qatar's Minister of State at the Foreign Ministry Mohammed bin Abdulaziz Al-Khulaifi, Prime Minister of Libya's Tripoli-based government Abdul Hamid Mohammed Dbeibah and Lebanon's Secretary-General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Hani Shmeitli represented Lebanon.

Two documents were adopted, namely the Beijing Declaration and the Action Implementation Plan. Teh former reviewed ways to further push for the building of a China-Arab community and boost bilateral cooperation, emphasizing common positions shared by China and the Arab countries on multiple issues, including resolving regional crises and addressing counterterrorism efforts, human rights, climate change and artificial intelligence. The latter meanwhile presents a framework for deepening Chinese-Arab relations and cooperation in economy, politics, infrastructure and aviation – among others – over the next two years.

In a bilateral meeting on the same day, Xi and El-Sissi witnessed the signing agreements to boost cooperation in infrastructure, technology, and food imports, continuing the trend of increasing Chinese investments in Egypt that amounted to approximately USD 14 billion in 2023. [The State Council, PRC 2] [Washinton Post]

In a separate June 3 meeting, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan Al-Saud. During their talks, the ministers focused on expanding cooperation in energy, investment, emerging industries, and 5G communications. They also discussed the Israel-Hamas and Ukraine conflicts. Al-Saud expressed appreciation for China's impartial stance. Both agreed that a Ukraine peace conference should be based on mutually accepted principles and treat all parties equally. Wang reiterated China's commitment to facilitating peace talks and supporting a political resolution in Ukraine. [CGTN]

Observers see the summit as China's latest successful effort to strengthen its role as a credible partner in the Middle East, emphasizing non-interference in domestic affairs and presenting itself as an alternative to Western influence. China has increasingly engaged diplomatically in the region, facilitating talks between Palestinian factions Hamas and Fatah (see No. 19, May/2024, 1), and brokering a reconciliation deal between Iran and Saudi Arabia last year(see No. 51, December/2023, 3) . [The Diplomat] [AP News] [ISPI] [Al Monitor]

US signals potential sanctions on Chinese firms over support for Russia

(jm) The United States, along with other allied nations, may impose sanctions on Chinese companies and financial institutions due to Beijing's support for Russia's war in Ukraine, as stated by US Deputy Secretary of State Curt Campbell on May 31 during a trilateral US-South Korea-Japan meeting briefing (see article in this edition). This announcement follows the Biden administration's December executive order warning punitive measures against entities aiding Russia in evading Western sanctions. Campbell highlighted that the primary focus is on Chinese firms systematically supporting Russia.

During a meeting on May 31 with Japan's Vice Foreign Minister Masataka Okano and South Korea's Vice Foreign Minister Kim Hyong Kyun, Campbell emphasized the urgent need for European and NATO countries to collectively express their concerns to China. The meeting aimed to prepare for a future trilateral summit, underscoring the priority of addressing shared concerns about China, North Korea, and the Ukraine conflict. [US Department of State 1]

In a joint statement resulting from the trilateral meeting, the US, Japan, and South Korea reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening security and maintaining peace across the Indo-Pacific, pledging to collaborate on economic security through initiatives like the Minerals Security Partnership to reduce dependency on China and Russia for critical resources. Furthermore, the allies expressed their commitment to support Ukraine's energy infrastructure and recovery efforts, holding Russia accountable for its actions. [US Department of State 2]

Campbell welcomed renewed diplomatic engagements between China, Japan, and South Korea, commending their meeting in Seoul between South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol, Japanese Prime Minister

Fumio Kishida and Chinese Premier Li Qiang on May 27 after a four-year hiatus (see AiR No. 22, May/2024, 4).

Campbell also praised Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. for his strong stance against China's actions in the disputed South China Sea during his speech at the Shangri-La Dialogue defense summit. He affirmed the strengthening security partnership between the US and the Philippines. However, he refrained from speculating on potential treaty-triggering incidents involving the Philippine Coast Guard and China. [Reuters]

Earlier on May 30, Campbell met with China's Vice Foreign Minister Ma Zhaoxu in Washington, where he expressed the US's concerns about China's support to Russia's defense industrial base as well as about Beijing's "destabilizing actions around Taiwan and in the Taiwan Strait that erode the status quo that has maintained regional peace and stability for decades." He also voiced concerns over China's support for Russia in its conflict with Ukraine. [US Department of State 3]

Ma, for his part, reiterated that the US approach of seeking dialogue while harming China's interests is ineffective and that China will not tolerate suppression of its legitimate development rights. Ma emphasized that zero-sum games disguised as competition have no future and highlighted the Taiwan issue as a critical red line, urging the US to adhere to the one-China principle. Ma also criticized the US economic and trade policies and called for an end to politicizing these issues. Chinese experts warned that continued US provocations could lead to retaliation and increased tensions, further complicating China-US relations. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC] [Global Times]

France, Germany, and the Netherlands urge the EU to investigate China's biofuel imports

(jm) On May 30, France, Germany, and the Netherlands have jointly called on the European Commission to strengthen oversight of biofuel imports, particularly from China, amidst concerns over fraudulent practices. They proposed rigorous controls on production sites globally and advocated refusing sustainability certification for biofuels from sites denying EU inspections. [European Council, Council of the EU]

The European biodiesel industry reported a significant increase in imports from China, suspecting that these

imports, claimed to be produced from recycled oil and fat, are actually made from cheaper virgin oil.

Although there were no objections to this proposal, no immediate actions were taken according to an EU diplomat. These efforts come amid investigations by the European Commission into alleged circumvention of EU duties by Indonesian biodiesel and dumping of low-cost biodiesel from China.

The surge in demand for sustainable aviation fuels has led to increased imports of used cooking oil (UCO), with concerns over fraudulent labeling and market distortions. Recommendations include suspending imports from suspected fraudulent sources and enhancing EU certification mechanisms to safeguard the integrity of the biofuel market and meet sustainability goals. According to the Commission, the European biodiesel sector, valued at approximately EUR 31 billion annually, has faced numerous disputes with trading partners, particularly concerning the use of palm oil, which the EU attributes to deforestation. [Reuters] [Euractiv]

China: New drone spotted first time in operation

(ms) On May 27, the Japanese Air Self-Defense Force (JASDF) intercepted a Chinese Wing Loong-10 (WL-10) unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) over the East China Sea. This marks the first time this type of drone has been seen during an airspace operation.

The Japanese Joint Staff Office (JSO), which oversees the country's Ground, Maritime, and Air Self-Defense Forces, reported that fighter jets were scrambled to respond to the UAV's intrusion of its airspace. The JSO shared that the drone flew eastward from mainland China, took a northeasterly route, and then returned along the same path.

The Japanese Defense Ministry highlighted that Chinese drone activities near Japan have been increasing, and this uptick is believed to be related to China's strategic interests, particularly concerning Taiwan.

The Wing Loong-10 (WL-10), also designated as WZ-10 by the PLA, is a High-Altitude Long Endurance (HALE) drone developed by the Chengdu Aircraft Industry Group. It features stealth characteristics and a wingspan of about 20 meters. The drone can operate at altitudes up to 15,000 meters and has an endurance of 20 hours at a cruising speed of 620 km/h. It is

equipped for electronic warfare and reconnaissance missions.

This development follows other recent Chinese drone operations in the region, such as the WZ-7 Soaring Dragon's mission over the Sea of Japan in March 2024 and earlier TB-001 drone flights through the Miyako Strait. [Eurasian Times] [South China Morning Post]

Japan, South Korea, US condemn North Korea's ballistic missiles firing

(sh) On May 29, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida stated that his government was gathering information and monitoring the situation after ballistic missiles of North Korea fell outside Japan's Special Exclusive Economic zone. He condemned North Korea's actions, noting they violated UN Security Council resolutions, and confirmed that Japan had lodged a protest.

South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff reported that North Korea fired over ten short-range ballistic missiles from Sunan, near Pyongyang on May 30. Seoul is closely sharing information with the US and Japan and conducting a detailed analysis. All missiles are believed to have fallen outside Japan's SEE zone, with no damage reported to ships or aircraft (see AiR No. 22, May/2024, 4). [NHK 1]

On May 30, senior Japanese, US, and South Korean officials condemned North Korea's ballistic missile launches and agreed to maintain trilateral cooperation to address the issue. During phone talks, Hamamoto Yukiya, deputy director-general of the Asian and Oceanian Affairs Bureau at Japan's Foreign Ministry; Jung Pak, the US deputy special representative for North Korea; and Lee Jun-il, South Korea's director-general for Korean Peninsula policy confirmed that North Korea's actions violated UN Security Council resolutions. They strongly condemned Pyongyang for threatening regional and international peace and security, agreeing to continue their cooperation on the matter. [NHK 2]

UN calls on Japan to establish national human right institution

(sh) On May 30, the Working Group on Business and Human Rights of the UN Human Rights Council called on Japan to set up a national human rights institution, as part of a catalogue of recommendations the group

brought forward in a report based on its first survey conducted in Japan between July and August last year.

The report expresses deep concern about the absence of a national human rights institution in Japan, stating that this gap can hinder access to justice and effective remedies. The report also addressed the gender wage gap, the underrepresentation of women in executive positions, the conditions of workers involved in the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant decontamination, and long working hours in the animation industry.

It mentions sexual abuse scandals involving Johnny Kitagawa, the late founder of Johnny & Associates (now Smile-Up), and long working hours in the animation industry. It also addresses discrimination against LGBTQ persons and working conditions for foreign technical intern trainees.

In its response, the Japanese government argued that some parts of the report contained factually incorrect or one-sided assertions. [NHK 1]

Human rights advocates in Japan held a news conference after the release of the report and emphasized that systemic human rights challenges in Japan are not being adequately addressed. Muraki Maki, head of a group working on LGBTQ issues in Japan, urged the government to promote public understanding and improve human rights. She called for establishing an independent human rights body and effective measures against online hate speech, as mentioned in the report. [NHK 2]

U.N. Security Council divided over North Korea's failed satellite launch

(rl) The UN Security Council remained divided during a May 31 meeting over North Korea's recent failed attempt to launch a spy satellite. The session was requested by the United States, Japan, and South Korea, who criticized the launch as a violation of UN resolutions.

Robert Wood, the U.S. deputy ambassador, condemned North Korea's actions, stating that Washington "condemns in the strongest possible terms" the use of ballistic missile technology for the satellite launch. He urged Russia and China, both veto-holding members of the Council, to support a measure against North Korea.

In contrast, Anna Evstigneeva, Russia's deputy ambassador, defended Pyongyang, arguing that North

Korea is "forced to take action to strengthen its national defense capacity" due to military drills by the U.S. and its allies near the Korean Peninsula.

North Korean ambassador Kim Song accused the Security Council of engaging in "anachronistic and shameful practice" by challenging North Korea's sovereign right to launch a satellite.

The session highlighted the ongoing division within the Security Council over how to address North Korea's missile and satellite activities. [Kyodo News]

North Korea's 18-missile drill aimed at South Korea

(rl) May 31, North Korea fired 18 short-range ballistic missiles on May 30, demonstrating its readiness to launch a preemptive strike against South Korea.

South Korea detected at least ten of the missiles, describing the act as a potential display for arms buyers, including Russia. Both Russia and North Korea have denied any arms deals, which would violate U.N. embargoes.

The drill involved 600mm "super-large" multiple rocket launchers to hit a target 365 km away. The U.S. State Department condemned the launch as reckless. South Korea's government also condemned the missile launch and recent balloon campaign, warning of strong counter-measures. [The Korea Herald]

Tensions have increased with North Korea sending balloons carrying trash into South Korea. In response, Seoul's National Security Council decided to suspend the 2018 inter-Korean peace pact until mutual trust is restored. [Reuters]

South Korea, Japan, and U.S reaffirm cooperate to North Korea’s missile threats

(ac) On May 30, South Korea, Japan and the U.S reconfirmed cooperation to respond to North Korea’s missile threats and China’s role in addressing the evolving threat to North Korea at a trilateral meeting in Little Washington, Virginia. US Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell hosted South Korean Vice Foreign Minister Kim Hong-kyun, and Japanese Vice Foreign Minister Masataka Okano the meeting.

The meeting came on the heels of North Korea's failed attempt to launch a spy satellite on May 27 (see article in this edition), which the three senior officials condemned as violations to UN Security Council resolutions.

During the meeting the three senior officials reaffirmed their countries' commitment to cooperation in multiple areas, including economic security, critical and emerging technologies, and maritime security. [VOA News]

South Korean defense minister meets Canadian, US counterparts at Singapore annual security forum

(ac) On May 31, South Korean Defense Minister Shin attended the annual security forum in Singapore and met on its sidelines Canadian and U.S counterparts to address defense and arms cooperations.

In the meeting with Canadian Defense Minister Bill Blair, Shin highlighted the competitiveness of the South Korean arms industry and the security issues on the Korean Peninsula. Shin requested Canada's interest in submarines and K-9 self-propelled howitzers. Blair, in return, emphasized the close cooperation between their countries and South Korea's strategic importance in the northern Pacific region.

In a separate meeting, Shin discussed the South Korea-U.S. alliance with a U.S. delegation. Both sides showed mutual interest in expanding their military alliance and condemned North Korea's acts as a clear violation of UNSC resolutions. [The Korea Times]

International organizations gather at Jeju Peace Forum to address regional and global security issues

(ac) On May 29-31, an annual peace forum was hosted by Jeju Special Self-Governing Province, International Peace Foundation and East Asia Foundation in Jeju Island addressing regional and global security tensions.

The ninth Jeju Forum for Peace and Prosperity addressed geopolitical risks, including the ongoing wars in Ukraine, and the Gaza strip. The forum was attended by former and current heads of international organizations, including Fukuda Yasuo, former Prime Minister of Japan; Ban Ki-moon, former General of the

UN; Jens Stoltenberg, Secretary-General of NATO; Kao Kim Hourn, Secretary-General of ASEAN; and Rebecca Fatima Sta Maria, Executive Director of APEC Secretariat.

Ban Ki-moon stressed that South Korea needs to cooperate closely with the U.S and like-minded countries, while expressing concerns over North Korea. Ban urged the UN Security Council (UNSC) to revive the panel of experts on monitoring North Korea missile threats that was recently shut down following Russia's veto of a resolution that sought to extend the mandate of that panel (see AiR No. 14, April/2024, 1). [Arirang News] [Jeju Forum] [Yonhap News]

World Bank approves USD 700 million for Rohingya, host communities in Bangladesh

(sg/jb) The World Bank has approved USD 700 million in funding to support both the displaced Rohingya population and host communities in Bangladesh. This comprises a USD 407.50 million loan and a USD 292.50 million grant. The loan, with a 2 percent interest rate and a 30-year repayment period including an eight-year grace period, is the first of its kind since the onset of the Rohingya crisis. [The Daily Star 1]

Since the crisis began, the World Bank has provided USD 590 million in grants. The funding is critical as the annual Joint Response Plan for the Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis, managed by the Bangladesh government and UN partners, has seen declining humanitarian responses, gathering only 49 percent of the required USD 876 million in 2023.

In separate but related developments, Bangladesh's Foreign Minister Hasan Mahmud has called for continuous support from the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) member states to ensure the safe and sustainable repatriation of nearly 1.3 million Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh to Myanmar. He made this appeal during a briefing with OIC ambassadors at the United Nations headquarters in New York. [The Daily Star 2]

Bangladesh key partner of UN, Secretary-General António Guterres says

(sg) United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres said that Bangladesh is making significant

contributions to many UN programs, including international peace and security, sustainable development, and addressing climate change. This statement was made during a visit of Foreign Affairs Minister Hasan Mahmud to United States while meeting with the UN chief. During this bilateral meeting Sectary General also commended the ability of Bangladesh to adapt to and cope with climate change. [Dhaka Tribune]

South Asia Wildlife Enforcement Network training led by Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka

(ps) A week-long training program in Paro, Bhutan, concluded, bringing together frontline officials from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. This South Asia Wildlife Enforcement Network training focused on enhancing legal documentation and strengthening judicial systems to effectively prosecute wildlife crimes. Participants gained skills in investigation, documentation, and court simulation, aiming to improve enforcement and prevention measures. The training is part of a larger project to counter wildlife trafficking in South Asia, with the goal of protecting the region's rich biodiversity and ensuring the survival of its endangered species for future generations. [Kuensel]

Bhutan seeks FDI in agriculture sector

(ps) The Bhutan AgriTrade and Investment Forum (BATIF) 2024 has prompted Bhutan's Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock (MoAL) to focus on increasing agricultural and livestock output through foreign direct investment (FDI). Several bilateral business-to-business (B2B) and business-to-government (B2G) meetings were held during BATIF to explore partnerships. Notably, Bangladeshi company PRAN expressed interest in establishing a large-scale agriculture farm in Bhutan. Discussions also took place with companies from Japan, India, and Thailand. [Kuensel]

The agriculture sector employs 43.5 percent of the population on 2.75 percent of arable land. Its contribution to GDP has declined from 38 percent in 1992 to 14.67 percent in 2022. Bhutan aims to increase this contribution from USD 365 million in 2022 to USD 625 million by 2029, and USD 854 million by 2034. [AiR No. 21, May/2024, 3]

Nepal seeks re-election for key UN positions

(ps) Nepal is actively seeking re-election for key United Nations positions, including membership in the UN Human Rights Council and the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). The country has started lobbying for re-election, emphasizing its successful past contributions. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal completed its second consecutive term on the Human Rights Council in December 2023 and has announced its candidacy for the 2027-2029 term. Additionally, the country is currently serving a three-year term on the ECOSOC for 2024-2026 and has also announced its candidacy for the 2029-2031 term.

Additionally, Nepal aims to secure several other UN positions, including vice president of ECOSOC for 2024-2025, and non-permanent membership of the UN Security Council for 2037-2038. The government is also pursuing positions such as chair of the First Committee of the United Nations General Assembly for the 81st session (2026-2027), membership in the Commission on Narcotic Drugs (2028-2031), the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice (2028-2030), the Executive Board of UNICEF (2027-2029), the Executive Board of UN Women (2025-2027), the Executive Board of UNDP/UNFPA/UNOPS (2026-2028), and the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) for 2025-2028.

Nepal's president to visit Switzerland, Germany

(lm) Nepal's President Ram Chandra Poudel's will travel to Switzerland and Germany in mid-June, which will mark his first official visits since taking office in March last year. The President will be accompanied by a delegation including a minister, senior officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and officials from the President's office. [The Kathmandu Post]

In Switzerland, President Poudel will attend the 112th session of the International Labour Organization (ILO) in Geneva. He is scheduled to address the session on June 13, focusing on social justice. During his stay, he will also participate in the "Global Coalition for Social Justice" event and meet with Swiss political figures, including the President of the Swiss Confederation, Viola Amherd.

Following his engagements in Switzerland, President Poudel will visit Germany from June 16 to June 19 at the invitation of German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier. This visit is intended as an official goodwill mission.

Last November, President Poudel's planned visits to France, Italy, and Germany were postponed due to an earthquake in Rukum West and Jajarkot districts, which resulted in significant casualties and damage.

Pakistan's Prime Minister Shabaz embarks on five-day China visit; top official visits Afghanistan

(ss/lm) Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif embarked on a five-day official visit to China on June 4, aiming to strengthen bilateral cooperation and attract Chinese investors through extensive business-to-business engagements. Sharif, who is accompanied by ministers and government officials as well as a group of Pakistani business leaders, will meet President Xi Jinping, Premier Li Qiang, and Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress Zhao Leji during the trip that will end June 8. He will also visit the cities of Xi'an, Shenzhen, and Beijing, as well as economic and agricultural zones. [Voice of America]

This visit is critical as Pakistan seeks to accelerate the multibillion-dollar China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project under Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to support its fragile economy, which recently avoided default with a USD 3 billion bailout from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Despite significant investments in power projects and road networks under the USD 65 billion CPEC, project implementation has slowed recently. [Al Jazeera]

Against this backdrop, discussions will focus on further upgrading CPEC, enhancing bilateral trade and investment, and ensuring the security of Chinese interests in Pakistan. This follows a recent virtual meeting of the Joint Cooperation Committee (JCC) on CPEC, which addressed joint energy and infrastructure development and security concerns, particularly after a March 26 suicide attack that killed five Chinese engineers and their driver [see AiR No. 14, April/2024, 1]. This attack was the third major assault on Chinese interests in Pakistan within a week, following attacks on a strategic port and a naval air base in Balochistan claimed by the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA).

