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Asia in Review

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Dear Readers,

The Asia in Review (AiR) team is pleased to present you this week´s AiR issue with the latest events, developments and trends in domestic politics, international relations and geopolitics in East Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia.

Wishing you an informative read, I extend special greetings to everyone who celebrates Brazil's, Eswatini's, North Macedonia's, and Vietnam's Independence Day, Andorra's Our Lady of Meritxell Day, and Malta's Victory 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: Former aerospace and defense conglomerate chairman investigated for corruption

(jf) Tan Ruisong, the former chairman of the Aviation Industry Corporation of China (AVIC), a state-owned aerospace and defense conglomerate, has come under investigation as part of Beijing's ongoing anti-corruption campaign targeting sectors vital to the country's military capabilities.

Tan, who led AVIC from 2018 to 2023, is suspected of committing "severe violations" of law and Communist Party discipline, according to an announcement on August 30 by the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) and the National Commission of Supervision. The specifics of these allegations, often a euphemism for corruption, have not been disclosed.

Tan was removed from his position at the state-owned AVIC in March 2023, ostensibly due to his age of 62, according to the party's personnel management authority. A native of Hunan province, Tan is a technocrat with a background in aviation engine design, manufacturing, and engineering. He spent over two decades with AVIC, a massive conglomerate comprising more than 100 subsidiaries and employing over 450,000 people globally – surpassing both America's Boeing and Europe's Airbus in size.

As of 2022, AVIC was the sixth-largest defense contractor in the world and the second-largest in China by annual revenue, following China North Industries Group, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. During his tenure, Tan aimed to elevate AVIC to the status of a world-class military equipment supplier, likening the company's ambitions to the excellence of China's national ping pong team during the China International Aviation & Aerospace Exhibition in Zhuhai.

AVIC plays a critical role in China's efforts to achieve greater technological self-reliance, producing both military and civil aviation products. The company is responsible for manufacturing some of China's top fighter aircraft, including the J-10, J-11, and J-20 models. Additionally, AVIC is a key supplier for the ARJ-21 regional jet and the C919 narrowbody medium-haul aircraft. Its export products include the MA60 series regional turboprop planes, Y12s, and the AC series helicopters. [South China Morning Post]

China: Chinese Communist Party introduces new regulations governing performance, loyalty, and faith

(jf) China's Communist Party has introduced new regulations designed to remove members who are deemed lacking in faith, loyalty, or performance, in a move to further tighten its control over the conduct of its nearly 100 million members. Announced by the party's general office on August 29, these rules dictate that underperforming members, even if their actions do not warrant a formal corruption investigation, can be disqualified from the party.

The 27-article regulation is described by China's state news agency Xinhua as "crucial for exercising full and rigorous" self-cleansing within the party. Unlike the disciplinary actions typically imposed for violations like corruption, these new rules specifically target members who "lack revolutionary spirit, fail to fulfill their party obligations, or no longer meet party

membership criteria," as explained by an official from the Central Organisation Department, the party's top personnel office. The goal is to establish a team of members with "stronger beliefs, better political reliability, superior qualities, stricter discipline, and more significant contributions," the official added. [South China Morning Post] [Xinhua Net]

The new regulations outline three specific organizational measures for dealing with members who underperform: rectification within a specified time frame, persuasion to voluntarily withdraw from the Party, or expulsion.

For members who fail to engage in regular Party activities, delay or neglect the payment of membership dues, or lose contact with their Party organization for a period ranging from six months to two years, their Party branch is mandated to address these issues by setting a deadline for the individuals to correct their behavior. Party members who threaten to leave the Party in pursuit of personal goals, but do not change their behavior despite receiving educational guidance, will be strongly encouraged to withdraw from the Party. Expulsion is reserved for cases involving a loss of ideals and beliefs, wavering political commitment, disloyalty, or failure to engage in Party organizational activities for six consecutive months without a valid reason, as well as neglecting the payment of Party dues or assigned work. [Xinhua Net]

Observers emphasized that while party membership is often seen as essential for political or social advancement, many members become complacent after joining. With the party's membership now exceeding 99.18 million, up by over 1.14 million from the previous year, there is a need to ensure that the quality of members keeps pace with its growing size.

Previously, the party largely relied on anti-corruption watchdogs to maintain internal discipline, but these measures primarily addressed serious offenses. The new rules empower the Central Organization Department, which is a human resource management department that controls staffing positions within the CCP, to address less severe but still problematic conduct, allowing them to expel members who fail to meet the party's standards.

Party branches are now required to closely monitor members' conduct, setting deadlines for those who fail to participate in regular activities or pay their membership fees on time. Members who fail to rectify their behavior, such as neglecting assigned work or failing to participate in organizational activities for six months without a valid reason, can be expelled or

persuaded to withdraw voluntarily. [South China Morning Post]

China: Alibaba ends three-year "rectification" period

(jf) On August 30, China's State Administration for Market Regulation announced that Alibaba Group has successfully completed a three-year "rectification" process following a substantial fine imposed in 2021 for monopolistic practices (see AiR No. 15, April/2021, 2). The fine, amounting to a record USD 75 billion, was levied against the e-commerce giant for abusing its market dominance by pressuring merchants to exclusively use its platforms, thereby preventing them from working with competing platforms.

In the statement, the regulator acknowledged the "good results" achieved through Alibaba's rectification efforts and emphasized that it would continue to "guide" the company to maintain regulatory compliance and enhance the quality of its operations. [State Administration for Market Regulation in Chinese]

This conclusion of the rectification period marks an important step for Alibaba, which had been under intense regulatory scrutiny, particularly during a period when the broader business empire founded by Jack Ma faced multiple challenges. Notably, a USD 37 billion IPO by Ant Group, Alibaba's financial affiliate, was abruptly halted following Ma's public criticism of China's regulatory framework in late 2020. [Reuters]

China: Low carbon policies to be continued

(jf) On August 29, China's energy regulator announced that the country will continue phasing out fossil fuels and reforming its electricity system, as outlined in a new white paper. While the document emphasized past achievements, it offered few new plans for China's ongoing energy transition. [National Energy Administration in Chinese]

Zhang Jianhua, head of the National Energy Administration, stated that China would persist in its efforts to reform the electricity system, expand the spot market, promote green electricity trading, and increasingly replace fossil fuels with renewable energy. He also emphasized the need for market-oriented reforms. Speaking at a State Council press conference,

Zhang cited BloombergNEF's estimate that China invested USD 76 billion in its energy transition last year, accounting for 38 percent of the global total.

China had aimed to install 1,200 gigawatts of wind and solar power by 2030, but exceeded that goal in July, six years ahead of schedule due to the rapid expansion of renewable energy installations. Despite these advancements, analysts note that China is falling behind on certain objectives, such as reducing carbon intensity—measured as CO2 emissions per unit of economic output – by 18 percent over the five years leading up to 2030. To achieve this, the country would need to cut absolute emissions by 2 percent annually in 2024 and 2025, according to a report by the non-profit Carbon Brief.

The white paper also addressed China's efforts to promote a "global community of shared future," highlighting green energy cooperation through its Belt and Road Initiative. Notably, it mentioned the Karot hydropower station in Pakistan, a key project under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which has recently faced threats from separatist militant attacks. [Reuters]

China: Free-trade zones to boosted to support businesses and reassure international investors

(jf) China has committed to enhancing the role of its free-trade zones and rolling out new pro-business measures aimed at facilitating smoother capital and data flows for foreign businesses. This initiative was highlighted on August 29 during a meeting of the Communist Party's reform task force, led by President Xi Jinping.

According to a statement from the state-run Xinhua Net following the meeting of the Central Commission for Comprehensively Deepening Reform, the Chinese government plans to promote investment liberalization and facilitation within these free-trade zones. The new policy framework will emphasize the importance of free and convenient trade, investment, capital flow, transportation, personnel exchanges, and the secure and orderly cross-border flow of data. [Xinhua Net]

In an effort to retain and attract foreign investment, Beijing is engaging in a series of key events. Notably, during a three-day investment summit organized by the Ministry of Commerce in Qingdao, Shandong province, multinationals from 37 countries signed 163

deals worth USD 53.3 billion. These initiatives are part of a broader strategy to counter Western economic and technological decoupling efforts and to stabilize China's trade and economic recovery.

The Chinese leadership has intensified efforts to create a more favorable environment for foreign businesses as the country seeks to achieve its ambitious economic growth target of "around 5 percent" for 2024. However, despite these efforts, direct foreign investment inflows have continued to decline, dropping by 29.1 percent year-on-year in the first half of the year. This decline is attributed to several factors, including geopolitical tensions, an uneven economic recovery in China, and a growing emphasis on national security. These challenges have compounded longstanding issues such as intellectual property concerns and limited market access, affecting a wide range of foreign companies.

Nevertheless, foreign investors may find renewed opportunities in China's 22 free-trade zones, which are strategically located in both coastal cities like Shanghai and Qingdao, as well as key inland regions. Beijing has tasked these zones with taking on more trial and exploration roles, potentially providing a more conducive environment for foreign businesses amid the current economic and geopolitical landscape. [South China Morning Post]

China: Chinese cooking oil scandal leads to new regulations for product transportation safety

(jf) In response to a recent scandal involving the transportation of cooking oil in unclean fuel tanks (see AiR No. 29, July/2024, 3), China is drafting new national standards to ensure the safe handling of such products. The scandal, which led to the arrest of two drivers and penalties for three companies, highlighted serious lapses in food safety practices. The investigation was prompted by reports from news outlets, and while regulators stated that no other similar issues were found, the incident has spurred a call for tighter regulations.

The National Food and Strategic Reserves Administration proposed new rules on August 27. These draft regulations specify that only designated containers should be used for transporting cooking oil, explicitly prohibiting the use of non-edible oil cans. The quality of these containers must adhere to China's food safety standards, and detailed records of transportation must be maintained. The draft also

mandates that containers be periodically cleaned with approved detergents and water to ensure hygiene.

China, as one of the world's largest consumers of vegetable oil, consumed 39 million tons in 2023 alone, underscoring the importance of robust transportation standards. The State Council, China's cabinet, has emphasized the need for timely industry regulations in the wake of the scandal. However, the draft regulations do not specify the consequences for failing to meet these new requirements. [South China Morning Post]

The investigation that led to these proposals was sparked by a report from *The Beijing News* in July, which revealed that it was an "open secret" in the transport industry that tanker trucks used for chemicals were also being used to transport cooking oil without proper cleaning. The report detailed instances where trucks were observed entering and leaving cooking oil factories, with one truck carrying 35.91 tons of oil, 11 tons of which were used to make animal feed, while the rest was sealed by regulators to prevent further use. Another truck carried 31.86 tons, of which 29.38 tons had already been packaged and sold, primarily to Ordos in Inner Mongolia. Authorities managed to recall and seal 7.78 tons that had been sold but not yet used.

While the investigation appears to be concluded, Xinhua Net commented on August 25 that the swift punishments reflect China's "zero-tolerance attitude to food safety issues" and its commitment to a "people-first stance."[Weibo in Chinese]

China: Food security task forces set up to investigate allegations of goji berry contamination

(jf) In response to a recent investigative report highlighting the misuse of illegal additives in goji berries, local governments in Golmud, Qinghai province, and Jingyuan county, Gansu province, have pledged to crack down on these practices. On September 1, authorities in both regions announced the formation of special task forces to investigate the situation and promised to publicly disclose the results of their investigations and the measures taken against those responsible.

The move follows a report by state broadcaster CCTV, which revealed that some dealers in these areas were using banned substances such as sodium metabisulfite and industrial sulfur to enhance the appearance and preservation of goji berries. These illegal practices

involve soaking the berries in sodium metabisulfite to make them look redder and brighter, allowing them to be sold at higher prices. The report also showed dealers smoking berries with industrial sulfur in sheds, where the fumes caused severe irritation to the reporter, highlighting the dangerous nature of the practice.