In this context, it is worth noting that a top Pakistani official, Secretary Interior Muhammad Khurram Agha, visited Kabul on May 30, to discuss the March 26 suicide attack. Agha met with Taliban Deputy Minister for Interior Muhammad Nabi Omari, sharing findings from the investigation and seeking Afghanistan's assistance in apprehending the perpetrators. Just days earlier, Islamabad revealed arresting 11 suspects that belonged to the banned militant outfit Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan or TTP. [Arab News]

Additionally, Islamabad has enhanced security protocols for Chinese nationals and recently announced over USD 2.5 million in compensation for the families of the slain foreign workers. [AiR No. 22, May/2024, 4]

EU maintains ban on Pakistan's national flag carrier; Islamabad selects companies for privatization

(tj) The European Union has maintained its ban on Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) from operating flights to Europe, citing "no grounds" for changing the status of Pakistani air carriers. This decision comes despite earlier statements by PIA CEO Muhammad Amir Hayat expressing confidence that the airline would resume European flights by June or July. [Arab News 1] [DAWN]

The ban was instituted after a pilot license scandal following a 2020 PIA plane crash that killed nearly 100 people. The scandal led to the grounding of 262 Pakistani pilots, including 141 from PIA.

The European Commission's document highlighted a "noticeable lack of depth of scrutiny" by Pakistani aviation authorities, pointing out issues such as understaffing and shortcomings in the Flight Standards Directorate of the Pakistan Civil Aviation Authority (PCAA). Despite PCAA's efforts to address these issues, including a Corrective Action Plan, the EU experts found persistent deficiencies.

Meanwhile, Pakistan is preparing to sell a stake of between 51 percent and 100 percent in the loss-making airline by June or July, as urged by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to implement economic reforms. Islamabad has selected six companies to bid for the acquisition of PIA. This move, though potentially unpopular, aims to privatize all state-owned enterprises except for strategic entities. [Arab News 2]

Pakistan seeks economic integration with Central Asia amid push for investment

(lm) On May 29, Pakistan's Investment Minister Abdul Aleem Khan reaffirmed the country's commitment to cooperating with Central Asian states to enhance trade and economic activities. This initiative is part of Pakistan's broader strategy to become a key trade and transit hub connecting Central Asia with the rest of the world, leveraging its strategic location. [Arab News]

Pakistan has invested in infrastructure projects such as roads, railways, and pipelines to improve economic connectivity, particularly under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) initiative. Speaking at the "Road to Tien Shan" regional forum in Tajikistan, Khan emphasized that international trade is crucial for regional development and prosperity. He noted that Pakistan's Port Qasim and Gwadar port are available for Central Asia's trade routes.

In April, Pakistan initiated its trade gateway to Central Asia with the first potato shipment to Tajikistan. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has emphasized the importance of mutually beneficial economic partnerships over loans for Pakistan's economic progress.

World Bank discusses energy transition for Sri Lanka in high-level roundtable

(hgh) The World Bank hosted a high-level roundtable discussion on advancing energy transitions in Sri Lanka, chaired by President Ranil Wickremesinghe. Attendees included senior officials from the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, Japan International Cooperation Agency, USAID, International Finance Corporation, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and global renewable energy corporations. [Daily Mirror]

Power and Energy Minister Kanchana Wijesekara stated that presentations were made on adopting financial tools for cost reduction, mitigating developer risks, structuring new projects for competitive bidding, and securing technical assistance for evaluation. Case studies of renewable energy in similar countries were analyzed to secure financial assistance for Sri Lanka’s energy efficiency.

President Wickremesinghe outlined Sri Lanka's vision for prosperity, renewable energy development, and net zero targets, highlighting the government's reform agenda and investment opportunities in energy transition.

The discussion aimed to attract investments in the renewable energy sector, accelerate energy transition, green hydrogen programs, and scale up private investments. This aligns with the 2023 World Bank study showing that deploying 500-1000 megawatts of offshore wind can help Sri Lanka meet its 70 percent renewable energy target by 2030. The World Bank also stressed the urgent need for the government to incorporate environmental considerations into its restructuring processes, as Sri Lanka is among the top third most vulnerable countries to the consequences of climate change.

World Bank approves additional funding to strengthen education in Cambodia

(lvw) The World Bank has approved an additional USD 79.5 million to expand the Cambodia General Education Improvement Project, initially funded with USD 69.25 million in January 2022. This new financing includes a USD 19.5 million grant from the Global Partnership for Education to enhance educational access across Cambodia.

Key activities include teacher training, addressing low student outcomes, building climate-resilient classrooms, piloting education technology, and modernizing educational materials. The project aims to improve education for disadvantaged groups, including poor, ethnic minority, and disabled children in remote areas. [The Star]

ADB launches Cambodian country partnership

(lvw) The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has introduced a new country partnership strategy for Cambodia for 2024-2028. The strategy aims to foster a sustainable, inclusive, and resilient economy by accelerating private-sector-led economic diversification, advancing human development, and strengthening climate resilience and adaptation, aligned with the key goals of Cambodia's national Pentagonal Strategy.

The new ADB strategy also prioritizes improved governance, enhanced gender equality, food security, digitalization, and deepening regional cooperation to support the Kingdom's transition to a high-income status. [Asian Development Bank]

Cambodia invited to contribute to the Ukrainian peace process

(lvw) On May 28, Senate President Hun Sen met via video call with Ruslan Stefanchuk, head of the Ukrainian parliament, to discuss Ukraine's invitation for Cambodia to participate in the upcoming Global Peace Conference in Switzerland, as part of Ukraine's Peace Formula initiative. The Peace Formula initiative is a diplomatic effort presented by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to the G7 leaders in 2022.

Stefanchuk stated on May 28, "This initiative remains the only realistic and comprehensive plan to restore Ukraine's territorial integrity and ensure security and justice for the entire international community." He also called on Cambodia to support its implementation and attend the Global Peace Summit.

Hun Sen reaffirmed his eagerness to enhance bilateral cooperation between Cambodia and Ukraine and reiterated Cambodia's commitment to peace and stability, highlighting the country's experience in post-conflict reconstruction, rebuilding, and demining. [Phnom Penh Post]

French Thales and PT Len form joint venture to boost Indonesia's defence

(jb) Paris-based Thales, a multinational defense group, and Indonesian defence supplier PT Len have signed a joint venture agreement to enhance Indonesia's defence capabilities. The agreement, signed on May 30, aims to strengthen local industrial activities in manufacturing, engineering, and services, supporting Indonesia's 'Made-in-Indonesia' strategy.

The joint venture will establish Indonesia's first Centre of Excellence to address air surveillance and protect airspace. This initiative will bolster the Indonesian Air Force's capabilities. Thales will share its expertise in radar technology and command and control activities, co-developing a national Air Operations Centre. Maintenance and repair will be conducted at PT Len's Subang site.

This collaboration marks a significant step towards building an indigenous defence industry, aligning Indonesia with other 'Global South' nations seeking to enhance their defence manufacturing capabilities. The venture aims to expand into areas such as C4ISR, military satellites, and electronic warfare in the future. [Airforce Technology]

Indonesia's ESDM Minister advocates clean energy agenda during Tokyo visit

(jb) During a visit to Tokyo, Indonesia's Minister of Energy and Mineral Resources, Arifin Tasrif, reaffirmed the country's commitment to reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and achieving Net Zero Emissions (NZE) by 2060 or the 2070s.

Speaking at the Nikkei Forum Future of Asia, Tasrif outlined Indonesia's Enhanced National Determined Contribution (ENDC) and the Ministry's NZE Roadmap, focusing on renewable energy, carbon reduction, and energy efficiency.

Tasrif highlighted initiatives such as the early retirement of Steam Power Plants (PLTU), electrification, and CCS/CCUS implementation. He stressed the importance of strategic energy utilization and ongoing projects, including electricity interconnection infrastructure and natural gas exploration. Emphasizing the need for financing and technological development, Tasrif discussed programs like JETP, AZEC, and IPEP.

The Minister also promoted downstream mineral processing to support the energy transition and create jobs, and the transition to electric vehicles to decarbonize transport. Tasrif called for strengthened international cooperation to ensure inclusive progress and address global climate challenges. [Solar Quarter]

Indonesia aims to lead global Islamic economy, says minister

(jb) Coordinating Economic Minister Airlangga Hartarto emphasized the need for Indonesia to enhance its Islamic economy to become the best in the world. Speaking at an Islamic boarding school (pesantren) in Bogor, West Java, on 1 June 2024, he referenced the State of the Global Islamic Economy (SGIE) 2023 report, which ranked Indonesia third behind Saudi Arabia and Malaysia.

With a population of 280 million, Hartarto stressed that Indonesia's Islamic economy should outpace countries with smaller populations. He highlighted advancements in Islamic investment, halal food, modest fashion, pharmaceuticals, cosmetics, and Muslim-friendly tourism as key areas of development.

Hartarto noted the significant potential within Indonesia's extensive network of pesantrens, which house approximately 4.8 million students. He emphasized the role of these institutions in empowering communities economically and socially through agriculture, fisheries, and small enterprises.

The minister also underscored the importance of inclusive finance, targeting a financial inclusion rate of 90 percent, supported by government regulations and coordinated efforts across various sectors. [Tempo.co]

Cambodia, Laos, and Singapore form working group for cross-border electricity cooperation

(lvw) Cambodia, Laos, and Singapore have formed a working group to facilitate cross-border electricity trade, aiming to advance the ASEAN Power Grid vision. The group comprises the Cambodia Ministry of Mines and Energy, Singapore Ministry of Trade and Industry, and Lao PDR Ministry of Energy and Mines.

The group will focus on several key outcomes. Firstly, it will establish a framework for cross-border electricity trading projects, starting with initiatives between Lao PDR, Cambodia, and Singapore. Secondly, the group will facilitate regulatory approvals and licenses for generating, exporting, and importing electricity. This includes developing principles and frameworks for subsea power cable installation, and it will also work on developing generation and transmission infrastructure for cross-border electricity trading.

Singapore, as the meeting host, expressed optimism about creating a cooperation framework that will encourage more regional partners to join this initiative towards sustainable energy production and advancing the ASEAN Power Grid. [Khmer Times]

Asian Development Bank to support Laos' expanding EV charging network

(lvw) LOCA, a leading mobility service provider in Laos, has secured substantial funding from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and USAID to expand its electric vehicle (EV) fleet and EV charging infrastructure across the country.

Founded in 2018, LOCA now operates a fleet that includes 600 EV drivers. The company aims for 100 percent EV integration by 2030 and will stop accepting internal combustion engine (ICE) vehicles after 2025. Souliyo Vongdala, Co-founder and CEO, emphasized that the funding supports their vision for a cleaner transportation network. [Laotian Times]

Myanmar's children suffer amid ongoing crisis, UK ambassador reports

(jb) Myanmar's children are disproportionately affected by the ongoing crisis following the military coup, according to UK Ambassador James Kariuki. Speaking at a UN Arria meeting on May 29, Kariuki highlighted the sharp increase in humanitarian needs over the past year, with those requiring aid rising from 17.6 million to 18.6 million, and internally displaced persons escalating to 3 million.

Kariuki emphasized that more than half of Myanmar's children are now out of school, vaccination programs are disrupted, and food insecurity is soaring, risking widespread malnutrition. He called for heightened international attention and support, noting the UK's aid to 1.8 million people in 2023 for nutrition and livelihoods.

Kariuki stressed the need for enhanced access to education and health services through local partners and condemned the killing of nearly 150 children in the first five months of 2024. He urged Myanmar's armed forces to cease attacks on civilians and infrastructure, reiterating the Security Council's call for an end to violence. [GOV.UK]

Record meth seizures in East and Southeast Asia in 2023, Myanmar epicenter

(jb) East and Southeast Asia witnessed record methamphetamine seizures in 2023, according to a UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) report released May 28. The Golden Triangle – where Thailand,

Myanmar, and Laos converge – remains the primary source of these drugs.

The region seized a historic 190 tons of methamphetamine, with 89 percent from Southeast Asia. This included 1.1 billion meth tablets and 90 tons of crystal meth, marking unprecedented levels. The region's illicit synthetic drug trade is valued at approximately USD 80 billion annually.

Myanmar's Shan State, a part of the Golden Triangle, is the epicenter of meth production. Political instability, especially post-2021 military takeover, exacerbates the issue. Organized crime groups collaborate with local armed factions to operate these drug labs.

The report also highlighted record ecstasy and ketamine seizures. Increasingly, drugs are trafficked via complex land and maritime routes, reaching as far as South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand.

UNODC's Benedikt Hofmann expressed concern over the convergence of drug trafficking and other organized crimes, including online scams and human trafficking. [The Nation Thailand]

UN Security Council meeting highlights escalating crisis in Myanmar

(jb) At a UN Security Council Arria-formula meeting (convened to receive briefings from one or more experts on the relevant issues of interest to the council) on May 29, US Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield condemned the escalating violence in Myanmar following the military coup of February 2021. She highlighted nearly 1,000 airstrikes conducted by the regime in 2024, surpassing the total from the previous two years combined, and resulting in the destruction of homes, schools, healthcare facilities, and places of worship.

Thomas-Greenfield reported that Myanmar faces one of the world's most violent armed conflicts, with at least 47,000 deaths since the coup. She called for urgent action, including measures to restrict the regime's access to jet fuel.

The situation in Rakhine State is particularly dire, with Rohingya communities suffering from intensified military attacks and forced conscription. The Ambassador stressed the need for protecting civilians and ensuring humanitarian access, noting that one in three people in Myanmar requires aid, and over three million are internally displaced.

The US supports inclusive dialogue for restoring democracy in Myanmar, in line with UN Resolution 2669. [United States Mission to the United Nations]

President Marcos in Singapore for Shangri-La defense summit

(ms/rm/tl) President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. arrived in Singapore on May 29 to attend the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) Shangri-La Dialogue. Known as Asia's premier defense summit, the Shangri-La Dialogue provides a platform for government leaders, business leaders, and security experts to discuss Asia's evolving security challenges. The Dialogue, featuring plenary debates led by government ministers and opportunities for bilateral discussions between delegations, took place from May 31 to June 2.

In his concept note Marcos emphasized that "illegal, coercive, aggressive, and deceptive actions" continue to violate the Philippines' sovereignty, sovereign rights, and jurisdiction. Marcos did not specifically name China, but his remarks were widely seen as a reference to China's increasing assertiveness in the region.

Marcos warned that the death of a Filipino citizen through a "willful act" would be "close to an act of war" and would trigger the mutual defense treaty with the United States. He also reaffirmed the country's commitment to defending its sovereignty and territorial claims, vowing to "do whatever it takes to protect our sovereignty."

The Philippines has been shifting its geopolitical loyalties towards Washington, with increased military cooperation and a strengthening of diplomatic ties. Marcos' decision to pivot towards Washington is seen as a reversal of his predecessor's policy of engagement with Beijing. The Philippines' relations with China have been strained over disputes in the South China Sea, including the Scarborough Shoal and Second Thomas Shoal.

Marcos' speech came amid rising tensions in the region, with China's coast guard increasing its presence in the South China Sea and Manila accusing Beijing of harassing its vessels. The Philippines has also been bolstering its defense capabilities, with the United States providing additional military aid and training.

In his address, Marcos emphasized the importance of international law and the United Nations Convention

on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) in resolving maritime disputes. He also called for regional powers to manage their rivalries in a responsible manner, warning that any miscalculation or accident could lead to conflict.

The Philippines' shift towards Washington has raised concerns about the potential for increased tensions between China and the United States. However, Marcos' speech suggests that Manila is committed to defending its sovereignty and territorial claims, while also seeking to strengthen its relations with other regional powers. [Nikkei Asia] [The Japan Times]

In addition to Marcos's speech, Philippine Defense Secretary Gilberto Teodoro Jr. held several bilateral meetings with representatives from Lithuania, Canada, Netherlands, and New Zealand to deepen and broaden defense and security cooperation. One notable outcome was an offer from Lithuanian Minister of Defense Laurynas Kasčiūnas for military training on cybersecurity for the Philippines. The Philippines also extended an invitation for Lithuanian representatives to visit the Philippines and for Lithuanian shipping companies to utilize Filipino seafarers for their operations.

Teodoro Jr. also met with Dutch Defense Minister Kajsa Ollongren to strengthen bilateral defense and security relations, particularly in combating cybercrimes and espionage. Both officials expressed understanding of the global security concerns of the Philippine government and expressed confidence in engaging the Netherlands in combating these issues.

In addition, Teodoro Jr. met with New Zealand's Defense Minister Judith Anne Collins, who expressed concern over tensions in the West Philippine Sea, noting that "the Philippines is not the one causing the problem over there." The two also discussed building stronger defense cooperation in engineering and logistics. Finally, Teodoro Jr. met with Canadian Minister for National Defense Bill Blair to reaffirm their desire to forge further defense and security alliances with countries including the United States, Japan, and South Korea. [Manila Standard] [Philippine News Agnecy 2] 1] [Manila Standard] [Philippine News Agnecy 2]

Philippines wants to act as regional peacemaker in bid for UN Security Council

(rm) President Marcos used his speech at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore to emphasize the

need for the Philippines to embrace its role as a committed peacemaker in the region. This was part of his pitch for the country's candidacy for the United Nations Security Council for the 2027-2028 term. He highlighted the inevitable rise of the Philippines as a trusted partner and credible pathfinder in the Indo-Pacific region, stating, "we will embrace our role in this region and around the world with a sense of purpose." This sentiment resonated throughout the Philippines' presence at the Shangri-La Dialogue, with a clear message that the country would be critical in addressing the geopolitical challenges and vulnerabilities in the Indo-Pacific.

However, greater emphasis was placed on the economic potential of the Indo-Pacific, which is poised to become the fastest-growing economic hub and the largest contributor to global growth. Marcos committed to ensuring this promise is fulfilled as a regional leader. Finally, he urged the region not to be distracted by geopolitics, but to fulfill their duties as civil servants, aiming to achieve stability, security, and peace. [Presidential Communications Office] [Philippine News Agency]

Philippine Economic Zone Authority aims to attract USD 100 billion investment from Japan and U.S

(tl) Philippine Economic Zone Authority (PEZA) is seeking USD 100 billion in potential investments from the United States and Japan in the electronics and manufacturing sectors. The potential areas include supply chains, clean energy, agri-business, rail, and port infrastructure development.

PEZA Director General Tereso O. Panga believes these investments will be made possible by unique opportunities from the China+1 strategy, the US CHIPS Act, and the US-Japan-Philippines trilateral agreement. The upcoming Luzon economic corridor will support connectivity among Subic Bay, Clark, Manila, and Batangas, facilitating strategic investments in high-impact infrastructure projects. The inclusion of Ecozone Logistics Service Enterprises (ELSE) in the new Strategic Investment Priorities Plan allows more logistics companies to support new investments, especially within ecozones.

PEZA is optimistic about increasing its more than 300 American equity companies in the Philippines and attracting more investments and jobs for the Filipino people. The country's recent economic performance has allowed PEZA to attract USD 3 billion in

investments in 2023, a six-year high. PEZA is also working on 'leap-frogging' strategies to address challenges in the supply chain, industrial, and logistics sectors, particularly in ecozones. PEZA is also strengthening its partnership with the Bureau of Customs and engaging with lawmakers for possible amendments on investment laws and other economic provisions. [Business Mirror]

Singaporean ex-minister Lim Hwee Hua appointed as chair of IVSC board of trustees

(lb) Lim Hwee Hua, who made history in 2009 by becoming the first woman to serve in Singapore's Cabinet, has been appointed as the chair of the International Valuation Standards Council (IVSC) board of trustees, becoming the first Asian and female to hold this position. The IVSC, an independent organization recognized by the United Nations, sets universal standards for asset valuation. [Business Times]

Five Power Defence Arrangements to expand cooperation into non-conventional threat areas

(sm) The Five Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA), composed of Singapore, Malaysia, Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom, is expanding cooperation to address non-conventional threats such as counterterrorism, maritime security, humanitarian and disaster relief, cyber, and drone warfare. During the 12th FPDA Defence Ministers' Meeting hosted by Singapore, the ministers emphasized the need to enhance conventional war-fighting capabilities while incorporating capabilities in non-traditional areas to remain relevant. This expansion includes bringing high-end equipment and fifth-generation aircraft to joint military exercises. Terrorism remains a concern, prompting the group to build joint capabilities. [CNA]

Thai Cabinet formally approves bid for BRICS membership

(msz) The Thai government has formally approved a bid to join the BRICS bloc, seeking to boost the country's economy and global influence. The cabinet's decision aims to position Thailand as the first

Southeast Asian member of BRICS, which includes Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. The move follows recent BRICS expansions to include Saudi Arabia, Iran, Ethiopia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates. [Bangkok Post] [Nikkei Asia]

Bangkok's bid aligns with Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin's strategy to strengthen the economy and adjust foreign relations, balancing ties with the United States and China. The proposal also aligns with efforts to join the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), highlighting Thailand's flexible foreign policy strategy.

Thai Prime Minister outlines "Ignite Thailand" vision in Hong Kong

(msz) When attending attending the UBS Asian Investment Conference (AIC) 2024 in Hong Kong, Thai Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin invited global partners and businesses to invest in Thailand and outlined his "Ignite Thailand" vision, which aims to make Thailand a regional hub in eight key sectors - aviation, tourism, wellness and medical services, agriculture and food, logistics, future mobility, digital economy and finance. [Bangkok Post] [The Nation Thailand]

Fiscal policy

Srettha mentioned the contentious digital wallet scheme, which aims to boost economic growth by distributing 10,000 baht (around USD 272) to 50 million Thai citizens, injecting more than 500 billion baht (around USD 13.6 billion) into the economy, which is expected to stimulate GDP growth by 1.2-1.8 percent. Srettha expressed his aspiration that the policy will lay the foundation for a nationwide blockchain-based payment system.

Trade, economic and policies

Srettha outlined his government's aim to position Thailand as a key partner in the global supply chain by reducing import-export restrictions and accelerating free-trade negotiations with major economic regions. While stressing innovation and sustainability for Thailand's future, Srettha highlighted the importance of strengthening fiscal stability, regulatory reform, and strategic investment in key sectors to boost business confidence and Thailand's competitiveness in the global economy. He said that the new economic growth mechanisms will promote businesses aligned with climate change initiatives, improve the ease of doing business, digitize government services, and

invest in large-scale infrastructure projects such as airports and the land bridge project. Regarding human development, Srettha highlighted the government's commitment to reskilling the existing workforce, promoting education and lifelong learning of the future workforce, and enticing skillsets of international labor by improving work-permit and visa processes.

Environmental policies

The prime minister spotlighted the government's promotion of sustainability with the plan to issue THB 30 billion (around USD 815 million) worth of sovereign sustainability-linked bonds. He added that Thailand aims to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050, net-zero emissions by 206, and be a leading clean energy producer in the region by 2040.

Thailand targets tourism boost with longer stays for visitors, students, 'digital nomads'

(wt) Thailand's government has approved longer visa stay periods for tourists, postgraduate students, and remote workers, along with improved visa conditions for retirees, aiming to revitalize the country's tourism sector amid economic challenges. Starting in June, travelers from 93 countries can stay for 60 days, up from 57 nations, with more eligible for visas on arrival. Foreign students can extend their stay for an additional year after graduation, while insurance requirements for retirees are relaxed. These measures are part of efforts to attract more visitors, including from key markets, with plans to extend on-arrival visa stay limits to 60 days from 30 days. Additionally, digital nomad visas for self-employed remote workers will be extended to five years, with each stay limited to 180 days. Thailand aims for a record 40 million foreign arrivals this year, targeting revenue of THB 3.5 trillion (approximately USD 95.73 billion). [Reuters] [Khaosod] [The ShilongTimes]

Chinese businesses target Vietnam, Mexico as trade tensions with United States rise

(lm) Chinese businesses are increasingly investing in Vietnam and Mexico as trade tensions with the United States escalate. In the year leading up to March, there were 41 Chinese manufacturing and logistics projects announced in Mexico and 39 in Vietnam, surpassing

the US as the top destinations for such projects. [Financial Times]

The move highlights a broader trend of Chinese manufacturers establishing a presence overseas as Western countries seek to reduce reliance on Chinese factories for critical products. Investments have also surged in Thailand, Malaysia, Hungary, and Egypt.

However, some shifts in trade dynamics are attributed to Chinese companies rerouting products through Vietnam to mitigate direct tariffs. For example, Vietnam's trade surplus with the US has increased due to the rerouting of Chinese goods through Vietnamese ports. Nevertheless, there remain many advantages to manufacturing in China, such as better delivery times, costs, and quality.

China, Bangladesh to begin free trade talks after Prime Minister Hasina's Beijing visit

(sg/lm) China and Bangladesh are gearing up to initiate formal negotiations on a free trade agreement (FTA) by the year's end, announced by Ahasanul Islam Titu, state minister for commerce. Bangladesh, with China as its top trading partner and key development ally, aims to sign FTAs with 26 countries, with the FTA set to encompass trade in goods, services, investment, e-commerce, and high-tech industry cooperation, laying a robust foundation for bilateral economic ties. [The Buisness Standard]

The FTA discussions coincide with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's anticipated visit to China in July, a move expected to significantly impact China-Bangladesh relations, according to Chinese Ambassador Yao Wen. China is keen to conclude the feasibility study on the FTA swiftly, eyeing the establishment of a bilateral free trade zone by 2026. [Dhaka Tribune]

In parallel, Bangladesh's Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen held bilateral discussions with his Chinese counterpart, Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs Sun Weidong, during a recent visit to China, addressing mutual interests, including Prime Minister Hasina's proposed visit to China. [The Daily Star]

Team of India's Adani Group meets with Bangladesh's finance minister

(lm) Representatives of the Adani Group, a major India-based conglomerate, met with Bangladesh's Finance Minister Abul Hassan Mahmood Ali to discuss new investment opportunities in the country. Pranav Adani, director at Adani Enterprises and Managing Director of Adani's Agro, Oil & Gas, led the delegation. [The Daily Star]

The delegation expressed interest in exploring various investment prospects in Bangladesh. Additionally, they raised the issue of outstanding payments for electricity supplied by Adani Power since March 2023. The dues amount to USD 700 million, with payments increasing monthly. While the finance minister acknowledged the need to address these dues, he stated that there was no formal discussion on the matter during the meeting.

Japan's Prime Minister Kishida assures unwavering support to Bangladesh's post-cyclone recovery

(sg) Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida in a recent letter to Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said that his government will spare no effort to provide the necessary support for the swift recovery of the affected areas in Bangladesh due to Cyclone Remal. Kishida also shared the deep condolences to the bereaved families and victims due to cyclone while also pledging support to Bangladesh. [The Daily Star] [bdnews24]

Bangladesh's foreign minister discusses Rohingya issue with Canadian envoy

(lm) Canadian Permanent Representative to the United Nation, Bob Rae, met with Bangladesh's Foreign Minister Hasan Mahmud on May 28 during the Small Island Developing States Conference in Antigua and Barbuda. They discussed the Rohingya crisis, with Rae affirming his ongoing engagement on the issue as directed by the Canadian government. Mahmud emphasized that repatriation is the only solution to the crisis and urged the international community to intensify their efforts towards achieving this goal. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh, Finland to hold political consultations in October to strengthen

ties

(lm) Finland’s new non-resident Ambassador to Bangladesh, Kimmo Lähdevirta, discussed mutual cooperation with Bangladesh’s Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen, including political consultations scheduled for October and an upcoming visit of a Finish business delegation to Dhaka. The ambassador highlighted Finland's expertise in green transition, renewable energy, IT, and forestry, and mentioned the European Union (EU)'s Global Gateway initiative and potential engagements with Bangladesh. Both sides also discussed visas for Bangladeshi students, trade, culture, culinary, and tourism cooperation. [The Business Standard]

Lähdevirta also met with Bangladesh’s Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, to discuss various matters including Bangladesh's graduation to a developing country status in 2026. Upon graduating from the Least Developed Countries (LDC) status in 2026, Bangladesh faces the potential loss of its current Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) benefits from the EU. The GSP+ scheme, which offers preferential access, imposes more stringent conditions that Bangladesh needs to meet to qualify. In light of this, Hasina sought Finland's assistance to prolong GSP+ benefits from the European Union post-graduation. [The Daily Star]

Additionally, Hasina emphasized the burden of forcibly displaced Rohingyas on Bangladesh, noting the decrease in international financial aid amid global crises.

"Bhutan Road Safety" website and appreciation for real-time roadblock alerts brought by Japan

(ps) "Bhutan Road Safety" project is funded by Japan International Co-operation Agency (JICA) and is being implemented by the Department of Surface Transport (DoST). The system will provide information about roadblocks, ongoing road maintenance activities, and cautionary information for travelers. The information will be updated by regional and sub-divisional offices in real-time. The system is expected to be available to the public in July 2024, starting in 2019 with the investment of nearly USD 750,000. [Kuensel]

Bhutan subsidies the first 15,000 visitors from Bangladesh to USD 15 fee every year

(ps) The first 15,000 Bangladeshi tourists visiting Bhutan every year can pay a discounted SDF of USD 15 per day starting June 2, 2024, until 2027. This fee is equivalent to the currently charged to Indian tourists. Previously, Bangladeshi tourists paid an SDF of USD 200 per day following the implementation of a new tourism policy in September 2022. The government of Bangladesh has requested a reduction in the SDF for Bangladeshi tourists during bilateral meetings. [Kuensel] [AiR No. 20, May/2024, 2]

The Sustainable Development Fee (SDF) in Bhutan is a daily fee collected from tourists to support the country's development projects. The fee is currently USD 100 per person per night, with children aged 5 and under exempted and those aged 6 to 12 receiving a 50 percent discount. The SDF is used to fund initiatives such as preserving cultural traditions, enhancing sustainability, upgrading infrastructure, and providing free healthcare and education. The fee is payable for the duration of the traveler's stay in Bhutan.

Brunei, Philippines seek cooperation in renewable energy

(dql) The Philippine Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), along with other government agencies, has endorsed President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr.'s efforts to work together with Brunei's leading oil and gas companies in the development the Philippines' growing renewable energy sector.

During a meeting on May 29 with executives from Brunei Shell Petroleum (BSP), Brunei LNG (BLNG), TotalEnergies Brunei, Serikandi Oilfield Services, and Adinin Group of Companies, that took place while the president was visiting Brunei, the president's investment appeal was backed by DTI Secretary Fred Pascual.

The meeting focused on factors influencing investment decisions in renewable energy projects, enabling the Philippines to optimize its approach to attract Bruneian investment. [Solar Quarter]

US Defense Secretary visits Cambodia

(dql) On June 4, U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin visited Cambodia to meet Cambodian counterpart Tea Seiha and Prime Minister Hun Manet to discuss ways

to push for stronger military ties between the US and China's closest ally in Southeast Asia.

Following the talks, Austin who arrived in Cambodia from the Shangri-La defense in Singapore, confirmed on in a tweet "substantive conversations about ways to strengthen U.S.-Cambodian defense ties," adding that he was "looking forward to further dialogue."

Over the past years, relations between the US and Cambodia have been frosty over of Phnom Penh's close ties with China. Washington has especially closely watched China's military presence at the Ream Naval Base in the Gulf of Thailand that has been upgraded with Beijing's assistance. The US has also criticized what it sees as Cambodia's poor human rights record. [AP News] [Lloyd Austin, via X]

Cambodia renames road as Xi Jinping Boulevard

(lvw) Cambodia has renamed a main road in Phnom Penh as "Xi Jinping Boulevard" in honor of the Chinese president, highlighting the strong ties between Cambodia and China. The renaming ceremony, attended by Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet and outgoing Chinese Ambassador Wang Wentian, underscores Xi Jinping's key role in the countries' historical and growing relationship. The boulevard, formerly known as the Third Ring Road, was built with USD 273 million in concessional financing from China and contributions from Cambodia.

Prime Minister Hun Manet emphasized the deep and inseparable relationship between Cambodia and China, praising China's assistance in Cambodia's socio-economic development and political independence. Just days before U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin's visit to Phnom Penh (see article above), Cambodian Senate President Hun Sen affirmed the enduring "steel" relationship with Beijing, emphasizing strong material, trade and development ties. [SCMP]

Cambodia and China conclude joint 'Golden Dragon' military exercise

(lvw) The sixth iteration of the China-Cambodia "Golden Dragon" joint exercise concluded on May 30 in Kampong Chhnang, Cambodia. The 12-day joint naval exercise, which began on May 16, focused on counter-terrorism and humanitarian relief, with phases

including adaptation, command, and live-action. Over 2,000 troops and sixteen ships participated in the maritime anti-terrorism and anti-hijacking operations and drills to enhance military skills and cooperation.

Part of the exercise were live-fire drills near Sihanoukville Port, conducted on May 27, marking the first joint live-fire drill between Chinese and Cambodian naval vessels. During the exercises, China deployed robot dogs, including one equipped with a rifle for assault missions, as reported by Chinese state media. The rifle-equipped robot dog, weighing over 50 kilograms, led an attack on a building with mock terrorists. Analysts noted that these robot dogs enhance combat efficiency and reduce casualties.

Chinese state media dismissed Western media rumors about China using Cambodia's Ream Naval Base as a military base, stating that the cooperation aims to enhance Cambodia's maritime security capabilities and complies with international laws. [China Military] [Global Times] [Khmer Times] [Kyodo News]

Chinese and U.S. defense ministers hold talks in Singapore

(rl/jm) On May 31, Chinese Defence Minister Dong Jun and U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin held talks on the sidelines of the Shangri-La Dialogue defense summit. The meeting marked one of Dong's first appearances outside China after assuming the post of defense minister in December (see AiR No. 1, January/2024, 1).

During the meeting, that discussed multiple issues including Taiwan, the South China Sea tension, the Russia-Ukraine war, and the Gaza conflict, both sides emphasized the importance of renewed military communications to prevent miscalculations amid escalating tensions in the Asia-Pacific region.

Dong cautioned against U.S. interference in China's internal matters, specifically regarding Taiwan and accused Washington of supporting the Philippines over its activities in the disputed Second Thomas Shoal, voicing fierce opposition to the US deployment of a missile system in the country.

Austin, for his part, expressed concerns over recent activities of the PLA activity around the Taiwan Strait and reiterated the importance to respect high-seas freedom of navigation, pointing to especially to the South China Sea.

The meeting signifies a latest effort to stabilize ties between the world's two largest economies since Presidents Joe Biden and Xi Jinping met last November on the sidelines of the APEC forum to discuss bilateral and global issues, including areas of potential cooperation and differences in counternarcotics, high-level military communication, risks of advanced AI systems, regional and global challenges, support for Ukraine against Russian aggression, human rights concerns, trade practices, and climate action (see AiR No. 47, November/2023, 3).

However, the meeting also proved that ongoing issues such as heightened Chinese military activity around Taiwan and in the South China as well as China's support for Russia's defense industry remain points of contention. [Reuters] [SCMP]

This was manifest in Dong's address at the Shangri-La forum two days after the meeting with Austin in which he reiterated accusation against Washington of exacerbating tensions through its support for Taiwan and the Philippines. He criticized Manila for provoking conflicts, emboldened by external powers. Highlighted China's restraint, Dong at the same tome warned of its limits. Dong also reaffirmed China's claim to Taiwan, condemning US support for Taiwan's independence. He stressed that China remains open to military exchanges with the US but called for efforts from both sides to reduce tensions and avoid conflicts. [The State Council, PRC] [AP News]

US to enforce visa restrictions on Hong Kong and Chinese officials

(jm) The US will impose visa restrictions on Chinese and Hong Kong officials involved in the recent conviction of 14 pro-democracy activists and politicians under Hong Kong's National Security Law (see article in this edition). The law, imposed by Beijing in 2020, is widely seen by ciritics as effectively ending the civil liberties that Hong Kong had enjoyed under the 'one nation, two systems' framework.

On May 31, the US Department of State criticized the convictions, stating that the activists were "jailed simply for peacefully participating in political activities," and urged Chinese and Hong Kong authorities to release the detained and to stop using the National Security Law to suppress peaceful dissent, calling for a restoration of the openness that was vital to Hong Kong's competitiveness and vitality. [US Department of State] [Firstpost]

Chinese national arrested in US for global cybercrime

(jm) On May 29, the US Department of Justice announced that a coordinated international law enforcement operation has dismantled the "911 S5" botnet, which facilitated cybercrimes such as fraud, child exploitation, harassment, bomb threats, and export violations. Yunhe Wang, a 35-year-old China national and St. Kitts and Nevis citizen-by-investment, was arrested on May 24 for allegedly operating the "911 S5" botnet, which involved infected IP addresses in over 190 countries over an eight-year period beginning in 2014. The network generated millions of dollars by providing cybercriminals with access to these compromised systems for a fee.

Wang allegedly earned USD 99 million through the botnet operation, using the money to purchase luxury cars and real estate in multiple countries, including the U.S., St. Kitts and Nevis, China, Singapore, Thailand, and the UAE. The malware was spread through VPN programs such as MaskVPN and DewVPN, and pay-per-install services that bundled malware with other software files, including pirated software.

In coordination with law enforcement agencies in Singapore, Thailand, and Germany, the US Department of Justice seized assets valued at approximately USD 30 million and identified additional forfeitable property of similar value.

Wang faces multiple charges, including conspiracy to commit computer fraud and money laundering, with a maximum potential sentence of 65 years in prison. The US Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) has also issued financial sanctions against Wang and his associates. [US Department of the Treasury] [Office of Public Affairs, US Department of Justice] [Aljazeera]

Philippine president hits against China on South China Sea at Shangri-La Dialogue defense summit

(jm) On May 31, Philippine President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. addressed the Shangri-La Dialogue defense summit in Singapore, focusing on South China Sea tensions. Marcos condemned the illegal, coercive, and aggressive actions occurring in the South China Sea,

specifically pointing to the recent surge of Chinese coast guard ships in the disputed waters.

Marcos highlighted the increased frequency and tension of encounters between Philippine and Chinese forces, with China employing "grey-zone" tactics such as water cannons and ramming to disrupt Philippine missions. He warned that the death of a Filipino due to Chinese actions would be considered near an act of war. [Republic of the Philippines]

The ongoing territorial dispute between China and the Philippines has seen aggressive clashes, with Beijing defending its actions as sovereignty protection and accusing the Philippines of provocations. The US, bound by a defense treaty with the Philippines, has reiterated its commitment to defend its allies and has engaged in military cooperation with the Philippines and Japan.

On the same day, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and China's Defense Minister Dong Jun met, emphasizing the importance of freedom of navigation and expressing concerns over rising tensions due to US military presence in the region. Both nations indicated a desire to keep communication lines open, with efforts to resume direct military dialogue.

The Philippines, enhancing its military capabilities and seeking US military aid, remains at the center of the intensifying power struggle between Washington and Beijing in Asia, with President Marcos calling for responsible management of US-China rivalry to ensure regional stability. [Reuters] [BBC]

China deploys J-20 stealth fighters near India’s border

(jm) Satellite imagery from May 27 reveals China's deployment of J-20 stealth fighter jets near India's border in Sikkim. The images, analyzed by All Source Analysis, show six J-20s and a KJ-500 Airborne Early Warning and Control Aircraft at Shigatse, Tibet, one of the world's highest airports. This deployment positions the advanced fighters just under 150 kilometers from the Indian boundary.