Goji berries, also known as wolfberries, are a small, bright red fruit grown primarily in northwestern China. They are widely used in food, beverages, and traditional medicine and are a significant export commodity, with nearly 12,000 tons exported from mainland China in 2023. The major destinations include Vietnam and Hong Kong.

China's food safety regulations strictly prohibit the use of sodium metabisulfite and industrial sulfur in food processing. Both substances pose serious health risks, with industrial sulfur linked to kidney and liver failure, as well as nerve damage. Despite these regulations, the CCTV report indicated that many processed goji berries from Golmud and Jingyuan were being sold to hotpot restaurants, traditional Chinese medicine clinics, and used in alcoholic drinks. Tests on goji berry samples from Jingyuan confirmed that the fruit was unsafe for consumption. [South China Morning Post]

China: Chinese information technology company workers arrested for giving railway data to foreigners

(jf) China’s top intelligence and anti-espionage agency, the Ministry of State Security (MSS), has announced that it has cracked a case involving a Chinese company that assisted an overseas client in collecting data about China's railway systems. This marks the first known instance since the enactment of China's Data Security Law in September 2021 where collected data has been identified as intelligence.

In a social media post on September 2, the MSS highlighted the importance of data security, urging Chinese companies and individuals to remain vigilant against foreign intelligence agencies attempting to steal critical data from China. The agency revealed that an unnamed Chinese information technology company received a commercial contract in late 2020 to gather electronic signal data along China’s extensive railway networks. The contract was awarded by a foreign company, which claimed to be conducting market research as it entered China’s railway market to provide technical support services. [WeChat in Chinese]

Due to Beijing's COVID-19 restrictions, the foreign company was unable to send its personnel to China and outsourced the data collection to Chinese vendors. However, the MSS discovered that the foreign company had ties to numerous clients, including foreign intelligence agencies, military units, and government departments. Despite suspecting that the foreign company might have ulterior motives, the Chinese company proceeded with the contract, enticed by the financial benefits. The company purchased and installed the necessary equipment as specified, collected data at fixed locations, and conducted mobile testing across multiple cities and high-speed rail lines. Within a month, the project had amassed 500 gigabytes of data, including signals from Internet of Things (IoT) transmissions, cellular and railway communications, and confidential networks. The MSS later classified this data as "intelligence information" because it was directly related to the safe operation of China's railways, making its collection explicitly prohibited under the Data Security Law.

The individuals involved were arrested on suspicion of espionage and illegally providing intelligence to foreign forces. They have been sentenced to several years in prison, though the MSS did not disclose further details about the case. [South China Morning Post]

China: Two Hong Kong journalists convicted in sedition case

(jf) On August 29, a Hong Kong court convicted Chung Pui-kuen, the former chief editor of Stand News, of conspiring to publish seditious content. Chung, 54, was found guilty alongside Patrick Lam, 36, another editor at the publication.

Chung and Lam both pleaded not guilty to charges of participating in a conspiracy to publish and reproduce seditious materials when their trial commenced in October 2022.

The two convicted journalists face up to two years in prison under the sedition offense, which was originally governed by Hong Kong's colonial-era Crimes Ordinance. However, new security legislation enacted in March has since increased the maximum penalty for sedition to up to ten years in jail (see AiR No. 11, March/2024, 2). The two editors were detained for nearly a year following their arrests in December 2021 but were eventually granted bail after the trial had begun.

This case highlights the severe legal repercussions for journalists in Hong Kong amidst the ongoing crackdown on press freedoms under the new security laws. This marks the first sedition conviction of journalists in Hong Kong since the city's sovereignty was transferred from Britain to China in 1997, sparking concerns from critics, including the U.S. government, about the ongoing erosion of press freedom under an extensive security crackdown. [Hong Kong Free Press]

Stand News began in 2014 as a small non-profit organization, operating with a minimal team and largely dependent on public donations. However, during the pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong in 2019, the outlet's popularity surged. Its comprehensive Facebook live streams, investigative reporting, and in-depth features drew over 20 million page views each month. The publication's liberal stance resonated with readers who were increasingly seeking greater freedom and democracy amid China's tightening grip on the city. This surge in popularity led to a significant increase in donations, enabling the newsroom to expand its staff to more than 60 members. [Reuters]

China: Cabinet approves data security management legislation

(jf) On August 30, China's cabinet has approved draft regulations focused on data security management, according to state media reports. During a meeting, the cabinet emphasized the importance of categorizing and classifying network data protection, clearly defining security boundaries, and ensuring that data flows freely and in an orderly manner.

Additionally, the cabinet discussed and provisionally adopted a draft amendment to the country's maritime law, marking another significant regulatory update. [Reuters]

Japan: LDP pushes for constitutional revisions to clarify Self-Defense Forces

(sw) Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) seeks a revision of the Constitution to specifically mention the Self-Defense Forces (SDF). This move, agreed upon by the LDP's panel on constitutional reform, aims to resolve the ongoing debate over the constitutionality of the SDF under Article 9, which renounces war. The LDP proposes keeping the existing wording of Article 9 but adding a new section to clarify the role of the SDF.

This decision is significant ahead of the LDP's upcoming leadership election on September 27, where candidates are expected to state their positions on the proposed constitutional changes. Former Defense Minister Shigeru Ishiba advocates for a direct mention of the SDF in Article 9, while the LDP's coalition partner, Komeito, calls for cautious discussion.

Revising Japan's Constitution is challenging, requiring a two-thirds majority in both houses of parliament before being put to a national referendum. The LDP also seeks to grant the government greater authority during emergencies as part of the proposed revisions. [Kyodo News]

Japan: Women's rural relocation initiative canceled after social media backlash

(sw) Japan's government has scrapped a controversial initiative aimed at encouraging single women to relocate from Tokyo to rural areas for marriage, following widespread criticism on social media. The program, initially set to begin in fiscal year 2025, offered financial incentives including up to USD 7,000 to women moving from Tokyo's 23 wards to the countryside. It also covered travel costs for women attending matchmaking events in rural regions.

Critics pointed out that the initiative failed to address the root causes of the outflow of women from rural areas, such as wage disparities between men and women and traditional gender stereotypes.

In response to the backlash, the government announced that the program would be halted, with officials instructed to reconsider the initiative and address the concerns raised by those affected. [The Asahi Shimbun]

Japan: Former Prime Minister Noda announces bid for CDP leadership

(sw) Former Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda officially declared his candidacy for the leadership of the Japan's main opposition party, the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDP) on September 29. This marks his return to the forefront of Japanese politics 12 years after stepping down as prime minister. The 67-year-old emphasized the need for experienced leadership to address Japan's current challenges.

Noda is the second contender in the CDP leadership race, following veteran politician Yukio Edano's announcement last month (see AiR No. 35, August/2024, 4). Over the past year, Noda has actively raised his public profile, challenging Prime Minister Fumio Kishida in parliament, particularly over the ruling Liberal Democratic Party's (LDP's) slush fund scandal.

This scandal centers around the misuse of campaign funds by members of the LDP's Seiwa Seisaku Kenkyūkai and Shisuikai factions which had failed to report more than JPY 600 million (USD 4 million) in campaign funds and stored them in illegal slush funds.

In discussing the CDP's ties with the Japanese Communist Party, Noda made it clear that while dialogue is essential, he opposes any potential collaboration in government. This opposition is driven by a desire to maintain a possible alliance with the Democratic Party for the People (DPP), which, along with the Japanese Trade Union Confederation (Rengo), opposes any association between the CDP and the JCP. [Japan Times] [Jiji]

Japan: Former ruling party member resigns as lawmaker

(dql) Manabu Horii, a former member of Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party, resigned as a lawmaker following allegations of violating Japan's election law. Horii, who previously served as parliamentary vice foreign minister and senior vice minister at the Cabinet Office, left the party last month and submitted his resignation, which was accepted by the House of Representatives.

The allegations involve his staff distributing condolence money to supporters in Hokkaido on his behalf, an act permitted only if the lawmaker attends the funeral in person. Additionally, Horii is accused of failing to properly report JPY 21.96 million (USD 152,300) received from his party faction, which could lead to further legal action under the political funds control law. [Kyodo News]

Japan: Births hit record low

(sw) Japan recorded a historic low in births during the first half of 2024, with only 350,074 babies born, a 5.7 percent decrease from the same period last year. This

marks the lowest January-June birth figure since records began in 1969. If the trend continues, annual births could fall below 700,000 for the first time.

The number of marriages also declined, dropping 1.8 percent year-on-year to 491,462 in the 12 months leading to June 2024. This decline in both births and marriages is attributed to shifting societal values. Meanwhile, deaths increased by 1.8 percent, leading to a natural population decline of 461,745 in the first half of the year.

Japan's shrinking population is raising concerns about the potential collapse of businesses and local services, as well as the sustainability of social security systems.

In response, the Japanese government has vowed to implement "unprecedented measures" to combat the declining birthrate, viewing the period up to the early 2030s as the last opportunity to reverse this trend. [Kyodo News]

Japan: Authorities call for calm amid ongoing panic buying of rice

(sw) In response to growing concerns about rice shortages, the Japanese government has advised against panic purchases. Some stores have been emptied, leading the government to ration stock in early August.

Although the rationing has since been lifted, fears of upcoming typhoons, and a week-long national holiday have driven Japanese consumers to stock up on rice. These concerns are further exacerbated by factors such as lower harvests caused by hot weather and water shortages, along with increased demand due to record numbers of foreign tourists.

Officials reassure the public that the harvesting season has begun, with 40 percent of the crop expected to be available by the end of September. Rice remains Japan's most consumed food staple, with an annual consumption of seven million tons. [Japan Today]

Japan: Nuclear reactor fails safety review

(sw) Japan's nuclear energy sector faces renewed scrutiny as the No. 2 reactor at the Tsuruga plant in Fukui Prefecture failed to pass a crucial safety review. The Nuclear Regulation Authority (NRA) determined that an active fault possibly lies beneath the reactor,

making it the first one to be denied restart approval since the NRA's establishment in 2012. Public comments on this decision will be sought before it becomes official in the fall.

Japan restructured its regulatory framework by establishing the NRA in 2012 and introducing new safety standards based on lessons from the 2011 Fukushima Daiichi disaster. [Kyodonews]

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida is set to hold a ministerial meeting to discuss the potential restart of the Kashiwazaki-Kariwa nuclear power plant in Niigata Prefecture, operated by Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO). Although TEPCO received initial regulatory approval in 2017, it still requires local consent, with the governor calling for further discussions.

Kashiwazaki-Kariwa, the world's largest nuclear power plant, has been offline following the 2011 Fukushima disaster. Since then, Japan has only restarted 12 reactors, as many operators are still undergoing the re-licensing process to meet stricter safety standards. [Japan Today]

Japan: Regulatory oversight over large tech companies to be tightened

(dql) The Japan Fair Trade Commission (JFTC) is set to establish a new department by April next year, in a bid to boost regulatory oversight over major IT companies. This department will be tasked with enforcing a newly enacted law - called the law on promotion of competition for specified smartphone software - which will regulate Apple Inc. and Google LLC and investigate the actual situation in digital fields such as artificial intelligence.

Fully enforced by 2025, the new law will seek to regulate IT giants by requiring them to open their app stores to other companies and prohibiting preferential treatment of their services in search results. It is expected to protect hundreds of thousands of companies distributing apps and operating websites.