The Indian Air Force (IAF) is aware of this deployment but has refrained from commenting publicly. The J-20 is China's most advanced operational fighter, and its presence in Tibet marks a significant strategic shift as these jets are usually based in eastern China.

In response, India counters with its fleet of 36 Rafale fighters, including a squadron of 16 stationed at Hasimara in West Bengal, less than 290 kilometers from Shigatse. Currently, eight Rafales are engaged in advanced air combat exercises with the US Air Force in Alaska.

This deployment is the largest of the J-20s captured by commercial satellites. The J-20, introduced in 2017 and known as the Mighty Dragon, features advanced sensors and air-to-air missiles like the PL-15, adept at hitting targets up to 300 kilometers away.

According to Sim Tack, a global analyst at US-based geopolitical intelligence firm Stratfor, China's military buildup in Tibet, including new air bases and upgraded infrastructure, has intensified over the past five years. Besides the J-20s, China has also temporarily deployed H-6 nuclear-capable bombers in the region. In response, India has fortified its airbases and deployed the Russian-built S-400 long-range surface-to-air missile system, capable of tracking stealth aircraft, to deter Chinese operations along the Line of Actual Control (LAC). [The Economic Times]

China and Japan agree to resume ruling party talks after six-year break

(rl) On May 29, China and Japan agreed to resume regular talks between their ruling parties for the first time in six years, according to Japanese coalition government officials. [NHK World Japan]

Toshimitsu Motegi, secretary-general of Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), confirmed the agreement with Liu Jianchao, head of the Communist Party's foreign affairs department, during Liu's visit to Tokyo. The specifics of the talks are yet to be finalized, but this marks the first such engagement since 2018.

Liu, expected to become China's next foreign minister, also met with Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa. Kishida expressed a desire to build stable and constructive ties with China. [Reuters]

The renewed dialogue comes amid strained relations over maritime activities and Bejing’s bans of seafood imports in the wake of the release of treated water from Japan's Fukushima nuclear plant. It follows a recent meeting between Chinese Premier Li Qiang, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, and South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol, where they discussed

reviving trade and security dialogues (see AiR No. 22, May/2024, 4). [The Diplomat]

China to reinstate tariffs on 134 Taiwan imports

(rl) China announced it will reimpose tariffs on 134 items imported from Taiwan starting June 15, citing Taiwan's failure to reciprocate trade concessions. This move affects items including base oils used in manufacturing lubricants, chemical products, lithium-ion batteries, racing bikes, television cameras, certain woven fabrics and various machine tools.

The Cross-Strait Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA), signed in 2010, aimed to enhance trade between China and Taiwan. [WTO] However, China's Ministry of Finance stated that Taiwan's unilateral restrictions on mainland products violated the agreement.

Taiwan's presidential office condemned the move as "classic Chinese economic coercion," stressing that it undermines cross-Strait relations. Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council urged China to resolve differences through dialogue without political prerequisites.

The tariff suspension follows China's earlier decision in December to end tariff cuts on 12 chemical products from Taiwan (see AiR No. 52, December/2023, 4), seen as interference in Taiwan's January presidential elections, which Beijing-despised Lai Ching-te of the Democratic Progessive Party won.

China claims Taiwan as its own territory and has increased economic, political, and military pressure on the island. Taiwan's government rejects Beijing's sovereignty claims, maintaining that it operates as a separate, democratic state. [Reuters] [South China Morning Post]

China accuses British secret service to recruit Chinese government employees for espionage

(ms/rl) China has accused the British Secret Intelligence Service (MI6) of recruiting a married couple, both employed by the Chinese government, to spy for the UK. The alleged spies, identified by their surnames Wang and Zhou, were reportedly cultivated by MI6

while Wang was studying in the UK under a Sino-British exchange program in 2015.

The Ministry of State Security released a statement detailing the alleged espionage activities, claiming that Wang was initially hesitant but eventually agreed to work for MI6 after being promised higher monetary rewards and security guarantees. His wife, Zhou, was also recruited to spy for China, with promises of double the money. The statement claimed that Wang and Zhou had "core confidential roles" in an unnamed state agency and were tasked with collecting important information related to the Chinese government.

The case is still under investigation, and it is unclear if the couple will be charged. The allegations come amid a backdrop of escalating tensions between China and the West, with both sides trading accusations of espionage. China has been increasingly vocal about its concerns over foreign espionage, and has made public declarations of dismantling foreign spying operations. The Ministry of State Security has also launched a social media campaign to raise awareness about the threat of foreign spies and to encourage citizens to report any suspicious activity. [BBC] [CNN] [Reuters]

China lifts beef import bans on five Australian facilities

(rl) China has lifted import bans on five major Australian beef processing facilities, the Australian government announced on May 30, improving relations between the two nations.

This change removes restrictions from eight abattoirs, though two remain banned. The bans, imposed between 2020 and 2022, coincided with restrictions on other Australian goods after Australia called for an independent investigation into COVID-19 origins.

Despite these bans, China remained Australia's second-largest beef market last year, importing 240,000 tons worth about USD 1.6 billion.

Since a change in Canberra’s government two years ago, Beijing has lifted most trade barriers on Australian products, though the ban on Australian lobster imports remains.

China cited labelling errors, contamination, and COVID-19 cases among workers as reasons for suspending the Australian beef processors. [Reuters]

China demands apology from Nepalese journalist

(jm) On May 29, China's ambassador to Nepal, Chen Song, demanded a public apology from Gajendra Budhathoki, editor of Taksar Magazine, over a social media post. The post in question, made on X on May 27, alleged that Nepal had taken a loan from China at a 5 percent interest rate, differing from the 2 percent stated in official documents. Ambassador Chen insisted that the claim was false and called for an apology, questioning the journalist's intentions and suggesting the post was an attempt to spread misinformation.

Budhathoki responded defiantly, asserting that he had evidence from the Nepalese government and accusing the ambassador of overstepping boundaries and threatening his security. This interaction has sparked criticism from journalists and diplomats in Nepal, who view the ambassador's actions as inappropriate.

With a post on X, former foreign secretary and ambassador Madhu Raman Acharya posted stating that it is unusual for a foreign diplomat to demand an apology from a local journalist, suggesting that the proper course of action would have been to refute the claim or request a government clarification. Ajaya Bhadra Khanal, former editor of The Himalayan Times, also posted on X and criticized Chen's approach, describing it as arrogant and overbearing.

This incident highlights tensions in China-Nepal relations and raises questions about the boundaries of diplomatic engagement and freedom of the press in Nepal. [The Indian Express]

Moldovan opposition leader advocates for stronger ties with Russia and China

(rl) Igor Dodon, leader of Moldova's largest opposition party, has called for improved relations with Russia and China, urging a unified opposition against pro-European President Maia Sandu in the upcoming October election. Sandu, who sees Russia as a major threat, has been pushing for Moldova to join the European Union. A referendum on EU membership will be held alongside the presidential election. [Euractiv]

Dodon, head of the leftist Socialist party and a former president, criticized Moldova's current pro-European stance, warning it could lead the country into conflict. He advocated for resuming dialogue with traditional

allies like Russia and China and opposed further military exercises with foreign partners.

Recent polls show Sandu leading with 30 percent support, compared to Dodon's 18 percent. The Socialists and Communists have criticized the EU membership referendum as a tactic to boost Sandu's re-election chances.

The pro-Moscow "Victory" bloc, led by fugitive magnate Ilan Shor, campaigns against EU membership but has not allied with the Socialists and Communists. Dodon called for a unified opposition candidate to challenge Sandu, suggesting former chief prosecutor Alexandru Stoianoglo, who was dismissed for alleged misconduct. [Reuters]

No proposal has been made towards Maldives for FTA, says India

(sg) India clarified on May 30 that it has not proposed a bilateral free trade agreement (FTA) to the Maldives but is open to considering such a pact if the island nation expresses interest. This statement from New Delhi came in response to recent indications from the Maldives suggesting India's initiation of efforts for an FTA. The Maldivian Minister for Economic Development and Trade, Mohamed Saeed, mentioned India's interest in an FTA during a press conference. [The Indian Express]

The relationship between India and the Maldives has faced strains since President Mohamed Muizzu, with pro-China leanings, assumed office, leading to demands for the withdrawal of Indian military personnel from the country. Despite these challenges, both countries share a significant bilateral relationship, particularly in areas of defense and security.

Pakistan violated Lahore Agreement with India in 1999, then-prime minister Nawaz Sharif says

(sg) Former Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif admitted on Tuesday that Pakistan had violated a 1999 agreement with India, signed by himself and former Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee in the context of nuclear tests conducted by both countries in a year earlier. [Firstpost] [WION]

The agreement, known as the Lahore Declaration, aimed at promoting peace and stability between the two countries but was breached when Pakistani forces infiltrated into the Kargil district in Indian-administered Kashmir. This incursion, which caught India off guard, was aimed at capturing strategic positions along the Line of Control (LoC) without provoking a full-scale war.

British delegation calls off New Delhi visit, putting India-UK free trade talks in limbo

(sg) A high-ranking British delegation's abrupt cancellation of its scheduled visit to New Delhi has thrown the ongoing negotiations for an India-UK free trade agreement (FTA) into disarray. The cancellation, which came just before the UK general elections, has left the discussions on critical issues such as work visas for Indians, duty relaxations, and imports of British-made electric vehicles hanging in the balance. [Firstpost]

The origins of the FTA can be traced back to May 2021 when then-British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi agreed to deepen trade cooperation, culminating in the "Enhanced Trade Partnership." Subsequently, negotiations for the FTA commenced in January 2022, with both sides aiming to address various trade barriers and enhance economic ties.

However, progress has been marred by challenges, with work visas for Indian professionals emerging as a major sticking point for the UK. Additionally, India's request for exemptions from the UK's proposed carbon tax has added complexity to the negotiations, reflecting divergent priorities and interests between the two nations.

Indian central bank transfers 100 tons of gold from UK to India in major portfolio management move

(sg) The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has moved over 100 tons of gold from the United Kingdom to its vaults in India, marking the first significant transfer of gold to local reserves in over two decades. This move is part of a portfolio management strategy by the RBI, with the possibility of adding a similar amount in the near future. [The Economic Times]

The transfer recalls a similar move in 1991, during a severe foreign crisis, when the Indian government pledged gold to raise funds. Since 2017, the RBI has been consistently buying gold, with a notable purchase of 200 tons from the International Monetary Fund in 2009. In fiscal 2024 alone, the RBI added 27.5 tons to its reserves.

As of March 2024, India's total gold reserves stand at 822.1 tons, with 413 tons still held in UK vaults and 411 tons in domestic vaults.

India, France begin negotiations for USD 600 million Rafale Marine jets deal

(wh) India and France were set to commence negotiations for a significant USD 600 million Rafale Marine jet deal, with talks scheduled to begin on May 30. The negotiations are being conducted between high-level representatives from France, including industry leaders like Thales and Dassault Aviation, and counterparts from the Indian Defence Ministry. The agreement, tailored for the Indian Navy, involves operating the aircraft from both INS Vikrant and INS Vikramaditya aircraft carriers. Both sides aim to finalize the agreement by the end of the financial year. [Marine Insight]

Thai fugitive Chaowalit Thongduang to be extradited from Indonesia

(jb) High-profile escapee Chaowalit Thongduang, also known as Sia Paeng, is set to be extradited from Indonesia to Thailand under tight security. The 37-year-old, who escaped from Maharaj Nakhon Si Thammarat Hospital during a dental visit in October 2023, was captured in Bali last week.

Police Chief Somchai Seutortrakul confirmed a special unit will receive Chaowalit at Nakhon Si Thammarat Airport. Following his arrival, Chaowalit will be transported to Mueang Police Station for interrogation and formal charges related to his escape.

Chaowalit had been serving a 20-year sentence for multiple crimes, including murder and firearms possession. After his escape, he used a fake Indonesian ID and engaged in drug dealing and assault. Authorities have planned robust security measures for his transfer, reflecting the high-profile nature of his case.

Once questioned, Chaowalit will be handed over to the Corrections Department for further detention. [Thaiger]

Indonesian defense minister discusses defense modernization with US counterpart

(jb) Indonesian Defense Minister and President-elect Prabowo Subianto met with US Defense Secretary Lloyd J Austin III in Singapore on June 1 to discuss the modernization of Indonesia's primary weaponry defense system. The meeting took place on the sidelines of the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue 2024.

Prabowo expressed gratitude for US support in upgrading the Indonesian Defense Forces (TNI) equipment. He emphasized the importance of bilateral cooperation in defense modernization to effectively handle emerging threats.

Both leaders explored ways to strengthen the long-term partnership between Indonesia and the United States, aiming to pursue common interests. Prabowo lauded the productive discussions and expressed hope for continued collaboration.

Brigadier General Edwin Adrian Sumantha highlighted Prabowo's participation in the Shangri-La Dialogue as a demonstration of Indonesia's commitment to global peace and stability. The annual forum gathers global leaders and experts to discuss strategic geopolitical, defense, and security issues. [Antara News]

President-elect Prabowo Subianto pledges to strengthen Indonesia's defense ties with Singapore

(jb) President-elect and Indonesian Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto has committed to enhancing defense cooperation with Singapore. Following the enactment of the Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA), Prabowo emphasized readiness for increased collaboration in areas such as joint training, maritime security, and educational exchanges.

Prabowo met with Singaporean Prime Minister Lawrence Wong on 1 June 2024, after attending the opening reception of the 21st IISS Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore. He expressed appreciation for Wong's warm welcome and underscored the Dialogue's

significance in promoting regional dialogue, addressing security challenges, and building trust among Asia-Pacific nations.

Additionally, Prabowo congratulated Wong on his appointment as Prime Minister and lauded the strong leadership and communication established between Singapore and Indonesia. He is scheduled to deliver a special address at the forum, focusing on international commitment to regional security stability.
[Tempo.co] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs Singapore] [Antara News]

Volodymyr Zelenskyy meets with Indonesia's president-elect Prabowo Subianto in Singapore

(jb) On the sidelines of the Shangri-La Dialogue, Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy met with Indonesia's President-elect Prabowo Subianto on 1 June 2024. Zelenskyy congratulated Prabowo on his March election victory and expressed hopes for Indonesia's support of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The leaders discussed the Ukrainian Peace Formula, initially presented by Zelenskyy during his online address at the G20 Summit in Indonesia in 2022. Zelenskyy expressed hope for Indonesia's participation in the Global Peace Summit at the highest level.

Additionally, they explored bilateral cooperation, with Zelenskyy emphasizing Ukraine's readiness to increase agricultural product exports to Indonesia despite Russia's disruptions in the Black Sea.

Zelenskyy highlighted Ukraine's interest in strengthening relations with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its aspiration to become a Sectoral Dialogue Partner of the association.
[President of Ukraine]

Indonesia reaffirms support for Palestine amid pressure to recognize Israel

(jb) Indonesia remains supportive of Palestine despite increasing pressure to normalize relations with Israel, Foreign Affairs Minister Retno Marsudi announced on June 3. Speaking at Gadjah Mada University, Marsudi emphasized Indonesia's commitment to Palestinian

statehood, condemning Israel's "strategic and systematic efforts" to undermine Palestine.

Indonesia, one of the earliest countries to recognize Palestinian statehood in 1988, rejects claims of initiating diplomatic ties with Tel Aviv. [Arab News]

Japan request China to lift ban on fishery products

(sh) On May 29, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida requested senior Chinese Communist Party official Liu Jianchao to lift China's ban on Japanese fishery products. Kishida met Liu, who leads the International Department of the party's Central Committee, at the Prime Minister's Office in Tokyo.

The ban on fishery products by China was imposed last year following the release of treated wastewater from the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant (see AiR No. 9, February/2024, 4). During the meeting, Kishida expressed Japan's desire to boost cooperation through discussions on shared issues, emphasizing the importance of their mutually beneficial strategic relationship. Liu, reportedly close to Chinese leader Xi Jinping and tipped to become China’s next foreign minister, showed willingness to enhance dialogue. Kishida highlighted the importance of such political interactions for advancing Sino-Japanese relations.

Liu also met with Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa. During their talks, both agreed to work towards reciprocal visits by their countries' top diplomats.

Later, Liu held discussions with ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) Secretary-General Toshimitsu Motegi and Natsuo Yamaguchi, leader of Komeito, the junior partner in the governing LDP/Komeito coalition. [Japan Times]

Japan and China agree to maintain dialogue amid rising tensions

(sh) On June 1, Defense Minister Minoru Kihara expressed Tokyo's "serious concern" about Beijing's increased military activity near Japan during talks with his Chinese counterpart Dong Jun. They agreed to maintain bilateral dialogue.

In their first meeting at the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, Kihara highlighted several security concerns, including territorial disputes in the East

China Sea and joint military activities by Beijing and Russia near Japan. He also voiced Japan's apprehension over rising tensions in the South China Sea and emphasized the need for peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, advocating for "frank discussions" between the two nations.

Dong emphasized the importance of concrete actions to foster a cooperative partnership and avoid viewing each other as threats. Both ministers agreed to continue using a bilateral defense hotline, launched in early 2023, to build mutual trust and prevent incidents at sea and in the air. [Kyodo News]

Japan forms nonpartisan group to handle Chinese UAV intruding

(sh) On May 28, Japanese lawmakers convened to form a nonpartisan group aimed at urging the government to establish an organization for investigating unidentified aerial phenomena (UAP), also known as UFOs. On May 27, the Chinese PLA Air Force's WL-10, an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) designed for high-altitude, long-endurance missions, was spotted above the East China Sea (see AiR No. 22, May/2024, 4)

The group will be led by Yasukazu Hamada, parliamentary affairs leader of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), with former Environment Minister Shinjiro Koizumi, also from the LDP, serving as secretary-general. A preparatory meeting was held in parliament, and the group's founding general meeting is scheduled for June 6. This initiative follows the U.S. government's creation of a specialized organization within the Defense Department to investigate UAP.

The Japanese group plans to push the government to gather and analyze UAP information and seek cooperation with Washington by forming a similar organization in Japan. [Japan Times]

Japan and South Korea agree to prevent radar lock-on incidents

(sh) On June 1, Japanese and South Korean defense ministers agreed to implement measures to prevent radar lock-on incidents.

A joint statement issued after their meeting in Singapore showed both ministers affirmed that the Japan Self-Defense Forces and the South Korean military would resume full-fledged high-level

exchanges. Their defense exchanges had nearly stopped due to the dispute over Tokyo's allegation that a South Korean destroyer locked its fire-control radar on a Japanese patrol plane in December 2018.

The latest statement avoided confirming whether the incident occurred. Japanese Defense Minister Minoru Kihara stated that they have not changed our position (on the radar issue), and gaps remain between the two sides. [Kyodo News]

U.S. Steel and Nippon Steel merger receives global approvals

(sh) On June 1, U.S. Steel Corp and Japan's Nippon Steel received all regulatory approvals outside the United States for their proposed USD 14.9 billion merger, the companies announced. Nippon Steel secured the deal to buy U.S. Steel last December, outbidding rivals like Cleveland-Cliffs, ArcelorMittal, and Nucor.

The merger now awaits approval in the U.S., where it faces regulatory scrutiny and political opposition, including from US President Joe Biden, who prefers U.S. Steel to remain domestically owned. The United Steelworkers union also opposes the deal, fearing job losses.

Nippon pledged to honor all existing agreements with the union and to move its U.S. headquarters to Pittsburgh. The companies reiterated their expectation to complete the deal in the second half of this year. [Reuters]

Japan and Russia agree on fishing quotas after two-year break

(sh) On June 3, Japan's Fisheries Agency announced an agreement with Russia on Japanese fishing quotas for salmon and trout in Russia's 200-nautical-mile zone for this year, marking the first such deal in two years. Bilateral fishing negotiations, typically annual, were halted in 2022 and 2023 due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The agency stated that both nations agreed on a total catch quota of 125 tons, fishery cooperation fees of 25 million yen to be paid by Japan, and a fishing period from early June to July 31. These terms mirror the 2021 agreement. Fishing activities will be conducted by a single vessel as part of Japan's test operations. [Nippon]

Japan urges Israel to stop war in Gaza

(sh) On May 30, Japan urged Israel to stop its offensive in Gaza in invitations to the August 6 peace ceremony commemorating the atomic bombing.