Currently, the JFTC has 14 personnel dedicated to enforcing the new law, but it plans to increase this number to 50. The department will be staffed with JFTC officials and external experts, such as data analysts. The JFTC aims to include this expansion in the fiscal 2025 budget to strengthen its regulatory capacity.

The JFTC's move comes in response to the growing influence of tech giants, known as GAFA, whose

monopolistic practices have become a global concern. These companies, backed by legal and economic experts, have often evaded regulatory scrutiny. It aligns with similar initiatives by foreign antitrust authorities, such as the European Union's Digital Markets Act and the UK's plans to expand their regulatory teams. [The Japan News]

Japan: Inflation and unemployment continue to rise in August

(sw) Core inflation in Japan's capital accelerated for the fourth consecutive month in August, surpassing the Bank of Japan's (BOJ) 2 percent target. This rise, driven by the phase-out of government utility subsidies and increasing rice prices due to extreme heat, strengthens the case for further interest rate hikes.

A key inflation index, excluding fresh food and fuel, increased by 1.6 percent year-on-year in August, following a 1.5 percent rise in July. The consumer price index on the other side, which excludes volatile fresh food costs, increased by 2.4 percent year-on-year, surpassing the median market forecast of 2.2 percent and the 2.2 percent rise observed in July.

Concurrently, the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry upgraded its industrial output assessment for the first time since March 2023, reporting a 2.8 percent rise in July. However, expectations for August and September remain mixed, with output forecasted to grow 2.2 percent in August but contract by 3.3 percent in September.

In July, the BOJ raised its short-term policy rate to 0.25 percent, signaling a shift from its decade-long stimulus program. As inflation continues to rise and wage growth is expected to boost private consumption, BOJ Governor Kazuo Ueda indicated that further rate hikes may be considered if inflation remains on track to durably meet the 2 percent target. [Reuters 1]

Meanwhile, Japan's jobless rate increased to 2.7 percent in July, up from 2.5 percent in June, slightly above economists' forecasts. The jobs-to-applicants ratio also edged up to 1.24 from 1.23 in June, reflecting a continued demand for labor despite the rising unemployment rate. [Reuters 2]

Japan: Defense ministry eyes unprecedented defense spending for 2025

(sw) Japan's Defense Ministry has requested a record USD 59 billion budget for 2025, marking the third year of its accelerated five-year military buildup plan. This budget request comes amid rising tensions in the East and South China Seas, where China has intensified its military activities.

The proposed budget, which is pending approval by the Finance Ministry, focuses on advanced technologies like unmanned weapons and artificial intelligence, with USD 710 million allocated for drones and USD 124 million for AI surveillance systems across SDF bases. These innovations are essential as Japan grapples with a declining population, which has impacted the recruitment of Self-Defense Force (SDF) personnel. The demographic challenge, coupled with competition from private companies offering better salaries, has made it difficult to attract young applicants, resulting in only half of the 2023 recruitment target being met.

A significant portion of the budget (USD 6.7 billion) is earmarked for enhancing strike-back capabilities, including the development and acquisition of long-range missiles and related equipment.

Additionally, Japan plans to invest heavily in a satellite constellation to detect missile-related activities. The satellite constellation network will consist of numerous small satellites operating in the same orbit, forming a system expected to serve as a continuous "eye in the sky", capable of detecting and tracking targets consistently. It is considered a critical need as China, North Korea, and Russia advance in hypersonic missile technology. [Japan News]

The ministry is also proposing reforms to improve salaries, working conditions, and support for working mothers to attract more women into the force. [AP News]

Japan: Gigantic patrol ship planned

(dql) On August 27, the Japan Coast Guard (JCG) unveiled plans to request a significant budget to construct its largest-ever multipurpose patrol vessel, in a bid to boost disaster and emergency response capabilities. The JCG seeks JPY 3.43 billion (USD 23.7 million) in the fiscal 2025 budget to begin construction, with the total cost projected at around JPY 68 billion (USD 465 million). Part of a broader budgetary push, This request is raises the JCG's total budget request to a record JPY 293.5 billion (USD 2 billion), a 12 percent increase from the previous year.

Expected to enter service in fiscal 2029, the new 200-meter-long vessel will weigh approximately 30,000 tons, significantly larger than the current largest JCG ship. It will have the capacity to carry up to 1,000 personnel, including police, firefighters, and Self-Defense Forces members, making it crucial for natural disaster response. The vessel will also be equipped to carry three helicopters, numerous rubber boats, and up to 1,000 evacuees, serving as a "maritime base" during security operations.

In addition to the vessel, the fiscal 2025 budget request includes JPY 4.16 billion (USD 28.5 million) for two large unmanned SeaGuardian aircraft. Despite concerns about personnel shortages, JCG officials assure that the operation of the new vessel will not be compromised. [The EurAsian Times]

Japan: Typhoon causes severe disruptions

(sw) Typhoon Shanshan was downgraded to a tropical depression on Sunday afternoon as it moved northwest. Despite its weakened status, the storm continues to bring heavy rainfall across Japan, with severe effects being felt far from its center.

Authorities have issued warnings for landslides and flooding, particularly in low-lying areas of Tokyo, Kanagawa, Shizuoka, and Saitama prefectures. The Fire and Disaster Management Agency reported six fatalities, one missing person, and 134 injuries.

The city of Atami in Shizuoka Prefecture recorded 638.5 millimeters of rain over 72 hours, more than three times its monthly average, while Ebina in Kanagawa Prefecture received 439 millimeters, the highest total since record-keeping began in 1976.

Transportation has been heavily affected, with Tokaido Shinkansen services expected to slowly resume normal operations this week, though potential disruptions may still occur. Air travel is close to normal, but Japan Airlines and All Nippon Airways have warned that potential delays and cancellations remain possible due to ongoing rain. [Japan Times]

Mongolia: GDP per capita to reach USD 7,500 in 2025

(dql) Speaking at the first meeting of Mongolia's Economic Policy Council, held on August 31, Prime Minister Oyun-Erdene Luvsannamsrai highlighted

Mongolia's economic growth, noting that the GDP increased from MNT 36 trillion (USD 10.6 billion) in 2021 to MNT 75 trillion (USD 22.2 billion). He projected that next year's GDP could reach MNT 95 trillion (USD 28.1 billion), raising the GDP per capita to USD 7,500, with a goal of reaching USD 10,000 in the near future.

The meeting focused on the joint government action program for 2024-2028, the implementation of the 2023 budget, amendments to the 2024 budget, and the draft budget for 2025. The Prime Minister Finance Minister Zhavkhlan Bold emphasized that the 2025 budget policy focuses on launching large development projects, reducing government involvement, and supporting the private sector.

Participants, including members of Parliament, government officials, and representatives from Mongolia's economy, finance, and business sectors, discussed and shared their views on the 2025 draft budget during the meeting. [Aki Press]

North Korea: Marketplace restrictions cause economic hardship

(jb) As recovery is underway from the late July floods that ravaged the northern regions of North Korea, authorities restricted economic activities in North Pyongan province, which bore the brunt of the flooding. The restriction has also cramped market hours, leading to economic hardship for citizens in the province as official markets which previously operated from 10am to 6pm now open at 5pm. The decision to restrict market hours was made to utilize human resources for flood recovery and relief activities to the maximum.

Discontent regarding the new rules is growing as many families make their living through the economic activity in the official markets. However, even with the markets being open, the food shortage has led to the markets holding less and less produce to sell to the people.

This situation has severely hindered quality of life and the ability to feed one’s family in the Sinuiju and Uiju counties. The food shortage and restrictions are also compounded by the fact that North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has refused the aid offered by his South Korean neighbors as part of their relief efforts. [Daily NK English] [The Independent]

North Korea: Hindered trade post-floods cause grain shortage

(jb) The neighboring provinces of North Pyongan, Jagang, and Ryanggang provinces are currently facing sky-high grain prices as a result of the floods that ravaged northern North Korea in late July (see AiR No. 32, August/2024, 1).

The cost of rice, according to a survey of Seoul-based online newspaper *Daily NK*, has risen by 5.83 percent in the capital Pyongyang in two weeks' time, between August 4 and August 18. Market prices of corn have also shot up, with a kilogram of corn costing KPW 2800 when it was previously KPW 2600.

To lessen the blow of market grain prices skyrocketing, the government was reported to have sold its wartime grain stocks in the official markets, including its emergency rice supplies. While the price of rice remained consistent before the floods, the combination of food shortage and restricted market hours (see article above) has led to the price of market grain to soar.

The floods, which inundated entire tracts of agrarian land, have also led to growing famine and poor-quality harvests in the northern regions, which leader Kim Jong Un is reportedly currently addressing. [Daily NK English]

North Korea: Kim Jong Un oversees test of upgraded multiple rocket launcher

(jb) On August 28, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un observed the test firing of the country's upgraded 240 millimetre-calibre multiple rocket launcher (MRL) which sports a new guidance system developed by the Second Economic Committee. The new MRL system is reported to be superior in mobility and strike intensity, vastly improving upon the previous models launched by North Korea in recent years.

The new MRL system is also reported to pose considerable damage to the South's capital, the Seoul Metropolitan Area, whose center lies a mere 196 kilometers from the North's capital in Pyongyang.

Kim, who was joined by several high-ranking officials, conducted the inspection of the launch site, where he provided detailed instructions on the "production of artillery weapons and the replacement of equipment for military units." [The Chosun Daily]

North Korea: Security measures tightened during ROK-US drills

(jb) Surveillance and guard details at major facilities were heightened by North Korean authorities as a response to the Ulchi Freedom Shield exercises that were jointly conducted by the US and South Korea from August 19-29.

Beginning August 18, state authorities tightened security measures around major North Korean political elites, including and especially leader Kim Jong Un.

Deeming the exercises to also be a symbol of American imperial aggression, the city of Hoeryong which borders China, has been encircled, with statues, revolutionary battlefields and historical sites being safeguarded by security taking shifts in a 12-hour cycle. [Daily NK English]

North Korea, which usually sends warnings to the South during the exercises which take place annually, considers the exercises to be a threat of aggression which upsets the security balance in the Korean Peninsula.

North Korea: State-sanctioned smuggling revived

(jb) Trading companies in Hyesan, a riverside city in Ryanggang Province, North Korea that borders China, have allegedly been given the green light by state authorities as of August 25 to resume smuggling along the border, lifting a hiatus that was in place from July 10. Companies which export goods from North Korea to China, and import them vice versa, were on tenterhooks as the ban prolonged the storage of the goods in Hyesan city.

The pause in smuggling activities had been brought on by North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's visit to Samjiyon, a city which lies in the same province. Kim's inspection of the city brought with it economic consequences, with the prices of imported goods in the official markets going up and that of perishable exports going down considerably due to lack of trading activity in the region.

Local livelihoods, which heavily depend on the trade and circulation of goods, have been restored due to the ban being lifted at last. [Daily NK English]

North Korea: More defections to South Korea

(ac) On August 28, South Korea's National Intelligence Service confirmed there has been an increasing number of North Korean working in foreign embassies or foreign currency workers defected to South Korea in the second half of 2023.

In addition, a South Korean-based civic group released video footage of North Korea defectors crossing the river near the border of Southern China to seek asylum in South Korea. The group including 13 women, and two children were arrested while attempting to cross the river.

The defectors would likely be repatriated and face severe punishment. The South Korean government is currently verifying the civic groups claim.

However, South Korea confirmed that the current number of defectors does not match the recorded number during the reign of former leader Kim Jong-Il, and that the defection rate is a sign of instability of the Kim Jong Un regime. [Arirang News]

North Korea: Flood victims left out of relief aid bitter over state treatment

(jb) The July floods in northern provinces of North Korea has seen the state mobilize on a large scale to ensure flood relief aid for the people as well as reconstruction of infrastructure. However, as state-sanctioned trips carrying flood victims from these provinces to the capital, Pyongyang, remain underway, several victims who have been left behind by this scheme reported their bitterness towards the state.

The dire health of the flood victims has also been exacerbated by a case of suicide by an elderly ailing couple, leading the state authorities to take quick, albeit subdued, measures to remedy the rising panic among citizens once reports of the suicide began circulating.

Flood victims who remain untreated in North Pyongan province have received news of other victims, who had been transferred to the capital, receiving advanced medical care with high technological care and with the best equipment, where they were treated for diseases including liver cirrhosis, diabetes and pancreatic cancer among other ailments.

Both the provincial party committee and police bureau have made efforts to control public discourse on the misfortune of the flood victims and especially of the double suicide, focusing instead on the efforts taken by both entities in reconstruction post the floods.

There remains unrest, however, over the unequal distribution of aid to the entire affected population. With state authorities yet to accept aid from their South Korean neighbors, the situation of relief aid distribution remains unsure. [Daily NK English]

South Korea: New scheme to improve doctor training and pension system

(ac) Amid the ongoing controversy over the government's medical policies and its plan to increase the admission quota for medical students – which has led to walkouts by trainee doctors and medical students since February (see AiR No. 10, March/2024, 1) – President Yoon Suk Yeol's administration has proposed a '4+1' reform plan to overhaul the country's healthcare system.

Under the plan, the government first will establish a Special Presidential Committee composed of doctors, nurses, and patients to provide advisory input and projections on the future demand for doctors. Second, the government is willing discuss the enrollment quota for 2026 admissions if doctors present a rational alternative to meet future healthcare needs. This 2026 admission plan remains unsettled due to ongoing disagreements between the government and medical professionals over increasing student quotas. However, the government has already finalized a plan to increase the medical school quota by approximately 1,500 students next year to address the current doctor shortage. Third, the government intends to improve working conditions for trainee doctors by reducing the standard working hours from the current 80 hours per week to 60 hours by 2031. Additional efforts will focus on upgrading medical facilities, including emergency rooms, pediatrics, and obstetrics. [Arirang News]

All of these initiatives are supported by a USD 294 million fund next year, aimed at strengthening trainee doctor programs and enhancing the quality of education for junior doctors. Noh Yun-Hong, head of the Presidential Committee, revealed that the government plans to allocate USD 7.5 billion over the next five years and will continue seeking improvements to the new scheme. [Yonhap News]

In addition to the healthcare reforms, Yoon also pledged to reform the pension system to ensure sustainable funding and restore public trust. He identified that the current pension system fails to provide sufficient income replacement for retirees, raising concerns that the public may not receive any benefits. Although Yoon did not provide further details, he indicated that his administration will soon present a detailed proposal on premiums and income replacement rates.

Opposition parties have proposed increasing the pension premium from the current 9 percent to 13 percent of one's income. They also suggested raising the income replacement rate – the pension as a percentage of a subscriber's average lifetime income – from the current 40 percent to 44 or 45 percent. [The Korea Times]

South Korea: National Assembly adopts Nursing Act

(ac) On August 28, South Korea's parliament passed the Nursing Act with an overwhelming 283-2 vote, marking a rare instance of bipartisan cooperation between the ruling People Power Party (PPP) and the opposition Democratic Party (DP), which holds a majority in the National Assembly. The Nursing Act was legalized amid ongoing struggles with staff shortages in hospitals, exacerbated by doctors protesting against the proposed increase in medical school admissions quotas (see article above).

The Nursing Act establishes a legal framework for physician assistant (PA) nurses to assist doctors in performing medical procedures, including some tasks previously reserved exclusively for doctors. The new law also expands legal protections for nurses. The Korean Health and Medical Workers' Union, representing nurses and non-physicians, has long advocated for legal protection and improved working conditions. The union welcomed the decision and expressed hope for a more robust education system to train PA nurses in the future. [Yonhap News]

However, the act has faced criticism from doctors who argue that it will create confusion within the medical community and undermine the training system for trainee doctors. The Korea Medical Association, a trade union for doctors, issued a statement condemning the National Assembly's approval of the bill, asserting that allowing PA nurses to perform medical procedures traditionally reserved for doctors is tantamount to "performing unlicensed medical practices," which they

warn will have negative consequences for the public. [The Korea Times]

South Korea: Rival parties form joint consultative body to discuss social affairs

(ac) On September 1, both leaders of the rival parties – Han Dong-Hoon of the ruling People Power Party (PPP) and Lee Jae-Myung of the main opposition Democratic Party (DP) – agreed to form a joint consultive body to discuss social affairs, despite their long-standing differences. This meeting between the PPP and DP marked the first time where two leaders held official talks since 2013.

Both leaders agreed to collaborate and continue the discussion at the Assembly level to resolve the ongoing doctor walk-out protests (see article above). Both leaders agreed that the basis of public safety was greatly influenced by the quality of the medical services.

The meeting also covered semiconductors, artificial intelligence, and general economic efforts targeting debts burdens for smaller businesses and households. Han and Lee agreed to renew the legislative process to combat low birth rate and to expand maternity leave for working parents, along with subsequent measures to penalize digital sex crimes.

Attempts were made to reach a conclusion on abolishing the financial investment income tax, but they only agreed to address structural issues in the stock market. Furthermore, the PPP 'expressed willingness' to accept a special consul regarding the investigation into a Marine's death but further discussions were not included in the meeting (see article below). [Yonhap News]

South Korea: Rival parties discuss investigation on death of Marine

(jb) The ruling People Power Party (PPP) and the main opposition Democratic Party (DP) have agreed to hold discussions on several issues of national importance, a prime focus being the special counsel probe into the death of a Marine on July 19 last year. [KBS World]

The case, which has taken the country by storm for over a year, was vetoed in Parliament by President Yoon Suk Yeol when the discussion surrounding a special investigation was raised as a bill in May. The

veto had drawn a majority opposition and uproar, leading to members of the PPP leaving Parliament when the opposition voted in favor of the investigation once again on July 4.

A citizen petition was also raised on June 20, which garnered over a million signatures within mere days, showing a wave of support for the deceased Marine. After months of debate, with accusations of obstruction of justice slung at Yoon, both parties have agreed to begin cordial discussions on the topic once more. [Nikkei Asia]

The 20-year-old marine, surnamed Chae, had been part of a search and rescue mission during torrential floods which swept South Korea in July last year. He had initially gone missing, and then was revealed to be dead half a day later. His memorial ceremony was conducted on the anniversary of his passing, which was attended by over 250 people, including officials and the bereaved. [The Korea Times]

South Korea: Government vows tougher stand on digital sex crimes

(ac) On August 27, South Korea's President Yoon Suk Yeol urged authorities to thoroughly investigate the country's digital sex crimes after several domestic media outlets reported that deepfake pornography is widespread in Telegram chat groups, including one with 220,000 members. The deepfake images, generated or altered using AI, were shared in chat groups linked to individual schools and universities, where users – primarily teenage students – targeted both classmates and teachers. [BBC Korea]

Yoon addressed the issue during a cabinet meeting, calling on authorities, police, and lawmakers to tackle digital crimes. The government aims to finalize legislative measures by October 2024. Additionally, South Korean authorities urged Telegram and other social media platforms to cooperate with the government's policies by deleting or blocking sexually explicit deepfake content. [Korea JoongAng Daily]

Meanwhile, the Korea Communications Standards Commission (KCSC), the country's state media regulator, held a meeting on August 28 to discuss measures to counter sexually explicit deepfake pornography. A 24-hour hotline will be established for public reporting, and the number of regulatory officers will be doubled from the current 70 to monitor digital sex crimes. The Korean National Police Agency also promised a seven-month campaign to combat digital

sex crimes. Furthermore, The Ministry of Science and ICT, the Office for Government Policy Coordination, along with the KCSC, will collaborate to prevent the production and distribution of deepfake videos and to ensure the sexually explicit videos are removed. [Reuters 1] [Reuters 2]

Human Rights Watch (HRW)highlighted that while online gender-based violence is a growing global issue, it is particularly prevalent in South Korea. The international human rights organization criticized that predominantly male judges, prosecutors, police, and lawmakers in the country often fail to take these crimes seriously. Women who seek police assistance are frequently dismissed, retraumatized, or ridiculed. Additionally, South Korea lacks comprehensive sexuality education in schools, leaving young people without proper understanding of the harmfulness of such conduct. HRW added that this occurs within a broader context of extreme gender inequality, marked by a 31 percent gender pay gap and women making up less than 13 percent of board members. [Human Rights Watch]

South Korea: President Yoon Suk Yeol absent from National Assembly opening ceremony

(ac) President Yoon Suk Yeol did not attend the formal opening ceremony of the 22nd National Assembly on Monday, marking the first time since Korea began direct presidential elections in 1987 that a sitting president has skipped this event. The ceremony, held more than three months days after the April 10 general election, was the most delayed opening of the National Assembly in history.

Since taking office, Yoon has vetoed 21 bills passed by the legislature, which is controlled by the liberal Democratic Party (DP). The Assembly's opening ceremony was initially postponed due to a boycott by the conservative People Power Party (PPP) over disagreements with the DP.

The PPP and DP are expected to clash over the government's proposed budget for next year, which totals KRW 677 trillion (USD 505 billion), a 3.2 percent increase from the previous year. The DP aims to cut some funding and push for its own initiatives, including a proposal to distribute 250,000 won to every individual.

DP leader Lee Jae-myung faced criticism from the presidential office for suggesting that the Yoon

administration might impose martial law, a claim the office denounced as baseless and intended to build a case for impeachment. Martial law was last imposed in 1979 during the military dictatorship of then-President Chun Doo Hwan. [Korea JoongAng News]

South Korea: Defense minister nominee hints at idea of nuclear armament

(ac) On September 2, Minister of Defense nominee Kim Young-Hyun hinted in a parliamentary confirmation hearing that nuclear armament could be among the possible security options to counter North Korea nuclear provocation, while reaffirmed the alliance with the US remained the basis in dealing with such threats.

Additionally, Kim rejected the speculations of imposing a Martial Law in a contingency, as he was questioned by opposition lawyers arguing that several key military figures graduated from the same high school of President Yoon Suk Yeol, implying Kim landed the nomination of Minister of Defense through nepotism and Kim' nomination is a broader scheme to impose Martial Law and to tighten control over the military.

The parliamentary confirmation hearing also covered a range of security questions. Kim refused to answer criticism raised by opposition lawyers regarding the relocation of the presidential office to Yongsan and its costs. Kim maintained that the current location offers "much stronger" protection.

Similar questions were asked regarding women's participations in rank-and-file soldiers' duty due to South Korea's low birth rate. However, Kim only responded that the idea should be reviewed as an option and public consensus is more important. [Yonhap News] [The Korea Times]

South Korea: Defense ministry to boost cyber defense capabilities

(ac) The National Security Council (NSC) has introduced the National Cybersecurity Basic Plan, developed in collaboration with 14 government agencies, including the spy agency, police, and ministries of foreign affairs, national defense, and science and ICT.

Under this plan, South Korea will launch offensive cyberdefense operations to safeguard critical national infrastructure from hacking and counter disinformation. NSC adviser Shin Won-sik stated that

the plan aims to provide deterrence against cyber threats that compromise national security and interests through proactive defense measures. It will also address disinformation that disrupts public opinion and causes social unrest.

The plan includes measures to strengthen the cyber resilience of critical infrastructure and communication systems by utilizing artificial intelligence and segregating national and public networks from less sensitive ones, creating a "multi-layered security" system.

To achieve these objectives, South Korea will collaborate with countries that share liberal democratic values, coordinate cybersecurity responses, and contribute to international efforts to establish norms for a secure cyber environment.