The invitations to Israeli President Isaac Herzog and the Israeli ambassador to Japan called for an immediate cease-fire in the Palestinian conflict, which has faced growing international opposition. The letters expressed regret over the loss of lives and daily disruptions. Japan's letters encouraged Israel to seek peace and abolish nuclear weapons.[Kyodo News]

In an earlier move on May 27, Japan's Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa had urged Israel to follow the International Court of Justice's order to stop military operations in Rafah, southern Gaza Strip. Kamikawa expressed her concerns to Israeli Foreign Minister Israel Katz during a phone call.

Despite the ICJ's directive to halt military actions and keep the Rafah crossing open for humanitarian aid, Israel continued its offensive (see AiR No. 22, May/2024, 4).

Japan and EU agree to deepen hydrogen cooperation

(sh) On Jun 3, Japan and the European Union agreed to strengthen cooperation to expand hydrogen use, a promising next-generation energy source. In a joint statement following a meeting in Tokyo, Japanese industry minister Ken Saito and EU Commissioner for Energy Kadri Simson announced plans to standardize infrastructure and lead discussions on international rules.

Both sides will promote policy coordination and establish a working group to discuss details. They will also consider support measures for companies importing hydrogen.

On the sidelines of the meeting, Kawasaki Heavy Industries Ltd. and Daimler Truck Holding AG exchanged documents for cooperation, underscoring the commitment to advancing hydrogen technology. [Nippon]

Malaysia to support Laos industrial and commercial standards

(lvw) Malaysia has pledged to support Laos in enhancing its industrial and commercial standards to promote bilateral trade. During a meeting on May 28 in Vientiane, Malaysia's Deputy Minister of Investment, Trade, and Industry, Liew Chin Tong, and Malaysian Ambassador to Laos, Edi Irwan Mahmud, discussed the initiative with Lao Minister of Industry and Commerce, Malaythong Kommasith.

Malaysia will assist through the Standard and Industrial Research Institute of Malaysia (SIRIM Berhad) as part of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and bilateral cooperation. The plan includes capacity building for Lao technicians and officials, technical coordination, and creating a strategic cooperation plan, potentially formalized by a memorandum of understanding (MoU). [Laotian Times]

Bangladesh seeks Malaysia’s cooperation on stranded workers

(ba) Bangladesh's State Minister for Expatriates’ Welfare and Overseas Employment, Shofiqur Rahman Choudhury, has urged the Malaysian government to grant a one-time extension for nearly 17,000 stranded workers who missed the May 31 deadline to enter Malaysia. The minister noted that many of these workers have depleted their savings or gone into debt to pay agents for documentation.

According to Choudhury, a typhoon, limited flights, and poor management by agents prevented the workers from traveling to Malaysia on time. He mentioned that he is scheduled to meet the Malaysian High Commissioner to Bangladesh, Haznah Md Hashim, on June 5. Choudhury expressed hope that the Malaysian government would consider the workers' predicament, as their future employment in Kuala Lumpur is at stake. All the stranded workers possess approved calling visas from the Malaysian Immigration Department and valid cards from Bangladesh’s Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training, he added.

However, on March 8, Home Minister Datuk Seri Saifuddin Nasution Ismail stated that the ministry would not extend the May 31, 2024, deadline for hiring foreign workers through the Labour Recalibration Programme (RTK) 2.0, citing national security concerns. There were also reports of workers facing extra

charges for flights and high recruitment fees from agents.

In response, Choudhury announced that the ministry would appoint a six-person committee to investigate these issues. On May 30, a large number of foreign workers reportedly entered Malaysia through both terminals of Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA). Immigration director-general Datuk Ruslin Jusoh said this was due to employers rushing to meet the May 31 deadline for foreign workers. [The Malay Mail]

Maldives signed MoU with China's WeChat

(hgh) The Maldives has entered into a strategic partnership with WeChat, China's foremost social media platform, by signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). This collaboration is designed to enhance tourism by tapping into WeChat's vast user base, positioning the Maldives as a premier travel destination. [the edition]

India, Maldives review the community development projects

(hgh) The Maldives' Foreign Ministry and the Indian High Commission reviewed the progress of community development projects funded by Indian grants. India supports 65 projects in the Maldives valued at MVR 360 million, focusing on various sectors including health, education, and infrastructure development. This review highlighted the ongoing cooperation between the two countries in enhancing local communities' development and improving their quality of life.

These developments highlight the Maldives' strategic focus on economic growth, support for local industries, and active engagement in international forums to advocate for the needs of small island nations. The government's initiatives are aimed at fostering a resilient and prosperous future for the country.

Bill seeks to ban Israeli passport holders from entering Maldives

(lm/hgh) A bill to amend the Immigration Act has been submitted to the Maldivian Parliament, seeking to ban

individuals holding Israeli passports from entering the Maldives. [The Sun]

The bill aims to prompt decisive action from the Maldives against what it describes as Israel's genocidal acts on Palestinians. It references a resolution passed during the previous parliamentary assembly that called for the ban but noted that the government has yet to take action or specify when the ban might be enforced.

This legislative push follows protests across the Maldives advocating for the ban and instances where Israeli tourists were removed upon arrival. The ruling People's National Congress (PNC) holds a supermajority in the 20th parliamentary assembly with 75 out of 93 seats, while the MDP holds 12 seats, the lowest in its history.

The backdrop to this legislative action includes the recent conflict in Gaza, which escalated after an attack by Hamas on October 7, resulting in significant casualties on both sides, with over 1,170 Israelis and at least 35,903 Gazans, mostly women and children, reported dead.

This move has prompted a response from the Israeli government and issued an advisory for Israelis currently in the Maldives. The advisory aims to provide guidance and ensure the safety of Israeli citizens in the country. Specific details of the advisory, including the reasons for its issuance and the recommendations given to Israeli citizens, have not been disclosed. [Times of Israel]

Maldives President meets with British state minister

(hgh) Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu met with the Rt. Hon. Lord Richard Benyon, Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth and Department of Environment of the United Kingdom, during the fourth International Conference on Small Island Developing States (SIDS4) in Antigua and Barbuda. During their meeting, they discussed strengthening bilateral relations, particularly in areas such as environmental conservation and climate resilience. The discussions also focused on potential collaborations to support sustainable development initiatives in the Maldives. [The President's Office]

The Maldives is undertaking several key sustainable development projects, including the Greater Malé Waste to Energy Project to convert waste into energy, the Ras Malé Eco-City Project to provide sustainable

urban housing, and initiatives to transition 33% of its energy to renewable sources by 2028. Additionally, the Maldives Resilient Reef Ecosystem and Economy for the Future (RREEF) project focuses on coral reef conservation, while the Asian Development Bank supports efforts to enhance public sector efficiency and environmental sustainability.

Mongolia, Belarus sign cooperation agreements

(dql) Mongolia and Belarus have signed on June 3 the Agreement on Friendly Relations and Cooperation between Mongolia and Belarus, the Cooperation Roadmap between Mongolia and Belarus for 2024-2026, as well as ten other cooperation documents that seek to further expand bilateral ties in multiple areas, including agriculture, environmental protection, education, science and tourism.

The documents were signed during President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko's visit to Mongolia from June 1-4 at the invitation of his Mongolian counterpart Khurelsukh Ukhnaa. [Montsame]

Mongolia, Hungary sign Memorandum of Cooperation to enhance parliamentary relations

(fg) On 29 May, Enkhbat Damdin, Secretary General of the State Grand Khural (Parliament) of Mongolia, and György Such, Secretary General of the Office of the National Assembly of Hungary, signed a Memorandum of Cooperation in Budapest.

The memorandum provides for co-operation between the parliaments in various areas, including increasing transparency and accountability in parliament, examining the structure and function of standing committees and comparing the legal framework for parliamentary work.

In March, the Chairman of the Great Khural Zandanshatar Gombojav visited Hungary. At the meeting with the Hungarian László Kövér parliamentary speaker, the formalization of a memorandum between the two parliaments was discussed (see AiR No. 11, March/2024, 2).

Both sides praised the signing as the beginning of closer cooperation between the offices and

parliamentary friendship groups of the two countries, with the aim of strengthening interparliamentary relations. [Montsame]

Russia to build low-power nuclear plant in Myanmar

(jb) Russia has approved a draft agreement to construct a low-power nuclear power plant (NPP) in Myanmar, marking a significant step in energy cooperation between the two nations. The project, proposed by Rosatom and coordinated with Russia's Foreign Ministry and other federal bodies, aims to build an Atomnoi Stantsii Maloi Moshnosti (ASMM) with a capacity of at least 110 MWe using Russian pressurized water reactors.

Negotiations for the agreement will involve Rosatom and the Russian Foreign Ministry, with the final agreement expected to undergo minor adjustments. The partnership will encompass engineering research, environmental assessments, design, construction, equipment supply, fuel management, and training, adhering to Russian regulations.

This initiative follows a 2023 Memorandum of Understanding between Rosatom and Myanmar's Ministry of Science & Technology, focusing on nuclear infrastructure development per International Atomic Energy Agency guidelines. The collaboration aims to bolster Myanmar's energy sector while leveraging Rosatom's expertise. [Nuclear Engineering International]

Czech university launches Myanmar Studies Center to enhance research and education

(jb) The Department of Asian Studies at Palacký University has inaugurated the Myanmar Studies Center (MSC), aiming to bolster interdisciplinary research and education on Myanmar. Supported by the European Union's Horizon Europe program, the MSC will provide public lectures and academic courses focusing on Myanmar's cultural heritage, social development, and political environment.

Kristina Kironská, MSC Director, emphasized the Center's commitment to filling the professional attention gap regarding Myanmar in Central Europe. Activities will include addressing human rights in Asia

and Indo-Pacific politics, featuring contributions from Myanmar students through the Erasmus+ programme.

In June, the MSC will host a summer school for PhD and advanced master's students on geostrategic dynamics in Southeast Asia, followed by an international conference themed "Myanmar's International Role: More Than a Buffer State." Palacky University Olomouc]

Illegal entry arrests surge in Thailand as Myanmar's youth flee conscription

(jw) Since February, Thai authorities have arrested 918 Myanmar nationals for illegal entry along the Thai-Myanmar border. More than half cited avoiding conscription as their reason for fleeing.

In February, the announcement of the junta's decision to enforce conscription — making all men aged 18-35 and women aged 18-27 eligible for military duty — prompted a mass exodus from the country.

Kanchanaburi and Mae Sot were the most frequented entry points, followed by Prachuap Khiri Khan and Ranong. At least 300 men and 160 women are currently detained. [The Irrawaddy]

Nepal begins export of 400 megawatts electricity to India on daily basis

(ps) The Nepal Electricity Authority (NEA) has begun exporting approximately 400 megawatts of electricity to India daily. This increase in electricity production is attributed to the monsoon season and higher temperatures, leading to more snowmelt in the Himalayas. The NEA aims to export 1,000 to 1,200 megawatts of surplus electricity to the competitive market this year. Additionally, the NEA has allowed the export of 656 megawatts from 15 hydropower plants, while during the winter season, Nepal imported electricity worth USD 93.83 million to meet demand. [My Republica]

Nepalese cross-party leaders visit Colombia to study transitional justice process

(lm) A team of cross-party Nepali leaders, along with a member of the National Human Rights Commission, is visiting Colombia to observe its transitional justice process. They aim to study the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (SJP), a mechanism established under Colombia's 2016 peace agreement with the FARC guerrilla group. [The Kathmandu Post]

The visit comes as Nepal struggles with its own transitional justice process, which has been stalled since July 2022. The Nepali team will focus on how the Colombian SJP implements reduced sentencing for perpetrators who cooperate by revealing the truth. This principle is also considered for Nepal's transitional justice framework, though political parties remain divided on its implementation.

The Nepali delegation hopes to learn from Colombia's experience to improve their own transitional justice mechanisms, which are currently non-functional due to legislative deadlock. The trip follows a similar visit last year, emphasizing the influence of the Colombian model on Nepal's peace process efforts.

North Korea launches balloons carrying trash into South Korea

(rl) From May 28 to June 2, according to the South Korean military, North Korea released around 1,000 balloons filled with trash and manure into South Korea.

Emergency alerts were issued in 20 counties or cities in Gyeonggi Province and five in Gangwon Province, advising citizens to avoid outdoor activities and report suspicious objects to authorities. The balloons have reached areas including Seoul and the provinces of Chungcheong, Gyeongsang, and Jeolla.

South Korea condemned the act as "irrational" and "low-class," and warned of strong countermeasures if the campaign continued. The North's decision to halt the balloon launches came after claiming to have scattered "15 tons of wastepaper."

In a response statement, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's sister Kim Yo Jong implied that the citizens of North Korea carried out the balloon launches, while stating that this move follows Pyongyang's threat to retaliate against anti-regime leafleting by sending "mounds of filth" over the border. [Euronews]

The South Korean military condemned the launches as a violation of international law and a threat to public

safety, urging North Korea to cease these actions immediately.

The situation is being closely monitored in cooperation with the U.N. Command. The tension highlights ongoing propaganda battles between the two Koreas, with past incidents escalating into armed conflict. [NK News] [CNA]

North Korea warns of “disaster” over U.S. spy plane activity

(rl) On May 31, North Korea issued a warning of an "unpredictable disaster" following a U.S. reconnaissance aircraft's recent flight over South Korea, accusing Washington of reckless military maneuvers.

The U.S. Air Force's RC-135U Combat Sent aircraft conducted air surveillance near the Korean Peninsula on May 28, taking off from Kadena Air Base in Okinawa, according to flight trackers. North Korea's state-run Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) claimed the aircraft performed close surveillance near its southern border.

"The U.S. has been conducting almost continuous monitoring and reconnaissance activities against us," KCNA stated in a commentary. It also condemned a planned joint military exercise between South Korea and the U.S. scheduled for August, calling it an "extremely provocative and reckless" war drill. "The latest development shows it is inevitable for us to strengthen our self-defense measures to target and counter the U.S. and its allies to protect our sovereign rights and security," KCNA added. [KCNA Watch]

This incident follows North Korea's launch of hundreds of balloons carrying trash and manure into South Korea earlier this week, as well as a failed attempt to launch a spy satellite on May 27. [NK News] [NK News]

North Korea's Foreign Ministry emphasized that these actions are a response to perceived threats and provocations from the U.S. and South Korea. [Yonhap News]

North Korea engages in GPS jamming against South Korea for three consecutive days

(rl) North Korea continued its GPS jamming attacks for a third consecutive day on May 31, targeting waters near South Korea's northwestern border islands, according to the South Korean military.

The jamming signals were directed towards islands near the Northern Limit Line in the Yellow Sea, a de facto maritime boundary. Despite the jamming, military operations remained unaffected, a South Korean military official stated. However, previous attempts caused navigation issues for fishing boats and passenger ships. [The Korea Times]

North Korean leader oversees rocket launcher drill targeting South Korea

(rl) On May 31, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un supervised an artillery drill with 600 mm super-large multiple rocket launchers, state media reported. This follows South Korea's detection of around ten short-range ballistic missiles fired by the North into the East Sea on May 30.

The Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) stated that Kim ordered the "power demonstration firing" in response to South Korea's military activities, which Pyongyang sees as provocations. [KCNA Watch]

South Korea's military confirmed the North's missiles launched from Pyongyang's Sunan area flew about 350 kilometers before landing in the East Sea.

North Korea claims these rocket launchers can carry tactical nuclear warheads. Kim emphasized the need for North Korea's nuclear forces to be ready for immediate action. State media photos showed 18 transporter erector launchers (TELs) lined up for the drill. [Newsweek]

North Korean emergency disaster official travels to Russia for security exhibition

(rl) On May 30, Nam Chol-gwang, North Korea's top official for emergency disaster management, departed for Russia to attend the General Security 2024 exhibition in Moscow. This visit marks the latest in a string of recent visits as part of increasing collaboration between the two nations. [KCNA Watch]

The Russian embassy in North Korea announced via Telegram that Nam plans to meet with Russia's Minister of Civil Defense and Disaster Relief, Aleksandr

Kurenkov. The delegation is also expected to inspect an exhibition showcasing weapons from Western countries captured during Russia's conflict in Ukraine.

North Korea and Russia have been strengthening their military ties, following a summit between North Korean leader Kim Jong-un and Russian President Vladimir Putin in September in Russia's Far East. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China] [Yonhap News]

Pakistan, Sri Lanka to boost cooperation in tourism sector

(ss) Pakistan and Sri Lanka plan to increase their bilateral cooperation in the tourism sector, particularly in religious tourism. The governor of Pakistan's Punjab province, Sardar Saleem Haider Khan, made this statement while speaking with a Sri Lankan delegation led by Religious and Cultural Affairs Minister Vidura Wickramanayaka in Lahore. [Radio Pakistan]

Pakistan, South Korea pledge to enhance economic cooperation

(ss) Pakistan and Korea have pledged to enhance economic cooperation and address mutual concerns for the benefit of both nations. This commitment was made during a meeting between Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb, the Korean Ambassador, and representatives of Korean companies operating in Pakistan, held in Islamabad. [Radio Pakistan]

Pakistani businessmen, Omani consul general discuss diversifying exports, enhancing bilateral trade

(lm) Oman's Consul General Sami Abdullah Salim Al Khanjari met with Pakistani businessmen at the Karachi Chamber of Commerce and Industry (KCCI) to discuss diversifying exports from Pakistan to Oman and increasing bilateral trade. [Arab News]

Khanjari highlighted Oman's long-standing import of Pakistani rice since 1982 and expressed a desire to import more Pakistani products, including other agricultural items, sugar, textiles, and towels. He encouraged Karachi's business community to explore exporting products like onions, lentils, mangoes, and

potatoes to Oman and to address any trade barriers for smoother transactions.

The KCCI noted Omani officials' interest in regular visits to Pakistan to identify export opportunities. KCCI President Iftikhar Ahmed Sheikh pointed out that Pakistan's exports to Oman amounted to USD 166 million in the first nine months of the current financial year, compared to USD 193 million the previous year. He emphasized the need to enhance trade volume, reduce barriers, diversify products, and promote SME collaboration for better economic integration.

Sheikh also suggested that Pakistan could benefit from importing LNG and petroleum products from Oman at discounted rates or through deferred payments, which could help address Pakistan's energy challenges and support economic growth.

Four Pakistanis killed by Iranian border guards in remote southwestern region

(ss) Iranian border guards opened fire on a vehicle carrying a group of Pakistanis near the border village of Mashkel in Baluchistan province, killing four and wounding two others, according to Pakistani officials. The incident occurred on May 29, but the reason for the gunfire remains unclear. [Dawn] [Daily Times] [Associated Press]

The region is known for frequent arrests of smugglers and insurgents by security forces on both sides. In January, tensions spiked after Iran claimed to have struck a "militant hideout" in Panjgur, Baluchistan, pressuring Islamabad to recall its ambassador from Tehran. Within 48 hours of the Iranian airstrikes, Pakistani forces targeted terrorist hideouts in Saravan, Sistan-Baluchestan province. However, both nations agreed to return their ambassadors to their posts shortly after, following active diplomatic efforts.

Pakistan, Tajikistan discuss strategies to enhance bilateral trade and investment

(ss) Pakistan and Tajikistan have explored ways to enhance bilateral trade and investment during discussions in Dushanbe. The meeting involved Pakistan's Minister for Privatization, Abdul Aleem Khan, and Tajikistan’s Transport Minister, Azim Ibrahim, along with Minister for Economic Development and Trade, Zavqizoda Zavqi Amin.

Khan agreed to initiate a pilot project at the ports of Gwadar and Karachi to boost organic exports. He also confirmed full cooperation in establishing at least one direct flight per week from Tajikistan to Pakistan and agreed on constructing high-quality and spacious highways between the two countries. [RADIO PAKISTAN]

Pakistan, European shipping firm expected to sign USD 2 billion investment agreement by October

(ss) Pakistan is expected to sign a $2 billion investment deal with a European shipping firm by October this year, according to Maritime Affairs Minister Qaiser Ahmed Sheikh. The announcement follows a visit by Maersk CEO Keith Svendsen, who met with Pakistani officials to explore opportunities in the country's maritime sector. The unnamed European company will invest in logistics and infrastructure at the Karachi Port Trust (KPT) and plans to establish a shipbreaking project to dismantle 750 ships, as well as train local youth. [Arab News]

In recent discussions, Danish shipping giant Maersk expressed interest in investing in a terminal, port, and allied infrastructure in Pakistan, including deep-sea areas suitable for large ships. Maersk, which holds around 20 percent of Pakistan's containerized import-export market, operates extensive logistics and warehouse facilities across the country. In January, Maersk announced new smart logistics and warehouse facilities in China, Norway, and Pakistan, including a flagship logistics hub in Port Qasim, Karachi.

Additionally, Pakistan has signed an agreement with Abu Dhabi Ports Group, which is investing about USD 395 million to develop a container and cargo terminal under a government-to-government agreement between the United Arab Emirates and Pakistan.

Filipino troops allegedly point guns at Chinese coastguard during confrontation

(ms) On May 19, Chinese coastguard vessels seized supplies intended for Filipino troops stationed on a grounded warship at Second Thomas Shoal, a disputed reef in the Spratly Islands, leading to an incident during which Filipino troops allegedly pointed guns on the Chinese Coast Guard ship.

The incident occurred when Chinese coastguard boats approached the Philippine-occupied reef, where the country's military personnel were stationed on the Sierra Madre warship. The Chinese vessels demanded that the Filipino troops hand over the supplies.

According to China's state media reported the personnel on the Sierra Madre warship pointed guns at Chinese coastguard vessels during the confrontation. However, the Philippine military denied these allegations, claiming that its personnel had acted with "professionalism, restraint, and discipline" and were only prepared to defend themselves in case of an attack.

The incident further entrenched the two countries, with the Philippines accusing China of "aggressive and unprovoked interference" in its humanitarian and resupply missions to the South China Sea.

The Philippines has summoned China's ambassador to Manila to express its protest over the seizure of supplies. [Channel News Asia] [Nikkei Asia] [South China Morning Post]

Filipinos are still able to fish unhindered in the West Philippine Sea despite China's fishing restriction, Philippine's Fishing Authority says

(tl) The Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) reported that Filipinos continue to fish unhampered in the West Philippine Sea (WPS) despite China's unilateral fishing ban (see AiR No. 22, May/2024, 4). BFAR stated that the agency has not received any reports of Filipino fishers being blocked by Chinese vessels in the WPS. The country's position on the matter remains clear, as it does not recognize the ban due to the lack of legal basis.

Nazario assured Filipino fishers of a whole-of-government approach in case Chinese forces make good on its warning on the detention of "trespassers" starting June 15. The Bureau reassured Filipino fishers of the government's full support and continuous programs to bolster their livelihood over the WPS, including increased government presence, provision of fuel and food, and the launch of BFAR's Livelihood Activities to Enhance Fisheries Yields and Economic Gains from the West Philippine Sea (LAYAG-WPS). [Philippine News Agency] [Philippine Canadian Inquirer]

Ukraine President Zelenskyy meets with Philippine President Marcos in Manila for the first time

(tl) Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. met with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in Manila on June 3. Zelenskyy's visit to Manila followed his appearance at a defense forum in Singapore where he accused Russia and China of undermining his upcoming peace summit.

Marcos and Zelenskyy discussed common issues between their countries. Zelenskyy criticized China for its economic support to Moscow despite claiming neutrality in the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Marcos also highlighted China's actions in the South China Sea. The Philippines has supported a UN resolution condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Zelenskyy added the similarities between Ukraine's struggles with Russia and the challenges fac ed by Manila in the South China Sea. He emphasized the need for unity and warned that a Ukrainian victory would send a signal to other nations. [Rappler 1] [CNA]

Philippines will also participate in the high-level Ukraine peace summit in Switzerland on June 15 and 16, despite Russia's objections. Zelenskiy also expressed gratitude to Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr for Manila's participation in a peace summit, highlighting the Philippines' clear stance on Russia's territorial occupation and its continued support. Zelenskyy visited the Philippines as only the third Asian country he has visited since the war in Ukraine began. The summit aims to address issues such as nuclear security and war prisoners. [Reuters] [AP News] [Rappler 2]

French Navy destroyer visits Manila to deepen the security ties between two nations

(tl) Captain Gwenegan Le Bourhis, commander of the French Navy's Bretagne visited Manila for a port call and discussed plans for a joint exercise with the Philippine Navy.

According to the French Embassy in Manila, the talk includes strengthening strategic exchanges, the legislative framework for defense cooperation, military involvement in the naval, aviation, and land sectors,

and the defense and armaments industry were the main topics of discussion.

France is looking to strengthen defense ties with the Philippines through potential agreements. The joint exercise would be on a smaller scale compared to previous drills involving French frigates in the Balikatan exercises. The Philippines and France held their fourth Joint Defense Cooperation Committee in Paris last month, focusing on strategic affairs, military cooperation, logistics, and defense industry. French Ambassador to the Philippines Marie Fontanel said the port call was an offshoot of the agreement between the Philippines and France in December to boost bilateral defense cooperation.[Inquirer.net] [Rappler]

Philippine President Marcos Jr. and Lithuania Prime Minister Ingrida Šimonyte push to preserve the international rule-based system

(tl) President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. and Lithuanian Prime Minister Ingrida Šimonyte have agreed to uphold international rules-based order in the pursuit of peace and security. The leaders held a bilateral meeting on the sidelines of this years Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore

Marcos emphasized the importance of a rules-based international order, especially amid the challenges faced by both nations with their neighbors. The Philippines and China are at odds over the South China Sea, while Lithuania is the same with Russia.

Marcos emphasized the need to promote peace and national interest, not work for Beijing, Washington, or Moscow. He noted that some countries have made alliances to provide a stronger voice in support of law and sovereignty. In response, Šimonyte fully supported Marcos' statement, stating that small states matter and international law matter as a safety network for small states. [The Manila Times] [Philippine News Agency]

Warmer diplomatic ties between Philippines and Singapore under President Marcos leadership, Singapore statesman says

(tl) Singapore President Tharman Shanmugaratnam expects "warmer" diplomatic relations between Singapore and the Philippines under President

Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr.'s administration. He emphasized the strengthened economic relationship between the two countries, including efforts to attract investors in various sectors. Shanmugaratnam expressed his intention to visit the Philippines this year and agreed to explore new partnerships to adapt to the changing world. Marcos stressed the importance of maintaining a vibrant relationship between the two countries and noted significant exchanges between the Philippines and Singapore, particularly on people-to-people matters.

Marcos recognized Singapore as one of the top sources of foreign direct investments (FDI) in the Philippines, and noted the potential in the two countries' tourism industries. Singapore's new Prime Minister Lawrence Wong also acknowledged the positive momentum in the relationship between the two countries, with many projects taking place and over 200,000 Filipinos working and staying in Singapore. Wong made a commitment to protect and ensure the health and well-being of Filipino workers, recognizing their contributions to the Singapore economy. [GMA Network] [Philippine News Agency]

Philippine condems North Korea’s missile-powered satellite lunch, saying destabilizing the Korea Peninsula

(tl) The Philippines has condemned North Korea's launch of a ballistic missile-powered satellite, claiming it exacerbated tensions in the Korean Peninsula. The country's Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) criticized the launch, stating it undermined economic progress, peace, and stability. The Philippines has called for the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) to comply with international obligations and commit to peaceful dialogue. DFA states that the country has consistently supported the call for a complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization of the DPRK. The rocket that was launching the satellite on Monday burst during flight, resulting in a disastrous launch. Attempting to launch a second military reconnaissance satellite into orbit was North Korea's goal. [Philippine News Agency][Inquirer.net]

Singapore, Vietnam prime ministers holds talks

(lb) Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh congratulated Lawrence Wong on his appointment as

the fourth Prime Minister of Singapore during phone talks on May 29. The leaders expressed satisfaction with the robust economic cooperation between their nations, highlighted by the Vietnam-Singapore Industrial Parks (VSIP). They discussed elevating their green-digital economic partnership, established in February 2023, and emphasized the importance of their strategic partnership within ASEAN. Both prime ministers agreed to bolster ties in various sectors, including defense, finance, and education. Wong pledged to support increased Singaporean investment in Vietnam, particularly in high-tech and sustainable industries. Chinh invited Wong to visit Vietnam, which Wong accepted. [SGGP]

Singapore, Ukraine ink air agreement during President Zelensky's visit

(sm) During Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's visit to Singapore, he met with Singaporean President Tharman Shanmugaratnam, Prime Minister Lawrence Wong, and investors. The visit, coinciding with Zelensky's attendance at the Shangri-La Dialogue, included discussions on strengthening bilateral ties and cooperation. A significant outcome of the visit was the signing of an air services agreement between Singapore and Ukraine, facilitating unlimited frequencies of passenger and cargo services between the two countries. The agreement aims to enhance air connectivity and foster economic, cultural, and people-to-people ties. Additionally, Zelensky met with Singaporean investors, expressing gratitude for their continued presence in Ukraine and highlighting opportunities for trade cooperation, particularly in technology and innovation. He also invited Singaporean investors to participate in a conference on the Ukrainian economy later in June. [The Straits Times]

South Korea suspends intern-Korean military pact

(ac/rl) On June 4, South Korea fully suspended the 2018 Inter-Korean Military Agreement, following North Korea's sending around 1000 ballons of trash towards South Korea (see article in this edition), a move reflection further deteriorating inter-Korea relations.

The suspension comes after President Yoon Suk Yeol approved a related proposal of the National Security Office on June 3.

Signed on September 19, 2018, the agreement aimed at defusing tension and avoiding war. It was implemented after a meeting between South Korea's then-president Moon Jae-in and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. The 2018 pact had established land and maritime buffer zones and no-fly zones near the border to prevent accidental clashes.

The agreement's suspension allows the military to conduct exercises along the inter-Korean Military Demarcation Line, that previously have been limited by the agreement. [Channel News Asia] [The Korea Herald]

South Korea downgrades North Korea division

(ac) South Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has downgraded the rank of the lead nuclear envoy and reorganized its headquarters for denuclearization talks.

The Korean Peninsula Peace and Negotiation Headquarters will be part of the Foreign Affairs Strategy and Information Headquarters.

The reasons for the move were not disclosed, but analysts suggest that the reorganization is indicating a change of attitude to denuclearization talks and inter-Korean relations. [Trimfeed]

South Korea gathers more evidence on North Korea-Russia arms transfer

(ac) On June 1, South Korea defense minister Shin Won-sik announced that South Korea has gathered evidence on the North Korea-Russia weapon transfer and condemned North Korea for escalating tensions on the Korean Peninsula. Shin also called for China to take an active role to mitigate on denuclearization.

Although Shin acknowledged that North Korea's conventional military capability is an imminent risk, Shin reassured that South Korea adheres and trusts the global nonproliferation treaty (NPT) and that the South Korea-U.S. alliance is needed to counter North Korea's nuclear threats.

North Korea denied all claims of weapon transfer to Russia. [Reuters]

South Korean defense minister meets with new chief of the U.S Indo-Pacific Command

(ac) On May 30, Defense Minister Sin Won-sik met with Adm. Samuel Paparo, the new chief of the U.S. Indo Pacific Command in Seoul to discuss the South Korean-U.S. alliance and the ongoing nuclear missile threats from North Korea.

Both sides shared opinions and condemned North Korea's missile launches, agreeing the importance on cooperation to tackle Pyongyang's threats.

Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul met Paparo in a separate meeting to discuss bilateral cooperation for peace and security in the Indo-Pacific region. They also discussed and shared their insights on North Korea's missile launches and its recent balloon action (see article in this edition). [Yonhap News]

South Korea and UAE sign joint statement to strengthen cooperation and investment

(ac) On May 28-29, President Yoon Suk Yeol and President of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan issued a joint statement aimed at strengthening cooperation, trade, cyber security and nuclear energy.

President Yoon and President Sheikh Mohamed held a summit in Seoul and signed Memorandums of Understandings (MoUs) and the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), with Sheikh Mohamed emphasizing the relationship between South Korea and UAE and expressing his desire to strengthen the bilateral relations.

The agreements secure cooperation in economy and investment, clean energy and peaceful nuclear energy and defense. The summit also reinforced mutual interests in infrastructure, space, water technology, cultures, development and partnerships in Africa, Climate Change.

Moreover, UAE shared security concerns on nuclear missiles in the Korean Peninsula and emphasized the importance of denuclearizing through peaceful dialogue while urging North Korea to oblige to the Non-Proliferation Treaty. [ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs] [The Korea Times]

South Korea and Sierra-Leone sign trade investment

(ac) On May 31, South Korea Trade Minister Cho In-kyo signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in Seoul with his Sierra Leone counterpart Ibrahim Alpha Sesay to strengthen trade investment.

South Korea agreed to cooperate in education, public health and food security. President Yoon Suk Yeol and Sierra Leone President Julius Maada Bio discussed cooperations on global security as both countries have been elected to be non-permanent members of the U.N Security Council for 2024-2025.

Sierra Leone is among the 48 African nations to attend the South Korea-Africa Summit this week (see article in this edition). [Yonhap News1] [Yonhap News2]

South Korea and Vietnam agree to strengthen bilateral cooperations

(ac) On May 31, Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul and Vietnamese Foreign Minister Bui Thanh Son met in Seoul to discuss bilateral cooperation on different sectors including tourism, security and defense technology, trade and investment.

During the meetings, South Korea and Vietnam agreed to raise bilateral trade USD 100 billion by 2025 and to strengthen cooperations and mutual interests in trade, investment, security, defense, and technology.

The meeting is part of an agreement reached between the two countries' leaders during South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol's state visit to Vietnam in June 2023. In December 2022, the two countries upgraded their relations to a "comprehensive strategic partnership". [The Korea Times] [VOV World]

South Korea and ASEAN agree to strength clean energy and digital transition

(ac) On May 28, South Korea's Trade Minister Cheong In-Kyo met ASEAN Secretary-General Kao Kim Hourn in Seoul to discuss cooperation in trade, supply chains and clean energy development.

During the talks, Cheong underscored role of the Southeast Asian bloc as South Korea's No. 2 trade partner and as significant partner in investment projects. He acknowledged increased dynamics in bilateral cooperation against the backdrop of South Korea's Indo-Pacific strategy and the the Korea-ASEAN Solidarity Initiative of the South Korean government which calls for enhancing strategic communication and cooperation for regional peace with ASEAN.

Both expressed hope for further discussion of various measures to expand economic cooperation during the upcoming ASEAN summit in Laos scheduled for October. [Yonhap News]

South Korea provides humanitarian aid to Brazil in response to flood

(ac) South Korea will provide USD 300,000 in humanitarian aid to assist Brazil in coping with the fallout of recent floods in the affected areas, following a decision of the foreign ministry on May 29. [ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs]

Sri Lanka, Canada forge partnership for sustainable development

(hgh) In a diplomatic engagement, Sri Lankan Foreign Secretary Aruni Wijewardane met with Christopher MacLennan, the Canadian Deputy Minister for International Development, to discuss a bold new chapter in Sri Lanka-Canada relations. This high-level meeting, held at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Colombo, is set to pave the way for cooperation on international development projects. [Ada Derana]

Russia admits Sri Lankan combatants' part of war in Ukraine; Colombo takes action

(hgh/lm) In a recent high-level meeting held in Moscow on May 30, Russian authorities acknowledged to Sri Lankan officials that a group of Sri Lankan ex-servicemen, who had traveled to Russia, are presently serving in the Russian armed forces and are involved in combat operations in Ukraine. Sri Lanka had sought clarification on this issue and expressed interest in exploring measures to withdraw these individuals from active frontline duty. Additionally, Sri Lanka aimed to

obtain information regarding any casualties among its nationals and the potential repatriation of wounded individuals. [the morning]

Recent investigations revealed that many Sri Lankans, lured by the prospect of high earnings, ended up in perilous conditions on the frontlines without receiving the promised compensation or support. The Sri Lankan government has arrested several individuals involved in these trafficking operations and is actively working to repatriate those affected. The Defence Ministry and other government bodies are intensifying efforts to provide accurate information and prevent further exploitation.

In parallel, Sri Lanka is taking steps to prevent its citizens from being deceived into fighting for Russia in Ukraine. Measures include tightening controls to prevent illegal travel and organizing a delegation to bring back Sri Lankans already engaged in frontline combat. The Russian embassy in Sri Lanka has pledged cooperation, denying government involvement in recruitment offers. New regulations require men to obtain a "no-objection" document from the Sri Lankan defense ministry when applying for tourist visas to Russia. [The Straits Times]

In related updates, Sri Lanka has firmly denied recent media reports claiming that the country is involved in selling surplus ammunition to Ukraine via Poland. These reports suggested that intermediaries were being used to facilitate the transfer of surplus ammunition from Sri Lanka to Ukraine amidst the ongoing conflict. The Ministry has clarified that no such transactions are taking place and emphasized Sri Lanka's neutrality in the conflict. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lankan ambassador explores investment opportunities with Guinea-Bissau president

(hgh) Sri Lankan Ambassador to Kenya, Kananathan, met President Embaló of Guinea-Bissau during Chad's President's investiture ceremony. They discussed advancing private investments from Sri Lankan businessmen in Guinea-Bissau, aiming to bolster economic ties. Ambassador Kananathan emphasized Sri Lanka's commitment to Africa's economic growth through strategic partnerships. President Embaló welcomed the progress, pledging support for successful implementation. [Daily Mirror]

US delegation visits Taiwan

(dql) On May 29, Taiwanese President Lai Ching-te received a 16-member bipartisan U.S. Senate delegation, led by Tammy Duckworth, junior US senator from Illinois.

Lai welcomed the visit as a demonstration of the strong partnership between the US and Taiwan. Duckworth, for her part, reaffirmed the US responsibility to show up and support its friends, emphasizing that the US-Taiwan friendship is rooted in shared democratic and other values across many different aspects of society. [Taiwan Today]

US bill on military aid for Taiwan submitted

(dql) A bill was introduced by the US House Appropriations Committee which seeks to provide USD 500 million in foreign military financing for Taiwan aimed at boosting deterrence across the Taiwan Strait.

To this end, the Fiscal Year 2025 State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Bill also contains an offer to Taiwan of up to USD 2 billion in loans and loan guarantees. Furthermore, the bill seeks to provide USD 2.1 billion for U.S. national security interests in the Indo-Pacific, as well as funding the Countering PRC Influence Fund with USD 400 million. [Focus Taiwan]

New director appointed to lead U.S. representation in Taiwan

(fg) Raymond Greene will move to Taipei next summer to become the new director of the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT), serving as the highest representative of the United States. He will succeed Sandra Oudkirk, who has held the position since 2021. Previously, Greene was deputy chief of mission at the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo and also served as deputy director of the AIT from 2018 to 2021. The AIT functions as the principal U.S. representation in Taiwan. [Taiwan News]

Thai foreign minister plans visit to neighboring Cambodia for border and maritime negotiations

(lm) Thailand's Foreign Affairs Minister, Maris Sangiampongsa, is planning a visit to Cambodia to negotiate an overlapping claims area (OCA) in Koh Kood, a Thai island in the Gulf of Thailand near the country's eastern border with Cambodia. [Bangkok Post]

Maris also intends to address a long-standing dispute with Cambodia regarding the construction of a breakwater near the 73rd border demarcation post, adjacent to Thailand's Klong Yai border checkpoint. The Thai government views this structure as a potential encroachment on its territory, raising concerns over territorial integrity. Despite raising the issue with Cambodia three years ago, the breakwater remains intact.