South Korea's move comes amid concerns over North Korea's alleged cryptocurrency theft to fund its nuclear and missile programs and its hacking of local defense contractors to steal military technology essential for major weapons systems. [Yonhap News]

South Korea: Intelligence official leaking military secrets to China indicted

(dql) A military intelligence official has been indicted for allegedly selling military secrets to a suspected Chinese operative. Recruited in 2017, the 49-year-old Defense Intelligence Command official is charged with aiding the enemy, accepting bribes, and violating the Military Secret Protection Act. He is accused of leaking sensitive information, including a list of undercover agents, in exchange for money.

According to the prosecution, the official was approached by the suspected Chinese agent while visiting Yanji, China, in April 2017. He claimed to have accepted the offer due to threats against his family. Although he began selling secrets in 2017, evidence shows he received payments starting in May 2019 and continued leaking information until June 2022. Over approximately 40 transactions, he demanded KRW 400 million (USD 299,000) and received KRW 160 million (USD 119 thousand). 30 files, among them 12 documents and 18 voice messages, were leaked.

The case, unrelated to North Korean operatives, was discovered in June. While the official's actions were extensive, military prosecutors chose not to pursue espionage charges due to the lack of a direct link to North Korea. The investigation is ongoing, with the

possibility that the Chinese agent may have North Korean connections. [Yonhap News]

Taiwan: Military addressing equipment shortages amid extended conscription

(jp) On August 27, Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense (MND) announced efforts to address equipment shortages faced by local military field units. This follows complaints from military officers about inadequate resources for training one-year conscripts, reinstated in January to counter increased threats from China.

The initial group of 3,500 conscripts has completed boot camp and is set to begin 13 weeks of specialized training in September. However, officers reported deficiencies in communication equipment, armored vehicles, fire trucks, and insufficient personnel to run the training programs. These issues led officers to escalate the matter to lawmakers after unsuccessful attempts to resolve the problems through the MND.

In response, the MND stated that it has begun distributing necessary equipment and allocating human resources to ensure field units are prepared for training. The Army Command Headquarters is also investing in future equipment needs. [Taiwan Focus]

Taiwan: Ministry of Digital Affairs to launch anti-fraud website and AI investment plan

(jp) The Ministry of Digital Affairs (MODA) has announced plans for two major initiatives: a new anti-fraud reporting website and a substantial investment plan for artificial intelligence (AI) startups.

The ministry is developing a new website and mobile app to streamline the reporting of online fraud. The site, currently in internal testing, aims to improve the efficiency of handling fraud cases. The system will leverage AI to process and verify reports from the public, public figures, and automated scanning services. Confirmed fraudulent content will be reported to major platforms like Google, Facebook, LINE, and Instagram for removal. Minister Yennun Huang highlighted that the website's launch is contingent upon thorough cybersecurity testing and approval from the Executive Yuan, Taiwan’s Cabinet. The goal is to allow the public to quickly identify and

report fraud while expediting the processing of cases. [Focus Taiwan]

MODA also unveiled a TWD 10 billion (USD 313 million) investment plan to support AI startups in Taiwan. Approved by the National Development Fund's management committee, this 10-year plan will start accepting applications next year. The initiative aims to boost the growth of domestic AI companies, including those led by foreign nationals, and foster international expansion. The investment will target various AI sectors, including discriminative and generative AI, with the intent to provide essential resources for startups and support their development into global players. [Focus Taiwan]

Taiwan: Ministry of Finance announce adjustment multinational enterprise tax rates

(jp) Taiwan is set to adjust its income tax rates for multinational enterprises (MNEs) to align with the OECD's Global Minimum Tax (GMT) framework, starting in 2025, the Ministry of Finance (MOF) announced on August 28. The ministry highlighted those 60 countries or regions, including Taiwan's neighbors such as Japan, South Korea, Singapore, and Hong Kong, along with key trade partners like EU countries and Canada, have already announced plans to implement the GMT framework

Under the new rules, MNEs operating in Taiwan and subject to the GMT will see their Alternative Minimum Tax (AMT) rate rise from 12 percent to 15 percent. This adjustment will apply when these businesses file their taxes in 2026. However, small and medium-sized enterprises, as well as larger businesses with an effective tax rate already at 15 percent, will not be affected by this change.

The GMT framework applies to MNEs with consolidated annual revenues exceeding EUR 750 million (approximately USD 834.51 million) for any two fiscal years within the last four years. These enterprises will be required to pay a 15 percent minimum tax rate globally, a measure designed to curb profit shifting to low-tax jurisdictions and ensure that taxes are paid where economic activities occur. [Focus Taiwan]

Taiwan: Wind farm construction supervisor released on bail in lethal CO2 leak case

(jp) The supervisor of an onshore wind farm construction site in Changhua County has been released on TWD 200,000 (USD 6,260) bail following a fatal CO2 leak, according to the Changhua District Prosecutors Office. The supervisor, identified by the surname Chen, was questioned on August 28 over allegations of negligent homicide and violations of the Occupational Safety and Health Act. He was released on bail after the interrogation.

The incident took place on August 20 at a construction site, which is part of an offshore wind farm project. The CO2 leak led to one fatality, two critically injured workers, and 14 others who were also affected but have since been discharged from the hospital.

Prosecutors, along with forensic investigators, have not yet determined the exact cause of the gas leak. However, Teco Electric & Machinery Co., the main contractor at the site, suggested that improper operations and the installation of high-pressure cylinders by on-site staff might have contributed to the incident. The investigation is ongoing. [Focus Taiwan]

Taiwan: Migrant worker rights groups call for revisions to labor insurance system

(jp) On August 28, migrant worker rights groups, led by the Serve the People Association (SPA), urged reforms to Taiwan's Labor Insurance system to make it easier for migrant workers to claim retirement benefits at the end of their employment contracts. The call was made during a forum in Taipei, highlighting the challenges faced by migrant workers in accessing their Old-Age Benefits.

Under the current system, workers aged 60 or older, who have been covered by Labor Insurance for less than 15 years, can claim their benefits as a lump sum. However, blue-collar migrant workers, who are not domestic caregivers, are only allowed to work in Taiwan for up to 12 years, often leaving the country before reaching the eligible age. This discrepancy, coupled with the fact that migrant workers generally have shorter life expectancies than Taiwanese citizens, creates significant barriers for them in claiming their rightful benefits.

Critics of the current system highlight that many migrant workers struggle to claim benefits and face high fees for transferring funds home and suggest an online system and support offices in workers' home countries to assist with claims. Others have proposed a legal revision to allow migrant workers to claim their lump-sum benefits upon contract expiration or termination, regardless of their age, arguing that migrant workers should be entitled to at least 90 percent of the total premiums paid by themselves and their employers.

In response, the Ministry of Labor (MOL) acknowledged the concerns and promised to relay them for future policymaking, though it defended the current system as non-discriminatory. [Focus Taiwan]

Taiwan: TPP Chairman Ko Wen-je takes months-long leave amid scandals

(jp) Opposition Taiwan People's Party (TPP) Chairman Ko Wen-je announced on August 29 that he would take a three-month leave of absence from his leadership role in response to multiple scandals affecting his party. Ko also stated that he would voluntarily apply for an internal investigation, though he did not provide further details.

Ko apologized to the party's supporters for the mishandling of campaign finances during Taiwan's January presidential election (see AiR No. 33, August/2024, 2). He acknowledged that he bore "the biggest responsibility" for the breach of trust caused by the scandal and expressed regret for disappointing the TPP's friends and supporters.

Ko addressed separate criticisms regarding his use of the party's presidential election subsidy to fund personal office space. He explained that he did so because the party needed a legislative office near the Legislative Yuan and allowed the party to use the space. However, Ko admitted that failing to consider the full picture was a "bad habit" and took responsibility for the oversight. [Focus Taiwan]

In addition to the campaign finance scandal, Ko is facing pressure related to an anti-corruption probe concerning real estate dealings during his tenure as mayor of Taipei. Recent investigations have led to searches, questioning of suspects, and requests for the detention of individuals involved in the case. [Focus Taiwan]

Taiwan: Core Pacific Chairman and Taipei Councilor detained

(jp) Core Pacific Group Chairman Sheen Ching-jing, a Taiwanese petrochemical energy and biotechnology business group, and Taipei City Councilor Ying Hsiao-wei have been detained by the Taipei District Court for alleged corruption related to the Core Pacific City (Living Mall) development project.

Sheen claimed that the TWD 47 million (USD 1.48 million) he provided to Ying was a charitable donation, but the court ruled it was a bribe aimed at influencing a property development deal during Ko Wen-je's tenure as Taipei mayor. Sheen and Ying were detained due to concerns they might collude or flee.

Ying had lobbied the Taipei City government to increase the floor area ratio (FAR) of the Core Pacific City project from 560 percent to 840 percent, a move that could have boosted the group's profits by TWD 10 billion (USD 311 thousand) (see AiR No. 33, August/2024, 2).

On August 30, prosecutors also raided Ko's home and his Taiwan People's Party (TPP) headquarters, as Ko and several others are suspects in the case. Earlier, former Taipei Deputy Mayor Pong Cheng-sheng was prohibited from leaving the country as part of the investigation.

The Kuomintang (KMT), Ying's party, announced it would hold a disciplinary meeting to determine possible sanctions against her. Meanwhile, the TPP pledged cooperation with the investigation while questioning the necessity of the search. [Focus Taiwan]

Taiwan: Prosecutors seek detention of Taiwan People's Party Chairman Ko Wen-je

(jp) Prosecutors have officially requested the detention of Taiwan People's Party (TPP) Chairman Ko Wen-je in connection with an alleged corruption scandal related to the redevelopment of the Core Pacific City project during his tenure as Taipei mayor (see article above). The request was filed with the Taipei District Court on August 31 after Ko's earlier petition against his arrest was rejected. The investigation into Ko's alleged involvement in the Core Pacific City redevelopment project centers on a significant increase in the floor area ratio (FAR) from 560 percent to 840 percent

during his mayoral tenure from 2014 to 2022 (see AiR No. 33, August/2024, 2).

Ko was arrested on August 31 after he declined to continue questioning following a full day of interrogation and attempted to leave. After the court rejected his petition, the Taipei District Prosecutors Office resumed questioning him in the afternoon. Supporters of Ko gathered outside the prosecutor's office, expressing their outrage with signs demanding justice and chanting slogans like "Green Terror" and "Stay Strong Professor Ko." As the crowd grew, Taipei police expanded the restricted area around the office.

Ko and several others, including former Taipei Deputy Mayor Pong Cheng-sheng, were named as suspects in the case in May. Prosecutors conducted raids on Ko's home, office, and TPP headquarters, followed by summoning him for questioning. Other individuals suspected of involvement in the case, such as Taipei City Councilor Ying Hsiao-wei, Core Pacific Group Chairman Sheen Ching-jing, and Ying's assistant Wu Shun-min, are currently being held incommunicado as the investigation continues. [Focus Taiwan]

Taiwan: Navy to build six more minelayers and seven indigenous submarines

(jp) Taiwan plans to construct six additional minelayers between 2025 and 2027 as part of its strategy to enhance its indigenous naval capabilities, according to a spending plan submitted by the Ministry of National Defense (MND) to the Legislature on August 30. The Navy has allocated TWD 1.8 billion (USD 56.26 million) for this project, with TWD 789 million (USD 24.5 million) set aside for 2025.

The new minelayers are intended to expedite the deployment of naval mines, bolstering Taiwan's defenses against potential amphibious assaults by the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). This effort also supports Taiwan's broader initiative to strengthen its domestic shipbuilding industry and develop warships locally. Taiwan previously built four minelayers between 2017 and 2021 for TWD 917.7 million (USD 28.6 million), which are currently in active service.