Additionally, Maris clarified that the 2001 Thai-Cambodian memorandum of understanding (MoU) on joint development in the Gulf of Thailand, which has been questioned for its constitutional validity, is not a treaty and lacks obligatory clauses. He emphasized that no formal agreements have been made based on this MoU.

In April, Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP) deputy leader Paiboon Nititawan requested the Ombudsman to petition the Constitutional Court to determine whether the MoU violates the constitution, citing its lack of parliamentary approval before signing as a legal oversight. 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. [AiR No. 16, April/2024, 3]

Thai Navy expects delivery of first Chinese submarine in next three years

(lm) Thailand and China have finalized negotiations for the Royal Thai Navy's procurement of a Chinese-made S26T Yuan-class submarine. Admiral Adoong Pan-iam, Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Thai Navy (RTN), announced that the deal is now awaiting final cabinet approval. Once approved, the RTN will amend the deal with the Chinese manufacturer, expecting the submarine to be delivered in three years. [Thai PBS]

This submarine, equipped with advanced weaponry, will be the first of its kind in Southeast Asia, significantly enhancing the navy's capabilities. The

procurement process faced delays due to the RTN's initial insistence on German-made diesel engines, which Berlin refused to supply to China due to the EU's boycott. The RTN has since decided to use Chinese-made CHD620 diesel engines instead.

Admiral Adoong expressed confidence that the Thai public would be proud of the acquisition, and suggested that the navy might procure additional submarines in the future.

Chinese state-owned company wins contract for Thailand's Laem Chabang Port, but rival appeals bid result

(wt) A Chinese state-owned company, China Harbour Engineering Co Ltd (CHEC), was awarded the contract for the Phase 3 expansion of Laem Chabang Port in Thailand's Chonburi province, as announced by the Port Authority of Thailand (PAT) on May 29. However, the contract signing is currently on hold due to an appeal by a rival bidder. [The Nation]

The USD 3.08 billion Phase 3 expansion, a public-private partnership with 47 percent investment from PAT and 53 percent from the private sector, aims to increase Laem Chabang Port's capacity from 11 million TEU (Twenty-Foot Equivalent Units) to 18 million TEU per year, enhancing its role as a key logistics gateway in the Eastern Economic Corridor.

CHEC and Nawarat Patanakarn Plc (NWR) were the only two bidders to pass the screening out of four initial bidders. CHEC's bid was USD 4.32 million lower than the project estimate of USD 199.26 million, covering infrastructure, buildings, docks, roads, and other facilities.

PAT plans to conduct bidding for the remaining two Phase 3 projects, worth over USD 81 million, before the end of the year. One project, valued at USD 21.59 million, involves constructing a railway system, while the other, worth USD 60.75 million, covers the establishment of product transport and IT systems for the port.

Thai fugitive arrested in Indonesia

(bk) Thai authorities have successfully captured Chavalit Thongduang, a notorious Thai criminal who escaped from a hospital in Nakhon Si Thammarat, Thailand's southern province, last year, in Indonesia.

The Royal Thai Police, Justice Ministry, and Foreign Ministry were involved in coordinating with Indonesian authorities for his repatriation. General Niphat Thonglek, a prime ministerial advisor with close ties to Indonesian security agencies, reportedly played a key role in Chavalit's arrest. [The Nation]

Chavalit faked an illness to escape from custody in October 2023. At that time, he was serving a 20-year sentence for attempting to free a police-detained drug suspect. He was later sentenced to life imprisonment in absentia in December 2023 for attempting to murder a court official in 2019.

On June 4, Indonesian officials escorted Chavalit to Nakhon Si Thammarat Airport. A restricted area was established at the arrival terminal, allowing only police and related authorities. After passing through immigration, Chavalit was swiftly transported to Nakhon Si Thammarat City Police Station, about 20 kilometers away. Initially detained at the station, charges will be filed the next day at the Nakhon Si Thammarat Provincial Court, after which he will be transferred to Bangkok Remand Prison.

Thai Foreign Minister visits neighboring Laos for wide-ranging talks

(bk) Thailand's Foreign Minister Maris Sangiampongsa visited the neighboring the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR) on May 30, at the invitation of his counterpart Saleumxay Kommasith, to strengthen the Strategic Partnership for Growth and Sustainable Development between the two nations, with the anticipation of celebrating the 75th anniversary of the diplomatic relations next year. The ministers discussed the implementation progress following Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin's visit in October 2023 [see AiR No. 44, October/2023, 5], focusing on enhancing bilateral cooperation on logistical connectivity, tourism, air pollution, development efforts, and ASEAN. [Minister of Foreign Affairs]

Logistical connectivity

Ongoing connectivity projects have progressed well, especially the signing of a financial assistance agreement between Thailand's Neighbouring Countries Economic Development Cooperation Agency (NEDA) and the Ministry of Finance of the Lao PDR for improving National Road No. 12. This project aims to enhance transport connectivity between Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam. They also anticipated the launch of cross-border rail service from Nong Khai Province to

Vientiane, set to begin in June. Furthermore, discussions centered on the potential involvement of the private sector in developing transportation infrastructure, such as dry ports and distribution centers, to spur local economic growth in Laos.

Notably, Bangkok confirmed its interest in constructing a bridge connecting Thailand's Ubon Ratchathani province and Saravan province in southern Laos. This would be the sixth bridge linking the two countries across the Mekong River. The idea for another bridge was initially proposed during the Thai-Lao Joint Commission talks in November 2021. [Bangkok Post]

Tourism

Both parties expressed commitment to support for Visit Laos Year 2024 and Thailand's "Six Countries, One Destination" initiative, with the aim of propelling the region as a single tourism destination.

Air pollution

Bilateral collaboration to reduce transboundary haze pollution was emphasized. Thailand pledged to support Laos in enhancing its capacity for forest fire control and reducing agricultural burning.

Development efforts

Thailand committed to supporting the UNODC's Alternative Development (AD) project by constructing a learning and training center for coffee cultivation in Hua Phan Province, Laos. This initiative seeks to transition from opium to viable crops, generating employment and enhancing the well-being of local communities.

ASEAN

Thailand reiterated its support for Lao PDR's Chairmanship and its determination to work closely with Laos on regional and international matters, particularly addressing the situation in Myanmar.

Malaysia, Thailand to make progress on border demarcation

(lm) Progress is being made in the demarcation of the shared border between Thailand and Malaysia, as indicated by a senior Thai government official. These efforts are being pursued under the framework of the Anglo-Siamese Treaty of 1909. One of the key areas of contention is the boundary between the Malaysian

state of Kelantan and the Thai province of Narathiwat. Both countries have engaged in discussions and negotiations to resolve these disputes peacefully. However, reaching a mutually acceptable agreement has proven challenging due to various factors, including historical grievances, cultural ties, and domestic political considerations. [Bangkok Post]

The disputed areas not only hold strategic importance but also have implications for resource management, security, and the rights of local communities. As a result, Malaysia and Thailand continue to engage in diplomatic efforts to address the border demarcation issue, aiming to find a resolution that respects the interests and concerns of both nations.

Thai Foreign Minister meets with United States ambassador to Bangkok

(bk) On May 30, the United States ambassador to Thailand, Robert F Godec, paid a courtesy visit to Thailand's new Foreign Minister Maris Sangiampongsa. They discussed bilateral ties and cooperation at both bilateral and multilateral levels, pledging to strengthen their strategic partnership and deepen cooperation in trade, investment, and clean business practices. They also focused on economic cooperation under the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity and addressed international issues, including conflicts in Myanmar and the Gaza Strip. [The Nation]

Thailand's CIB helps United States freeze assets of cybercrime network

(msz) The Central Investigation Bureau (CIB) of Thailand has collaborated with the FBI, the principal federal law enforcement agency of the United States, to freeze a significant portion of assets, worth more than USD 27 million, belonging to the founder of a major cybercrime network. Wang YunHe, a Chinese national, and other co-conspirator had invested in properties and shares of several companies, the CIB said in a statement. The bureau, in cooperation with US authorities, said it has seized at least USD 2.4 million of assets such as cash, luxury watches, a car and land deeds of Wang from searches of four locations in Chon Buri province. [Bangkok Post]

Israel to take more Thai workers

(msz) According to Thai Labour Minister Phiphat Ratchakitprakarn, who led a delegation to Israel, the Israeli government has responded positively to three proposals of Bangkok - lifting the number of farm workers from 6,000 a year at present to 20,000; making Thais who have worked for at least five years and three months in Israel eligible to return to take up employment there; and increasing construction worker numbers via a government-to-government employment contract. Phiphat met with Israeli Interior Minister Moshe Arbel, Labour Minister Yoav Ben-Tzur and Agriculture and Rural Development Minister Avi Dichter. There were around 30,000 Thai citizens working in Israel, 95 percent of them in the agricultural sector, before the Oct 7 attacks by Hamas in 2023. [Bangkok Post]

In addition, the Thai delegation asked the Israeli Agriculture and Rural Development minister to provide safety for Thai workers and ensure employers assign workers to high-security areas and the Israeli labor minister to employ more Thai workers to fill job vacancies in the hospitality sector. Phiphat-led delegation also sought Israeli offer of internships to Thai students

China, Vietnam establish three new specific cargo transport routes to enhance trade

(wn) Three dedicated cargo transport routes between Vietnam and China have been inaugurated. These routes include a specialized freight transport route through the area of border markers No. 1088/2–1089, the Tân Thanh (Vietnam)-Puzhai (China) entrance at the 1090-1091 border marker area, and the Cốc Nam (Vietnam)-Nongyao (China) entrance at the 1104-1105 border marker area. [Asia News Network]

Laos, Vietnam enhance their collaboration in technology and innovation

(wn) On May 28, the first session of the Vietnam-Laos Committee for Cooperation in Technology and Innovation took place in Vientiane, Laos. Vietnamese Minister of Science and Technology Huỳnh Thành Đạt and Lao Minister of Technology and Communications Boviengkham Vongdara agreed to expand bilateral cooperation in technology and innovation. [Vietnam News]

For 2024-2026, the two countries plan to share experiences in state management and policy planning, support the development of institutional and legal frameworks for high technology, high-tech zones, technology services, innovation management, startups, and technology transfer. Regular visits and exchanges of working groups are planned to conduct mid-term assessments of high-level agreements and discuss future cooperation.

Collaboration will focus on research, development, application, and technology transfer in fields such as Industry 4.0 technologies (AI, IoT, big data, cloud computing), IT, startups, digital transformation, remote sensing technology, geology and minerals, agriculture and forestry, medicine, biotechnology, agricultural product preservation, clean energy, renewable energy, irrigation, water resources, and climate change.

Additionally, they agreed to organize one or two training courses on science, technology, and innovation management annually, and to encourage participation in activities and events promoting supply-demand connectivity, technology transfer, startups, and innovation organized by both countries each year.

South Korea pledges collaboration with Vietnam to fight IUU fishing

(lm) South Korea has pledged to support Vietnam in combating illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing activities, following the European Commission's recommendations. During an interview, Korean Minister of Oceans and Fisheries Kang Do-hyung emphasized Vietnam's significance as a seafood trading partner, noting that in 2023, Vietnam was the third-largest seafood exporter to South Korea, with exports valued at approximately USD 800 million. Additionally, Vietnam was the fifth-largest source of seafood imports to the RoK, valued at about USD 240 million. [Vietnam News]

To bolster this partnership, the South Korean government plans to collaborate with major Korean companies to launch trade promotion initiatives benefiting both Vietnamese seafood producers and Korean consumers. Kang highlighted ongoing technical cooperation projects aimed at enhancing aquaculture productivity in Vietnam. One such project involves South Korea’s National Institute of Fisheries Science and Vietnam's Research Institute for Aquaculture, focusing on improving aquaculture practices in Nam Dinh and Ninh Binh provinces. This project, running

from 2022 to 2026 and valued at USD 2.1 billion, aims to transfer advanced technology to Vietnam.

Vietnam overtakes Thailand in tech exports

(lm) Thailand's export sector, crucial for over half of its GDP in 2020, is threatened by emerging technologies and competition from Vietnam, which leads in high-tech product exports like electronics due to global demand. Thailand's focus on lower-value electronic products faces intense price and technological competition. Despite efforts to boost the high-tech sector through incentives and educational partnerships, inconsistent foreign direct investment (FDI) policies, higher labor costs, and declining manufacturing output hamper progress. Vietnam's consistent policies and anti-corruption measures attract more investors, impacting Thailand's competitiveness. [Bangkok Post]

Vietnam, Poland looking to enhance its diverse connections

(wn) On May 29, Vietnam's Minister of Foreign Affairs Bui Thanh Son met with Anna Krystyna Radwan-Röhrenschef, Undersecretary of State at the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The visit included a political consultation at the deputy ministerial level between the two countries' foreign ministries. [Vietnam Plus]

Minister Son emphasized Vietnam's desire to strengthen multifaceted cooperation with Poland. He suggested increasing mutual visits at all levels to build political trust and understanding, thereby supporting broader cooperation. Son also appreciated Poland's support for the Vietnamese community in Poland and urged continued favorable conditions for their integration and contribution to the local society and economy. Additionally, he encouraged Poland to ratify the EU-Vietnam Investment Protection Agreement (EVIPA) to enhance investment partnerships.

Announcements

Upcoming online events

5 June 2024 @ 9:00-10:00 a.m. (GMT-4), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, USA

Decoding the 2024 Indian General Elections

Join Milan Vaishnav, senior fellow and director of the Carnegie Endowment's South Asia program, for a conversation with Sunetra Choudhury, national political editor of the Hindustan Times, and Rahul Verma, a fellow at the Centre for Policy Research and visiting assistant professor at Ashoka University. Together, they will analyze the results of the election and its implications for India's future.

For more information, visit [Carnegie].

5 June 2024 @ 1:00.-3:15 p.m. (GMT+2), The Swedish Institute of International Affairs, Sweden

Baltic Sea region security and the transatlantic relationship in a critical year

The Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI) and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace will host a timely discussion about Baltic Sea region security and the transatlantic relationship in a critical year. Swedish Minister for Foreign Affairs Tobias Billström will provide remarks on Baltic Sea region security and the transatlantic relationship, followed by a fireside conversation with Dan Baer, Senior Vice President for policy research at the Carnegie Endowment in DC. Jakob Hallgren, Director of The Swedish Institute of International Affairs, will deliver introductory remarks.

For more information, visit [SIIA].

5 June 2024 @ 12:30-1:30 p.m. (GMT+10), Lowy Institute, Australia

Sydney launch of the 20th Lowy Institute Poll - Australian Attitudes to the World

As the United States confronts a critical choice between Joe Biden and Donald Trump, how do Australians view our security ally? Have Australian perceptions of China changed? What should the government do about climate change, and do Australians support renewable and nuclear energy? Now in its 20th edition, the Lowy Institute's flagship annual poll is the longest-running and broadest survey of Australian public opinion on the world. For two decades, it has revealed changing attitudes and played an influential role in the public debate on foreign policy. Join the event for this special launch of the 20th edition of the Lowy Institute Poll.

For more information, visit [Lowy].

5 June 2024 @ 12:30-2:00 p.m. (GMT-4), Center for American Progress, USA

The Forgotten War: Sudan in Crisis

Sudan is grappling with a complex war that has spiraled the country into the world's largest displacement crisis. A persistent lack of food, water, and other resources has pushed Africa's third-largest country to the brink of famine. Join the event for a discussion on what must be done to bring urgent humanitarian relief to Sudan and restore lasting peace.

For more information, visit [CAP].

5 June 2024 @ 12:00 p.m. (GMT+2), Pacific Council, USA

Understanding the Results of Mexico's 2024 Presidential Election

The election results are highly consequential for the United States due to the deep economic, political and social ties between the countries. With a U.S. Presidential election later this year, policy conversations around migration, illegal trafficking, and economic partnerships may shift significantly. Our distinguished speakers will discuss the results and implications of the election for both Mexico and the

United States. Guests will also have the opportunity to participate in a Q&A.

For more information, visit [Pacific Council].

5 June 2024 @ 10:00-11:45 a.m. (GMT-4), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, USA

Cross-Atlantic Currents: 2024 Elections and the Future of Transatlantic Security

What should European policymakers prioritize in the short term to ensure that the outcome of these elections does not undermine support for Ukraine? What can they do in the long term to adapt to structural trends in U.S. politics and put European security and defense on a stable footing? Sophia Besch, a fellow in Carnegie's Europe program, will moderate a discussion on these issues with Dan Baer, senior vice president for studies and director of the Europe program at the Carnegie Endowment; Ian Bond, deputy director at the Centre for European Reform; and Anna Wieslander, director for Northern Europe at the Atlantic Council.

For more information, visit [Carnegie].

5 June 2024 @ 12:00 p.m. (GMT-4), Atlantic Council, USA

What is to be done? The impact of war on Putin's Russia

What effect has the Kremlin's continued war on Ukraine and broader historical revisionism against the West had on Russian society? What future remains for Russians in Russia – with or without Putin? join the Atlantic Council's Eurasia Center for a conversation on these issues with distinguished Russians opposed to the policies of the Putin regime.

For more information, visit [Atlantic].

6 June 2024 @ 4:30-6:00 p.m. (GMT+2), German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Germany

South African Perspectives: The Domestic and International Implications of South Africa's 2024 Elections

South Africa is not only an important country that must be engaged with in general but also one of Germany's key partners on the African continent. The BRICS member is set to host the G20 in 2025 and has made headlines both for its move to sue Israel before the International Court of Justice and for its position towards Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. What are the implications of South Africa's election results for its domestic politics and foreign policy, as well as its relations with Europe and Germany? What prospects and challenges do the election results present for collaborative efforts between Europe and South Africa in addressing global challenges such as climate change, security, and human rights? These and other questions are at the core of this discussion.

For more information, visit [GIGA].

6 June 2024 @ 10:00- 11:15 a.m. (GMT-4), United States Institute of Peace, USA

The Day After Conflict: Women's Meaningful Participation in Post-War Ukraine

Join the event for a discussion with various experts on the role of women's civil society organizations and how women can meaningfully participate in planning for sustainable peace and furthering the Women, Peace, and Security agenda.

For more information, visit [USIP].

6 June 2024 @ 6:00-7:00 p.m. (GMT+10), Australian Institute of International Affairs, Australia

The War in Ukraine: where to from here?

Russia currently controls 18 percent of Ukraine's territory and appears to have the military initiative. Ukraine's victory, and maybe even survival, depends on Western support that appears susceptible to Russian propaganda. Russian victory may be equally difficult with few options acceptable to the Kremlin other than a long war with high human, social, and economic costs. So how might the war progress from here? Can either side see their way to victory? Can the war be contained? What might be the long-term impact on Russia? join Richard Iron for a further appraisal of the military strategies and the possible courses of the Ukraine conflict.

For more information, visit [AIIA].

6 June 2024 @ 5:00-6:00 p.m. (GMT+1), Chatham House, UK

Beyond the ballot: Implications of the 2024 European elections

This discussion unpacks the importance of this year's elections. Other debates over areas such as ambitious climate policies, migration and the contentious issue of EU enlargement adds further layers of complexity to the electoral discourse. The election has arrived at a time when broader questions are being asked of a European identity. How solid will the Union be after the elections in June?

For more information, visit [Chatham].

6 June 2024 @ 11:30 a.m. -12:30 p.m. (GMT-4), Wilson Center, USA

Mexico's Elections: Outcomes and Implications

Ahead of the June presidential elections in Mexico, the Wilson Center's Mexico Institute organized a series of webinars covering critical issues concerning the electoral process to develop policy recommendations on the major challenges the incoming administration will face. Following the elections on June 2nd, we will provide analysis from top experts from civil society, academia, and the press from both sides of the border on what the results mean for the future of democracy in the country, and what to expect once the new president takes office.

For more information, visit [Wilson].

6 June 2024 @ 5:00 - 5:45 p.m. (GMT-5), Chicago Council on Global Affairs, USA

Redefining US-China Engagement with Congressman Krishnamoorthi

How should the US approach competition with China in the next decade to ensure its own security and prosperity? What should Americans know about companies like Shein and Temu and their ties to potential human rights abuses? Can apps like TikTok

really be used for surveillance? Join Representative Krishnamoorthi, Chair of the Select Committee, for a discussion on these questions and more.