The minelayers are part of Taiwan's proposed TWD 647 billion military budget for 2025, the highest in the nation's history. In addition to the minelayers, Taiwan plans to construct seven indigenous defense submarines (IDS) based on the prototype IDS, the Narwhal (Hai Kun). The submarines are expected to cost a total of TWD 284.08 billion (USD 8.8 billion), with

peak spending projected for 2031 at TWD 32.1 billion (USD 20.2 billion). [Focus Taiwan]

These military expansions come as Taiwan remains vigilant against potential threats from the PLA. In its 2024 report, the MND stated that while the PLA has not yet developed the capabilities for a full-scale invasion, it continues to strengthen its readiness for joint landing operations against Taiwan. The report suggests that the PLA's current strategies involve intimidation, blockades, and joint firepower strikes. [Focus Taiwan]

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

Bangladesh: Interim government reverses ban on Jamaat-e-Islami party

(lm) Bangladesh's interim government, under the leadership of Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus, has lifted the ban on the Jamaat-e-Islami party, which had been imposed by the previous administration of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. The ban, which was enforced under antiterrorism laws, accused Jamaat-e-Islami of instigating violence during student-led protests that ultimately led to Hasina's resignation. However, the interim government found no specific evidence supporting these claims and thus decided to revoke the ban.

The ban on Jamaat-e-Islami was a significant move by Hasina's government, particularly as it came just days before her ouster from power on August 5. Hasina's administration had accused the party of fomenting

unrest during widespread protests against a controversial quota system for government jobs. Hasina's opponents, including Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, secretary-general of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), criticized the ban as an attempt by Hasina to distract from her government's crackdown on dissent.

Jamaat-e-Islami, a party with millions of supporters, has a long and controversial history in Bangladesh. Founded in 1941 during British colonial rule, the party opposed the creation of Bangladesh during the 1971 war of independence from Pakistan. Since 2013, many of its senior leaders have been convicted of war crimes committed during that conflict, including killings, abductions, and rapes, leading to executions or imprisonment. The party was banned from contesting elections in 2013 after the high court ruled that its charter violated Bangladesh's secular constitution. This exclusion kept the party out of the electoral process in the subsequent 2014, 2018, and 2024 elections, during which Hasina secured multiple terms in office, often amid allegations of electoral irregularities and the absence of credible opposition. [Associated Press] [Al Jazeera]

The lifting of the ban by the interim government has been welcomed by Jamaat-e-Islami, which had long contested the legality and fairness of its exclusion from the political process. The Supreme Court has scheduled October 21 as the date to hear a petition filed by the party seeking the restoration of its appeal against a High Court verdict that revoked its registration with the Election Commission as a political party. The appeal had been previously dismissed by the Appellate Division on November 19, 2023, due to the absence of Jamaat's counsels. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: High Court orders government to report on benefits, properties given to Founding Father's family

(lm) The Bangladesh High Court has instructed the government to produce a detailed report within 30 days on the state expenditure for the benefits and properties provided to the family members of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founding father of the nation and father of ousted Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. This directive was issued in response to a petition filed by Supreme Court lawyer Mohammad Moniruzzaman, who also serves as the

Assistant Secretary General of the Human Rights Support Society.

The High Court's order includes a rule asking the relevant government authorities to explain why they should not be directed to recover the benefits and facilities that have already been provided to Bangabandhu's family members. The petitioner, Moniruzzaman, challenged the constitutionality of two specific laws: the Protection of Family Members of the Father of the Nation Act 2009 and the Special Security Forces Act 2021. He argued that these laws are discriminatory and unconstitutional as they provide special protections and benefits exclusively to the family of Bangabandhu and former Prime Minister Hasina, while excluding other citizens who are also considered ordinary citizens of the country.

Moniruzzaman's petition asserts that these laws violate the principles of equality enshrined in the constitution, as they ensure state-funded protection and facilities only for a specific family, which he claims is unjust and discriminatory. He also called for the High Court to order the government to recover the benefits and facilities that have already been enjoyed by Bangabandhu's family members and to halt any further provision of special security arrangements for them. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: High Court rejects writ petition seeking ban on Awami League

(lm) The High Court (HC) of Bangladesh has rejected a writ petition seeking to ban the Awami League (AL) of ousted Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina as a political party and cancel its registration due to alleged killings during anti-government protests in July and August. The HC bench dismissed the petition, stating that the Awami League was not named as a party in the petition and that political parties cannot be tried for the actions of individuals. The court emphasized that those responsible for any offenses will be prosecuted under the law.

The petition also included requests for extending the interim government's tenure, changing institution names associated with Sheikh Hasina, and recovering laundered money, but these were also dismissed. The Attorney General argued that the petitioner lacked the legal standing to file such a petition and urged the court to reject it, emphasizing the government's commitment to freedom of political organization. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Court adjourns appeal in USD 252 million embezzlement case against interim leader Yunus

(gs) The Appellate Division of Bangladesh's Supreme Court has adjourned until October 21 the hearing of a leave to appeal petition challenging a High Court order that upheld the indictment against Muhammad Yunus, the leader of the interim government, and six officials of Grameen Telecom in a corruption case. The petition was filed by Yunus and the six officials on August 25, following the High Court's rejection of their challenge to a Dhaka court's decision to frame charges against them.

The case, filed by the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) in May 2023, accuses Yunus and others of embezzling approximately BDT 252.2 million (USD 252.2 million) from the Grameen Telecom Workers' Profit Participation Fund. The ACC alleges that Yunus and the other officials diverted these funds for purposes other than those intended, which constitutes both embezzlement and money laundering. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Speaker of Parliament Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury resigns

(gs) Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury has resigned as the Speaker of Jatiya Sangsad, Bangladesh's National Parliament.She submitted her resignation letter to President Mohammed Shahabuddin. This development follows the dissolution of parliament by the president, which occurred a day after former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina resigned and fled the country on August 5 amid a mass uprising. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Interim leader Yunus to come up with 'comprehensive framework' on reforms soon

(lm) The leader of Bangladesh's interim government, Muhammad Yunus, is expected to soon present a "comprehensive framework" for reforms, including the process of power transition, according to his Special Assistant Mahfuj Alam. This announcement follows a series of meetings between the Chief Adviser and over two dozen political parties, including the Jatiya Party and Islamic parties. The meetings aimed to gather

input from political parties on the types of reforms they desire, with the goal of achieving a national consensus.

Yunus expressed optimism about creating lasting changes based on the collective input. He urged political parties to submit concrete, written proposals detailing their desired reforms, including potential amendments or rewrites of the Constitution. The framework will be developed considering these proposals, but no specific timeframe has been set for the reforms.

Islamic parties, during the discussions, requested the withdrawal of 300 cases against them and called for fair investigations into past events in 2013, 2016, and 2021. Earlier, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and other major political groups had also met with Yunus, expressing their full support for the interim government and the reform process. [The Daily Star 1]

Yunus to sit with secretaries September 4

Against this backdrop, Yunus will hold a meeting with all government secretaries on September 4 to discuss how to restore stability and improve coordination across the government administration. This will be his first meeting with all secretaries since the formation of the interim government on August 8. The meeting is expected to address the lack of harmony between central and field administrations following the fall of the Hasina-led government, and Yunus may seek advice on normalizing administrative functions. The discussion may also cover topics such as financial stability, the recovery of illegal weapons, and corruption prevention. [The Daily Star 2]

Bangladesh: Awami League, BNP have similar track record, leader of Jatiya Party says

(lm) Ghulam Muhammed Quader, chairman of the Jatiya Party (JaPa), has voiced sharp criticism of Bangladesh's two major political parties, the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), stating that both have similar histories marred by corruption, extrajudicial killings, election interference, and other criminal activities. Quader made these remarks during a press conference on September 1, where he discussed the current political landscape and the role of the interim government.

Quader specifically mentioned that under the BNP-led government from 2001 to 2006, Bangladesh was

labeled the most corrupt nation in the world, according to global corruption indexes. He also criticized the formation of the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) during this period, which he claims led to a surge in extrajudicial killings and the politicization of state institutions.

Moreover, Quader drew parallels between the BNP's tenure and the Awami League's governance following their overwhelming victory in the 2008 elections. Quader noted that despite the public's hope for change, the Awami League continued the same practices of politicization, corruption, and election manipulation. He criticized the party for amending the constitution to perpetuate these practices, rather than addressing the root causes of public dissatisfaction.

During the press conference, Quader also expressed satisfaction with the steps and activities undertaken by the current interim government. He conveyed confidence in its ability to hold a fair and impartial election, which he believes is crucial for restoring public trust in the political process. In a recent meeting with Chief Adviser Yunus, Quader and his party proposed constitutional amendments aimed at ensuring democratic governance and fair elections without the need for continuous political movements.

Quader outlined several key suggestions for the upcoming election process, emphasizing the need for a truly impartial Election Commission formed with the consensus of all political parties. He stressed the importance of depoliticizing the police and administrative sectors to prevent them from being used as tools of the ruling party. Quader also recommended holding local government elections before the national election as a test of transparency and impartiality in the electoral process.

Moreover, Quader argued that the prime minister and the leader of the ruling party should not be the same person, to avoid conflicts of interest and ensure a separation of powers between the government, party, and state. He advocated for a constitutional limit that would prevent any individual from serving as prime minister more than twice, which he believes would curb the concentration of power.

Quader also called for the repeal of the 15th Amendment to the constitution, suggesting that if it is not repealed, a new constitution might be necessary to safeguard the country's democratic framework. He criticized the abolition of the referendum process under the 15th Amendment, labeling it a mistake, and called for the creation of a universally accepted

constitution that cannot be easily altered for political gain. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: BNP optimistic about elections post-stability, proposes constitutional amendment

(gs) The secretary general of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, expressed optimism that the interim government will hold elections once stability is restored in the country. Speaking after a meeting with Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus, Fakhrul highlighted the government's sincerity, patriotism, and competence as key factors in achieving these goals. The meeting, which lasted over an hour, was described as fruitful, with discussions focused on necessary reforms to state systems and institutions. Although no specific election date was discussed, Fakhrul indicated that further talks with political parties would take place in phases. [The Daily Star 1]

BNP proposes constitutional amendment to limit Prime Minister to two consecutive terms

In related developments, BNP acting chairman Tarique Rahman, son of former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, announced the party's intention to introduce a constitutional amendment that would prevent anyone from serving as Prime Minister of Bangladesh for more than two consecutive terms.

Speaking virtually to party leaders and activists, Tarique emphasized the need for state reforms, including a balanced distribution of power among the legislative, judiciary, and executive branches, and the introduction of a two-chamber parliamentary system. He underscored the importance of understanding and adapting to the changing political landscape following the fall of autocracy on August 5, urging BNP members to build public trust through fairness rather than force.

Tarique also called for the transformation of Gono Bhaban, the Prime Minister's residence, into a museum to commemorate victims of past government atrocities. [The Daily Star 2]

BNP dissolves Chattogram South District Convening Committee

Separately, the BNP has dissolved the convening committee of its Chattogram South District unit. This decision followed the issuance of show-cause notices to three top leaders of the district unit, demanding

explanations for their involvement in the relocation of 14 luxury vehicles owned by S Alam Group Chairman Saiful Alam Masud. A video circulating on social media showed these leaders overseeing the vehicle relocation from a warehouse, prompting the party's disciplinary action. [The Daily Star 3]

Bangladesh: Government cancels contractual appointment of Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen

(lm/cr) Bangladesh's interim government has decided to cancel the contractual appointment of Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen. Following this decision, Momen began his post-retirement leave (PRL) on September 1, lasting for one year. Momen, who took over as Foreign Secretary in 2019, had his tenure extended on a contractual basis in November 2022 until December 6, 2024. Before his role as Foreign Secretary, he served as Bangladesh's ambassador to the UN, Japan, Italy, and other international organizations.