For more information, visit [Global Affairs].

7 June 2024 @ 1:30- 3:15 p.m. (GMT+2), Danish Institute for International Studies, Denmark

Nordic immigration policies in flux: Domino effects and shifting paradigms

This seminar explores the underlying drivers behind these policy changes, their impact, and interlinkages across Nordic countries and beyond. We ask leading Nordic scholars and legal experts: How have domestic interests and international trends impacted policy changes in each of the Nordic countries? When have Nordic immigration policies evolved co-extensively or out of sync, and how does this impact Nordic cooperation? To what extent have the 'New Nordic' immigration policies impacted similar reforms at European and international levels? What are the future outlooks for immigration policy and Nordic collaboration in light of the EU's new migration and asylum pact, current migration trends, and increasing labor shortages across Europe?

For more information, visit [DIIS].

7 June 2024 @ 11:00 a.m.- 12:00 p.m. (GMT-4), Center for Strategic & International Studies, USA

Centering Human Rights in Ukraine's Reconstruction

The CSIS Human Rights Initiative will be releasing a report in the coming weeks that aims to identify key gaps in these assessments and highlight issues that merit additional attention going forward. This event will begin with a brief overview of the report, followed by an expert panel discussion on the human rights issues that are at risk of being overlooked throughout Ukraine's reconstruction process and strategies for ensuring that those concerns are incorporated.

For more information, visit [CSIS].

7 June 2024 @ 2:00 -3:30 p.m. (GMT+2), South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA), South Africa

Making Sense of the Complex Security Situation in the DRC and the Great Lakes

Four years into a protracted war between the DRC and the Rwandan-supported M23 rebel group, the eastern DRC is flooded with national, regional, and international military actors. Aside from the Congolese army, there are Burundian troops, Ugandan troops fighting alongside the Congolese army against the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), French and Romanian mercenaries hired by the Congolese government, a coalition of Congolese armed groups opportunistically allied with Kinshasa against the M23, Rwandan Defense Forces (RDF) clandestinely supporting the M23 and UN peacekeepers deployed with the United Nations Stabilization Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO). This seminar explores the current situation in eastern DRC, the prospects for SAMIDRC, and the need for a long-term political solution.

For more information, visit [SAIIA].

10 June 2024 @ 10:30 a.m.-8:30 p.m. (GMT+2), Clingendael Institute, Netherlands

Ukraine Recovery Conference 2024 - Side Event

The 2024 Ukraine Recovery Conference in Berlin provides an opportunity to re-set the global policy framework around a concrete plan of action that links Ukraine's immediate economic needs in the war effort with its long-term re-development goals. Clingendael is co-hosting the side event 'Resilience, Reconstruction, Prosperity: Perspectives for Ukraine's Economy' before the Ukraine Recovery Conference 2024.

For more information, visit [Clingendael].

10 June 2024 @ 1:00-2:00 p.m. (GMT+2), German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Germany

Franco-German Observatory of the Indo-Pacific

The Franco-German Observatory invites key actors from the Indo-Pacific to present their vision of the region, how they conceive of it geo-strategically, and the place of China, the US, and Europe within this framework. Experts will be debating questions of economic interdependence and independence, trade and investment, and the expectations the countries of

the Indo-Pacific might have towards the “West” in general, and Europe, in particular.

For more information, visit [GIGA].

10 June 2024 @ 1:00-2:00 p.m. (GMT+2), German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Germany

How China's Presence in South Asia Shapes India's Indo-Pacific Policy

Dr. Smruti S Pattanaik is a Research Fellow at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analysis (MP-IDSA). She holds PhD in South Asian Studies from the School of International Studies, JNU and specializes on politics in South Asia and India’s policy towards its Neighbours and China in South Asia. Join this event to learn more about the topic from Dr. Pattanaik.

For more information, visit [GIGA].

10 June 2024 @ 9:30 - 11:00 a.m. (GMT+8), National University of Singapore, Singapore

The Politics of Pandemic Information and Health Emergency Decision-making: The Wuhan Outbreak

The focus of the seminar is on how epidemic information was processed or ignored, the cognitive framework that limited understanding of the virus’s contagiousness and affected the quality of decisions, as well as the lessons to be drawn and prospects for reforms and capacity enhancement. Dali L Yang the speaker of the event is the William Claude Reavis Professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Chicago. Professor Yang’s research is on the politics of China’s development, governance, and global impact.

For more information, visit [NUS].

10 June 2024 @ 10:00 - 11:00 a.m. (GMT-5), Chicago Council on Global Affairs, USA

Avoiding World War III: Managing Threats from Russia, China, and AI

What can the United States and its partners around the world do to address these threats and maintain the rules-based international order? Join the Council for a discussion of how geopolitical and technological forces are reshaping our world and how the US and its allies can navigate these challenges together.

For more information, visit [Global Affairs].

11 June 2024 @ 3:00-4:00 p.m. (GMT+2), Bruegel, Belgium

What can we learn from the 2023 banking turmoil?

In March 2023 several banks failed in quick succession, causing the most significant system-wide banking stress since the Great Financial Crisis. The bank failures triggered a lack of confidence in the banking system and reawakened debates on banking policy. At this event, experts look back at the root causes of the crisis and discuss what lessons can be drawn to mitigate risks in the future.

For more information, visit [Bruegel].

11 June 2024 @ 4:00- 5:00 p.m. (GMT-4), Center for Strategic & International Studies, USA

Book Event: 'Divided Isles: Solomon Islands and the China Switch' with Edward Cavanough

Join CSIS Senior Fellow Kathryn Paik for a discussion with Edward Cavanough on his book “Divided Isles: Solomon Islands and the China Switch”, which analyzes how and why the switch was made, and what the consequences may be for the Solomon Islands and the region.

For more information, visit [CSIS].

11 June 2024 @ 12:00- 2:00 p.m. (GMT-4), Center for Strategic & International Studies, USA

The Melting Point: A Book Talk with General Frank McKenzie

Join the conversation with General Kenneth F. "Frank" McKenzie, Jr., USMC (Ret.), former Commander of United States Central Command, on his book, The

Melting Point: High Command and War in the 21st Century. The discussion will be moderated by Emily Harding, Director of the Intelligence, National Security, and Technology Program, and Deputy Director of ISP, and will be followed by a book signing and reception.

For more information, visit [CSIS].

11 June 2024 @ 5:30-7:00 p.m. (GMT+10), Australian Institute of International Affairs, Australia

South Asia Seminar Series 2024: The Indian Election - Results and Consequences

This seminar will focus on the outcomes of the recent Indian election. Our speakers will discuss the impact and consequences of the election on the economy and Indian domestic and foreign policy. They will also consider the impact on India's relationships within the QUAD, the Indo-Pacific region, and the Ukrainian and Middle East conflicts.

For more information, visit [AIIA].

11 June 2024 @ 6:00-7:00 p.m. (GMT+10), Australian Institute of International Affairs, Australia

Ukraine, Gaza, and Genocide before the International Court of Justice

Join the conversation with Professor of International Law at the Australian National University, Donald Rothwell, who will speak on the complexities and developments of three active cases concerning genocide before the International Court of Justice.

For more information, visit [AIIA].

11 June 2024 @ 1:00 p.m. (GMT-4), Atlantic Council, USA

Integrating defense capabilities with allies

Join the event for a discussion surrounding the latest report titled “Friend-Sourcing Military Procurement: Technology Acquisition as Security Cooperation” by defense acquisition scholar Dr. James Hasik.

For more information, visit [Atlantic].

11 June 2024 @ 11:00 a.m.- 12:30 p.m. (GMT+2), Institute for Security Studies, South Africa

Can Tshisekedi's second term deliver inclusive growth for DRC?

This seminar will examine the DRC's development potential across eight key sectors and what inclusive growth and development could deliver for a country that will have a population of 164 million by 2043.

For more information, visit [ISS].

11 June 2024 @ 2:00-3:00 p.m. (GMT-4), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, USA

A Pivotal Year: Assessing the Russia-Ukraine War in 2024

Ukraine faces its most difficult moment on the battlefield since the early days of Russia's full-scale invasion. The country's electricity grid is under strain after months of targeted Russian missile attacks, and in May, Russia opened a new front near Kharkiv. U.S. aid is finally on its way after Congress's months long delay, but will it be enough to help Ukrainian forces stabilize their positions? Can Ukraine fix its manpower challenges and rebuild its force? What are Russia's vulnerabilities heading into 2025? How can Ukraine's allies in NATO use the upcoming seventy-fifth anniversary summit to signal to Moscow their enduring commitment to Ukraine's security? Join Dara Massicot, senior fellow in the Carnegie Endowment's Russia and Eurasia Program, for a conversation on these topics with Andriy Zagorodnyuk, Ukraine's former defense minister; Hanna Shelest, director of security programs at the Foreign Policy Council "Ukrainian Prism"; and Michael Kofman, senior fellow in Carnegie's Russia and Eurasia Program.

For more information, visit [Carnegie].

Recent Book Releases

Alexandre Lefebvre, ***Liberalism as a Way of Life***, Princeton University Press, 304 pages, published June 4, 2024. For a review, see [The Foreign Affairs Review of Books].

James Shapiro, ***The Playbook: A Story of Theater, Democracy, and the Making of a Culture War,*** Penguin Press, 384 pages, published May 28, 2024. For a review, see [The Guardian Review of Books].

Robert W. Cherny, ***San Francisco Reds: Communists in the Bay Area, 1919-1958,*** University of Illinois Press, 314 pages, published May 7, 2024. For a review, see [The Los Angeles Review of Books].

Steven Hahn, ***Illiberal America: A History,*** W. W. Norton & Company, 464 pages, published March 19, 2024. For a review, see [The Foreign Affairs Review of Books].

Alan Barenberg, ***The Gulag: A Very Short Introduction,*** Oxford University Press, 168 pages, published February 27, 2024. For a review, see [The Foreign Affairs Review of Books].

Patrick Joyce, ***Remembering Peasants: A Personal History of a Vanished World,*** Scribner, 400 pages, published February 20, 2024. For a review, see [The Foreign Affairs Review of Books].

Jacob Heilbrunn, ***America Last: The Right's Century-Long Romance with Foreign Dictators,*** Liveright, 264 pages, published February 20, 2024. For a review, see [The Los Angeles Review of Books].

Teresa Aranguren et al., ***Against Erasure: A Photographic Memory of Palestine Before the Nakba,*** Haymarket Books, 240 pages, published February 20, 2024. For a review, see [The Los Angeles Review of Books].

Tyler C. Kirk, ***After the Gulag: A History of Memory in Russia's Far North,*** Indiana University Press, 308 pages, published December 5, 2023. For a review, see [The Foreign Affairs Review of Books].

Sarah Engler, ***Centrist Anti-Establishment Parties and Their Struggle for Survival,*** OUP Oxford, 322 pages, published October 18, 2023. For a review, see [The Foreign Affairs Review of Books].

Daniel Deudney et al., ***Debating Worlds: Contested Narratives of Global Modernity and World Order,*** Oxford University Press, 312 pages, published March 28, 2023. For a review, see [The Foreign Affairs Review of Books].

Calls

The **The Luiss Centre for International and Strategic Studies (CISS)** invites paper proposals for ***its international conference "Distributive Justice in International Law,"*** to be held on October 3-4, 2024, in Rome. The deadline for abstract submission is June 30, 2024. For more information, see [Luiss].

Singapore Management University (SMU) invites paper proposals for its ***international workshop "Small States and Arctic Sustainability,"*** to be held on November 20, 2024, in Singapore. The deadline for abstract submission is July 15, 2024. For more information, see [SMU].

Jobs and Positions

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** is looking for a **Project Associate** to be based in Indonesia. Applications are accepted until June 23, 2024. More information is provided at [UNDP].

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** seeks a **Women Economic Empowerment Analyst** to be based in Beirut, Lebanon. Applications are accepted until June 18, 2024. More information is provided at [UNDP].

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** is looking for a **Project Analyst** to be based in Ha Noi, Viet Nam. Applications are accepted until June 15, 2024. More information is provided at [UNDP].

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** is looking for a **Research and Coordination Associate** to be based in Amman, Jordan. Applications are accepted until June 23, 2024. More information is provided at [UNDP].

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** is looking for a **Programme Analyst** to be based in Bruxelles, Belgium. Applications are accepted until June 13, 2024. More information is provided at [UNDP].

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** is looking for a **Legal Expert** to be based in Armenia. Applications are accepted until June 12, 2024. More information is provided at [UNDP].

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) s**eeks **a National Consultant For The Development Of Regulations For Citizen Economic EMPO**. Applications are accepted until June 14, 2024. More information is provided at [UNDP].

The **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** is looking for a **Programme Specialist** to be based in Uganda. Applications are accepted until June 14, 2024. More information is provided at [UNICEF].

The **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** is looking for a **Public Partnership Consultant** for Communication and Advocacy, Public Partnership Division to be based in Tokyo, Japan. Applications are accepted until June 23, 2024. More information is provided at [UNICEF].

The **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** is looking for a **Communications Officer** to be based in Belem, Brazil. Applications are accepted until June 17, 2024. More information is provided at [UNICEF].

The **United Nations Secretariat (UN)** is looking for an **Intern - Programme Management** to be based in New York, USA. Applications are accepted until July 6, 2024. More information is provided at [UN Secretariat].

The **United Nations Secretariat (UN)** is looking for a **UN Communications Intern** to be based in Beijing, China. Applications are accepted until June 14, 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 June 27, 2024. More information is provided at [UN Secretariat].

The **United Nations Secretariat (UN)** is looking for an **Associate Information Analyst, Political Affairs** to be based in Geneva, Switzerland. Applications are accepted until June 11, 2024. More information is provided at [UN Secretariat].

The **United Nations Secretariat (UN)** is looking for a **Senior Programme Officer** to be based in Amman, Jordan. Applications are accepted until June 26, 2024. More information is provided at [UN Secretariat].

The **United Nations Secretariat (UN)** is looking for a **Documents Management Assistant** to be based in Geneva, Switzerland. Applications are accepted until June 26, 2024. More information is provided at [UN Secretariat].

The **United Nations Secretariat (UN)** is looking for a **Legal Assistant** to be based in New York, USA. Applications are accepted until June 22, 2024. More information is provided at [UN Secretariat].

The **World Food Programme (WFP)** is looking for a **Legal Consultant**. This is a remote position.

Applications are accepted until June 16, 2024. More information is provided at [WFP].

The **World Food Programme (WFP)** is looking for a **Human Resources Associate** to be based in Bureau Pays Niamey. Applications are accepted until June 13, 2024. More information is provided at [WFP].

The **World Food Programme (WFP)** is looking for a **Programme Policy Officer** to be based in Bureau Pays Niamey. Applications are accepted until June 13, 2024. More information is provided at [WFP].

The **World Food Programme (WFP)** is looking for a **Programme Policy Officer** to be based in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Applications are accepted until June 12, 2024. More information is provided at [WFP].

The World Food Programme (WFP) **is looking for a** Human Resources Associate **to be based in Maputo, Mozambique. Applications are accepted until June 13, 2024. More information is provided at [**WFP**].**

The F**ood and Agriculture Organization (FAO)** is looking for a **Senior Programme Officer.** The primary location for the position is Rome, Italy. Applications are accepted until June 21, 2024. More information is provided at [FAO].

The **Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)** is looking for an **Expert in Financial Analysis**. This is a remote position. Applications are accepted until June 20, 2024. More information is provided at [FAO].

The **Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)** seeks a **Project Coordinator** to be based in Lao People's Democratic Republic-Vientiane. Applications are accepted until June 14, 2024. More information is provided at [FAO].

The **International Organization for Migration (IOM)** is looking for a **Programme Manager** to be based in Mogadishu, Somalia. Applications are accepted until June 13, 2024. More information is provided at [IOM].

The **International Rescue Committee (IRC)** is looking for candidates for the position of **Operations Manager.** Applications are accepted until July 30, 2024. More information is provided at [IRC].

The **International Rescue Committee (IRC)** is looking for a **Senior Employment Specialist.** Applications are accepted until July 29, 2024. More information is provided at [IRC].

The **International Rescue Committee (IRC)** is looking for a **Crisis Case Manager.** This is a remote position. Applications are accepted until July 24, 2024. More information is provided at [IRC].

The **International Rescue Committee (IRC)** is looking for **Referral Liaison, Virtual Reception & Placement,** for the East Region. This is a remote position. Applications are accepted until July 31, 2024. More information is provided at [IRC].

The **International Rescue Committee (IRC)** is looking for **Referral Liaison, Virtual Reception & Placement,** for the South Region. This is a remote position. Applications are accepted until July 31, 2024. More information is provided at [IRC].

The **International Rescue Committee (IRC)** is looking for **Referral Liaison, Virtual Reception & Placement,** for the West Region. This is a remote position. Applications are accepted until July 31, 2024. More information is provided at [IRC].

The **United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS)** is looking for a **Programme Management Intern** to be based in Bangkok, Thailand. Applications are accepted until June 28, 2024. More information is provided at [UNOPS].

The **International Labour Organization (ILO)** is looking for an **Office Support Assistant** to be based in Geneva, Switzerland. Applications are accepted until July 1, 2024. More information is provided at [ILO].

The **International Labour Organization (ILO)** is looking for a candidate for the role of **Senior Relations Specialist.** Applications are accepted until July 1, 2024. More information is provided at [ILO].

Worcester College at the University of Oxford is looking for a fixed-term Stipendiary **Lectureship in Law.** Applications are accepted until June 21, 2024. More information is provided at [Worcester].

The **Essex Pathways Department** at the **University of Essex** is looking for a **Lecturer in Law** to join their team. Applications are accepted until June 10, 2024. More information is provided at [Essex].

SOAS University of London is looking for a **Reader/Professor in Economics.** Applications are accepted until June 23, 2024. More information is provided at [SOAS].

The **Southampton Law School** at the **University of Southampton** is looking for **an Associate**

Professor/Professor in Law. Applications are accepted until June 26, 2024. More information is provided at [Southampton].

The **School of Histories, Languages, and Cultures** at the **University of Liverpool** wishes to appoint up to two **Lecturers in Politics/International Relations.** Applications are accepted until June 21, 2024. More information is provided at [Liverpool].

The **Department of Social Policy and Intervention** at the **University of Oxford** wishes to appoint a full-time **Departmental Lecturer in Comparative Social Policy**. Applications are accepted until June 24, 2024. More information is provided at [Oxford].

City University of London is looking for a **Lecturer in International Politics.** Applications are accepted until June 18, 2024. More information is provided at [City, London].

The **Department of Political Science** at **UCL** is looking for a **Research Fellow in Platform Governance.** Applications are accepted until June 23, 2024. More information is provided at [UCL].

The **Department of Politics, Philosophy, and Religion** at **Lancaster University** is looking for a **Lecturer in Religion and Politics in the Global South.** Applications are accepted until June 17, 2024. More information is provided at [Lancaster].

Team:

Anna Chong (ac), Aye Moe Pwint Phyu, Bintang Wicaksono Ajie (ba), Busawan Kachonnarongvanish (bk), Duc Quang Ly (dql), Fahima Mohseni, Florian Gareis (fg), Hamza Gharfane (hgh), Henning Glaser (hg), Jason Wang (jw), Jennifer Martinez (jm), Joseph Black (jb), Laurence Brenner (lb), Lottie van Wijck (lvw), Lucas Meier (lm), Morten Strantzen (ms), Myat Sandar Zaw (msz), Pakkanut Srinives (ps), Rhea Maggs (rm), Saw Eh Ta Mu (sm), Saw Khu Doh Soe (ss), Saw Lalbwel Htoo (sh), Shreya Goyal (sg), Thurein Lynn (tl), Tomwit Jarnson (tj), Venus Phuangkom, Wai Yan Phyo Naing (wn), Wannee Thiraputthisakul (wt), Wyne Ei Htwe (wh)

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