The cancellation of his appointment is part of a broader government move to recall officials, including ambassadors appointed on political grounds. Md Jashim Uddin, the current Ambassador to China, is expected to be the next Foreign Secretary. [The Daily Star]

In a related development, two Bangladeshi diplomats in India, Shaban Mahmud and Ranjan Sen, were dismissed by Dhaka's interim government. Mahmud, stationed at the Bangladesh High Commission in New Delhi, and Sen, at the consulate in Kolkata, were asked to resign before their contracts ended. [NDTV]

Bangladesh: Gonoforum party pledges full support to interim government, calls for national unity, reform

(gs) Gonoforum, a minor political party founded in 1993 by a former member of the Awami League, has announced its full support for the interim government, setting aside internal differences to help address the country's current challenges.

At a press conference marking the party's 31st founding anniversary, Emeritus President Kamal Hossain emphasized the party's commitment to working alongside students and the public to rebuild

the nation. He called on all political parties and citizens to support the interim government, led by Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus, in its efforts to reform state institutions and ensure a fair election. Kamal highlighted the opportunity for establishing democracy and justice in Bangladesh, expressing hope for an independent and discrimination-free future for the country. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Anti-corruption body to investigate former ministers, their associates

(lm) The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) of Bangladesh has launched an investigation into former ministers Sh M Rezaul Karim and Begum Mannujan Sufian, along with five of their associates, over allegations of corruption and illegal asset accumulation. This decision follows intelligence gathered by the ACC, indicating their involvement in money laundering, project irregularities, and the accumulation of substantial illicit wealth both within Bangladesh and abroad.

Rezaul Karim, who previously held positions as the Minister for Housing and Public Works and later as the Minister for Fisheries and Livestock, is accused of misusing his power for corrupt practices, including the embezzlement of BDT 250 million (USD 2.075 million) under a livestock development project. He is also alleged to have accumulated significant movable and immovable properties in various locations.

Mannujan Sufian, a former Minister of State for Labour and Employment, along with her Assistant Private Secretary and family members, is also under investigation for corruption and illegal asset accumulation, including properties in Dhaka and Khulna. [Dhaka Tribune 1]

Courts issue travel bans on various individuals, including former ministers

In a related development, a Dhaka court has issued a travel ban on 10 individuals, including former Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan, due to corruption allegations. The ban extends to his wife, son, and daughter, as well as other officials associated with the Ministry of Home Affairs, including joint secretary Dhananjoy Kumar Das and former additional secretary Md Harun-or-Rashid Biswas. [The Daily Star 1]

Additionally, travel bans have been imposed on another 26 individuals, including 18 former ministers

and state ministers, amid similar corruption allegations. The ACC is investigating claims that these individuals amassed significant wealth through illegal means during their time in office. [The Daily Star 2]

Court freezes 19 bank accounts of ex-senior secretary of disaster management ministry, wife

Furthermore, a court has frozen 19 bank accounts belonging to Shah Kamal, former Senior Secretary of the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief, and his wife, amid corruption allegations. Shah Kamal and his wife hold significant funds across multiple accounts, raising concerns about the source of these assets. [The Daily Star 3]

All government employees asked to submit wealth statements

In a broader crackdown on corruption, the government has mandated that all public employees must submit their asset declarations. This directive, issued by the Ministry of Public Administration, reinforces existing regulations that have seen poor compliance in the past. Government employees are required by law to declare their assets upon joining service and to update these declarations every five years. The interim government is now enforcing this mandate more strictly, with discussions underway about requiring annual asset declarations alongside income tax returns to the National Board of Revenue (NBR).

Additionally, judicial officers and their families have been instructed to submit their asset declarations, including international assets, within 10 working days following consultations with the Supreme Court. [Dhaka Tribune 2]

Bangladesh: Beximco Group accused of laundering USD 135 million through trade-based schemes

(lm) The Criminal Investigation Department (CID) of Bangladesh has accused Beximco Group of laundering at least USD 135 million through trade-based money laundering. The group, which includes several companies such as Apollo Apparels, Bextex Garments, Int'l Knitwear and Apparels, and Esses Fashions, allegedly exported goods but failed to repatriate the export proceeds. Instead, they took loans against 80 percent of the export value, leaving the loans unpaid.

Beximco's vice-chairman, Salman F Rahman, who served as the private industry and investment adviser

to former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, is suspected of laundering the money and investing in real estate in Dubai, Singapore, and the United Kingdom. His son, Ahmed Shayan Fazlur Rahman, is also implicated, with claims that funds were funneled from Bangladesh to establish a pharmaceutical company in Saudi Arabia. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Board of Chittagong Chamber resigns amid protests over fair elections

(lm) Omar Hazzaz, the president of the Chittagong Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCCI), has resigned from his position, along with all 23 directors of the executive committee. The resignations were prompted by demands from groups like the "All Business Community of Chattogram" and the "Deprived Business Community" following the ousting of the Awami League government on August 5. These groups have been calling for the resignation of the CCCI's executive committee and for new elections to be held.

The executive committee had faced criticism for alleged nepotism, with its members being elected unopposed for five consecutive terms, including the most recent election on August 6 last year. Omar Hazzaz, who is the son of former Awami League lawmaker MA Latif, was chosen as the chamber's president for the 2023-24 and 2024-25 terms. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Severe floods claim at least 59 lives, leave over 700,000 stranded

(gs/lm) Severe floods in Bangladesh, which began in late August, have claimed at least 59 lives and affected over 5.3 million people across 11 districts. Although floodwaters have receded in many areas, the aftermath has left thousands of families homeless and struggling to rebuild their lives. Over 700,000 families remain marooned, with low-income families, particularly farmers, losing both their homes and livelihoods due to the destruction of crops and property.

The Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief reported that while the situation is gradually improving in some districts, significant challenges remain in rehabilitating the affected communities. Many residents are still seeking shelter with relatives or in

temporary accommodations, and the government is working to allocate resources for their recovery. [The Economic Times]

In addition to the physical damage, the floods have triggered a surge in waterborne diseases, resulting in six deaths and approximately 3,000 hospitalizations. Health officials are contending with outbreaks of diarrhea and skin diseases in areas where access to clean drinking water is limited, particularly in remote villages cut off by the floodwaters. Authorities are distributing water purification tablets and setting up temporary health camps, but the risk of further disease outbreaks remains high as they strive to provide safe water and sanitation to those affected. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Health Advisor reports over 1,000 deaths, 400 cases of blindness from uprising

(gs) Bangladesh's Health Adviser, Nurjahan Begum, reported that the recent student-led mass uprising, which led to the ouster of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, resulted in over 1,000 deaths and more than 400 cases of blindness.

After visiting the Central Police Hospital, Nurjahan noted that many injured policemen are receiving treatment for leg and head injuries. The government is working to provide specialized care for those blinded during the unrest, with plans to bring in doctors from the US-based Sheba Foundation. These victims will be treated at major eye care facilities in Bangladesh. Additionally, the government is in discussions with donor agencies, including the World Bank, to bring in international doctors for advanced treatment, especially for those who suffered severe leg injuries requiring amputations.

Nurjahan also cited reports from the Human Rights Support Society, which documented 819 deaths during the protests, based on information from victims' families, hospitals, witnesses, and national dailies. A preliminary report from the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights further indicated that 650 people were killed between July 16 and August 11 during the protests. [The Daily Star]

Bodies piled onto van: Police form 4-member probe body

In related news, the Bangladesh police have formed a four-member committee to investigate a disturbing incident in Savar, where bodies were piled onto a van

during the August 5 protests. The investigation is being led by an additional superintendent of police, though the names of the committee members have not been disclosed. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: Identification mandatory before making arrests, home advisor says

(lm) Home Affairs Adviser Lt Gen (Retd) Md Jahangir Alam Chowdhury has mandated that law enforcement agencies must identify themselves before making any arrests or conducting operations, including joint operations. This directive, emphasized by the Home Ministry's Senior Information Officer Faisal Hasan, specifies that no arrests should be made without proper identification by the officers involved. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: Several people killed as Gazi tire factory caught fire after raid by mob

(lm) A fire broke out at an auto tire factory in Narayanganj, near Dhaka, on August 25, leading to the deaths of numerous individuals after a mob raided the facility. The fire, which started in the lower part of a five-story warehouse filled with inflammable materials, trapped those who had entered the building. The exact number of people involved is unclear, but reports indicate that hundreds were present, including men, women, and children, who were attempting to loot materials to sell in scrap markets.

As the fire spread rapidly, explosions were heard, and those inside were unable to escape. By August 26, authorities reported that between 168 to 178 individuals were missing, though relatives at the scene believed the number was higher. The fire was exacerbated by the presence of industrial chemicals, which may have ignited due to careless handling by the mob.

The tragedy unfolded shortly after the arrest of Golam Dastgir Gazi, the factory owner and former minister under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, leading to speculation that the raid was linked to his detention. The incident has been described as preventable, with authorities stating that stronger policing could have averted the disaster. [The Hindu] [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Factory closures amid worker protests over wages, job security, and hiring practices

(lm/gs) On September 1, authorities closed at least 15 factories in Savar and Dhamarai due to widespread worker protests. The protests started in Palashbari and spread across the region, with workers demanding fair wages, overtime pay, attendance bonuses, and job security. Workers from GAB Limited and nearby factories blocked roads, and employees of Acme Consumers Limited presented a 16-point demand. Additional law enforcement was deployed to manage the situation. [Dhaka Tribune]

Separately, production has been halted at 10 garment and 20 pharmaceutical factories on the outskirts of Dhaka, including in areas like Savar, Ashulia, Dhamrai, and Gazipur. The protests also extended to other sectors, with workers from shoe, ceramic, and garment factories blocking major highways, leading to severe traffic disruptions. The workers are demanding bonuses, lunch allowances, medical allowances, and an end to arbitrary terminations.

Despite management's efforts to negotiate and promise phased concessions, workers have continued to strike, insisting on immediate fulfillment of their demands. In light of this, industry leaders, including representatives from the Bangladesh Association of Pharmaceutical Industries, have sought government assistance to resolve the crisis. [The Daily Star 1]

Moreover, at least 30 garment factories in Ashulia were closed amid protests by job-seeking workers demanding the "proportional" hiring of men and women in the factories. The protests, which began in the morning, saw workers blocking key roads and gathering in front of various factories. The protests escalated when workers erected barricades and threw stones at factories, leading to severe traffic congestion and increased tensions. [The Daily Star 2]

Bangladesh: Sex workers targeted in attacks across Dhaka

(lm) In Dhaka, floating sex workers have become targets of violent attacks by groups of young men, with several assaults being captured on video and shared on social media. Since August 27, at least 60 female sex workers have been injured in these attacks, according to Kallyanmayi Nari Sangha, an organization supporting floating sex workers. Dhaka is home to an

estimated 10,000 floating sex workers, who are increasingly vulnerable to such violence. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: Nationwide strike by doctors following assault on surgeons disrupts medical services

(gs/lm) Doctors and health workers at Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) and other hospitals across Bangladesh went on strike following the assault of three neurosurgeons at DMCH on August 31. The attack occurred after the death of a student, which was believed by some to be due to medical negligence. In response, doctors initiated a nationwide strike on September 1, demanding the arrest of those responsible and calling for enhanced safety measures for healthcare workers. [Dhaka Tribune]

The strike has severely disrupted medical services, especially at public hospitals like DMCH, where both outpatient and routine services were suspended. While emergency services have resumed under limited conditions, the strike has led to significant strain on the healthcare system, with many patients unable to access needed care. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: New curriculum unfeasible for implementation, education ministry says

(lm) A review of Bangladesh's National Curriculum 2022 has revealed significant issues, leading the Education Ministry to deem it unfeasible for implementation. The key problems include inadequate teacher preparation, unclear curriculum content, a severe lack of institutional capacity, and widespread negative perceptions of the assessment methods. These deficiencies have made it impractical to continue with the curriculum as planned.

The government is expected to make major revisions to address these challenges, with a potential rollback to the previous educational system hinted at by Education Adviser Wahiduddin Mahmud. The revised approach aims to minimize disruption for students, with updates to textbooks and assessment methods planned for the coming years. A comprehensive curriculum revision is anticipated to be finalized in 2025, with full implementation expected by 2026. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: USD 2.22 billion in August remittances, up 39 percent year-on-year

(lm) In August 2024, Bangladesh received USD 2.22 billion in remittances, marking a 39 percent increase year-on-year compared to USD 1.6 billion in August 2023, according to Bangladesh Bank data. This figure also represents a 16 percent rise from July 2024, when the country received USD 1.91 billion. The increase in remittances is attributed to renewed confidence among expatriates following the establishment of a new government, despite disruptions in July due to student movements, public holidays, and internet outages that had temporarily halted foreign transactions with the country's banks. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: Law enforcement recovers nearly 4,000 looted firearms, over 286,000 rounds of ammunition

(lm) The Bangladesh government has issued a directive requiring all legal firearms and ammunition issued over the past 15 years to be submitted to local police stations by September 3. Failure to comply will result in these firearms being declared illegal. This move comes as part of a broader effort to recover illegal weapons, with a joint operation involving the armed forces, BGB, Coast Guard, Police, RAB, and Ansar set to begin on September 4.

This operation is part of the response to recent mass protests that saw widespread violence, including the looting of police stations. So far, law enforcement has recovered 3,880 weapons, 286,353 rounds of ammunition, and other items looted during the unrest, including 22,201 tear gas shells and 2,139 sound grenades. [Dhaka Tribune] [The Daily Star]

Bhutan: DNT defends tax reforms amid public outcry over vehicle price surge

(lm) Amid increasing public dissatisfaction over rising vehicle prices, Bhutan’s former ruling party, Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa (DNT), has defended its tax reforms introduced in 2022. These reforms, part of the Tax Amendment Bill 2022, have been linked to significant increases in automobile costs.

The current government has distanced itself from the controversy, attributing the vehicle price hikes to the tax reforms implemented by the DNT. Finance Minister Lekey Dorji has clarified that the current administration did not endorse any new tax increases and that the vehicle price surge is a direct result of the previous government's measures.

In response, the DNT has released a statement defending its tax reforms as crucial decisions made during a period of severe crisis. The party highlighted that during their tenure, Bhutan faced significant challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic fallout, as well as the global impact of the Russia-Ukraine war. These crises strained Bhutan's foreign reserves and worsened the trade deficit, compelling the DNT to implement the vehicle import embargo and revise the tax system in 2022. [Kuensel]

Bhutan: Home ministry begins cracking down on unauthorized social media donations

(lm) In Bhutan, the Ministry of Home Affairs has begun cracking down on unauthorized social media donation drives, issuing warnings and prohibiting such activities without prior approval. This action follows previous directives issued in 2021 and 2023 aimed at ensuring accountability, transparency, and preventing scams. Despite these efforts, unauthorized donations continue, with some cases involving deception for personal gain.

The regulation primarily targets unauthorized solicitations on platforms like TikTok and Facebook, while donations at the village and community levels for specific cultural or religious practices remain exempt. [Kuensel]

Bhutan: Nikachhu Hydropower Project earns USD 11.68 million in first seven months of operation

(lm) The 118 MW Nikachhu Hydropower Project (NHP) in Bhutan has generated approximately BDT 973 million (USD 11.68 million) within the first seven months of its operation by selling about 266 million units of electricity. Launched on January 25, 2024, NHP aims to produce 491 million units of electricity annually, targeting a revenue of BDT 1.6 billion (USD 19.2 million). The project's operation is expected to

significantly contribute to Bhutan's economic growth, supporting a projected 6.5 percent growth in the services sector and a 2.5 percent rebound in the industry.

By July, the project had achieved about 50 percent of its energy production goal and 61 percent of its revenue target. The electricity generated is primarily sold to the Power Trading Corporation of India (PTC), which receives 80 percent, while the remaining 20 percent is split between the Bhutan Power Corporation (BPC) and the Indian Energy Exchange. The NHP also supports the Mangdechhu Hydropower Project (MHP) by discharging water, enhancing MHP's energy generation. Revenue from this arrangement is shared equally between the two projects.

The project was funded primarily through loans from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and Indian commercial banks, with a total cost of BDT 15.99 billion (USD 191.88 million), which exceeded the initial estimate by 36 percent. The project faced challenges including geological issues, cash flow problems, and delays due to the pandemic, resulting in the project's completion being pushed from 2019 to 2023. [Kuensel]

Bhutan: Government allocates USD 30.7 million for disaster preparedness

(lm) The Bhutanese government has allocated BDT 2.56 billion (USD 30.7 million) for disaster preparedness as part of the 13th Five-Year-Plan to enhance the country's resilience against increasingly severe weather events.

Key departments under the Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources (MoENR) will receive funding to strengthen disaster management frameworks. The National Centre for Hydrology and Meteorology (NCHM) is allocated BDT 1.7046 billion (USD 20.5 million) to develop critical infrastructure, including a 24/7 national weather and flood warning center and enhance early warning systems for hydrological and glacial lake outburst floods (GLOFs).

The Department of Forest and Park Services (DoFPS) will receive BDT 835 million (USD 10 million) to improve forest health and resilience, focusing on forest fire management, including fire hotspot mapping and community-based fire management.

The Department of Environment and Climate Change (DECC) will work on climate resilience, establishing a climate and environmental scientific museum,

developing a natural capital accounting system, and creating a Bhutan Carbon Market and Bhutan Climate Fund. [Kuensel]

Bhutan: Private schools in crisis

(lm) In Bhutan, private schools are facing a severe crisis due to inconsistent government policies over the years. The number of private higher secondary schools has drastically fallen from 21 to just four.

Key issues include the removal of the class X cut-off point by the previous government, which exacerbated enrollment declines and intensified competition with public schools. Additionally, the central school program reduced private school enrollment by half. Despite proposals like a voucher system to ease overcrowding in public schools, progress has been limited.

The government has focused on new constructions rather than supporting private schools, leaving many struggling or closing. Current discussions include repurposing closed private schools and revisiting regulations to address operational challenges. [Kuensel]

India: Supreme Court questions bulldozer justice, will lay down ‘pan-India’ norms for due process

(lm) India’s Supreme Court is moving to establish comprehensive, pan-India guidelines to address the increasing use of bulldozers by state governments to demolish properties of individuals accused of crimes, a practice that has sparked widespread controversy and has been termed 'bulldozer justice.' This action follows the court's hearing of a plea concerning the demolition drive in Delhi's Jahangirpuri area, which occurred shortly after the 2022 riots.

The 2022 Jahangirpuri riots were primarily communal in nature, involving clashes between two religious communities—Hindus and Muslims. The violence erupted during a Hanuman Jayanti procession, a Hindu religious event, when it reportedly passed through a Muslim-majority area in Jahangirpuri. Following the riots, the local authorities initiated a demolition drive in the Jahangirpuri area, targeting properties that were allegedly linked to individuals accused of participating in the violence. The demolition, carried out using

bulldozers, was widely criticized for its timing and perceived bias.

During the hearing, the petitioners highlighted that several state governments were increasingly resorting to the use of bulldozers to punish individuals by demolishing their properties, often without following due legal procedures. They argued that this practice was becoming a norm in some states, raising serious concerns about the violation of fundamental rights.

The Solicitor General, representing the Uttar Pradesh government, defended the state's actions, asserting that all demolitions conducted in Uttar Pradesh followed legal procedures. He referred to an affidavit filed in 2022, which stated that demolitions could only occur for violations of municipal laws and not merely because the property owner was involved in a criminal offense. [The Indian Express]

India: Junior doctors demand Kolkata Police Commissioner's resignation amid protests over rape-murder case

(lm) On September 2, junior doctors in Kolkata organized a protest march to the Kolkata Police (KP) Headquarters in Lalbazar, demanding the resignation of Police Commissioner Vineet Goyal. The protest was triggered by the recent rape and murder of a resident doctor at a government-run hospital, an incident that has sparked outrage among the medical community due to what they perceive as gross negligence and failure on the part of the police.

The doctors accused the police of abandoning them during the violent incident on August 15, when a mob attacked the hospital. They claimed that the police, despite being responsible for securing the area, failed to protect the staff and maintain order. The protesting doctors expressed deep frustration, noting that while the police were quick to mobilize large forces during other events, such as student marches to the State Secretariat (Nabanna), they failed to adequately protect the hospital staff or preserve crucial evidence related to the crime.

Despite multiple rounds of negotiations with senior police officials, including Deputy Commissioner Indira Mukherjee, the protest ended without a resolution. The police cited Section 144, which prohibits the assembly of more than four people in an area, as a reason for stopping the doctors' march about 800 meters from the police headquarters.

Amidst the ongoing protests, the Trinamool Congress (TMC) made an official statement on September 1, distancing itself from certain media channels like ABP Ananda, Republic, and TV9. The TMC accused these channels of pursuing an "anti-Bengal agenda-driven propaganda" and advised the public not to be misled by individuals portrayed as party supporters or sympathizers on these networks. [The Hindu 1]

West Bengal state government seeks capital punishment for convicted rapists

Meanwhile, the government of West Bengal state was set to table the "Aparajita Woman and Child Bill (West Bengal Criminal Laws and Amendment) Bill 2024" in the State Assembly on September 3. The proposed legislation seeks to impose capital punishment for individuals convicted of rape if the crime results in the victim's death or leaves her in a vegetative state. It also includes provisions for a life sentence without parole for those convicted of rape and gang rape.

The special two-day Assembly session, called in response to the rape-murder of the woman doctor, has drawn criticism from Leader of the Opposition Suvendu Adhikari, who claimed that the session was convened without consultation and was a unilateral decision by Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee. [The Hindu 2]

Supreme Court judge warns politicians' 'mob rule' abrogates judicial independence

Speaking against this backdrop, Justice Abhay Oka of the Supreme Court of India expressed deep concern over the increasing trend of "mob rule," where politicians exploit incidents to incite public outrage and promise capital punishment for the accused. In his speech, Oka emphasized that only the judiciary has the authority to deliver legal verdicts and warned that such political actions are dangerous and unconstitutional. [JURIST]

India: Prime Minister Modi urges BJP to recruit more women members as future leaders

(lm) Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) National Membership Drive on September 2, 2024, urging his party to focus on recruiting more women as future leaders in anticipation of the upcoming implementation of the 33 percent reservation for women in the lower house of the federal Parliament and State Assemblies. Modi

emphasized the importance of building capacity for women's leadership during this drive, which occurs every six years, where existing memberships are renewed, and new members are enrolled.

Modi highlighted the drive as more than just a numbers game, calling it an "ideological and emotional movement" aimed at expanding the party's base, particularly among women, youth, and in areas where the BJP has traditionally been weak. He also reminded party members of the BJP's commitment to internal democracy and encouraged them to make special efforts to strengthen the party's presence in border villages.

The membership drive, which serves as a precursor to the party's presidential election, will take place in two phases: from September 2 to September 25 and from October 1 to October 15, targeting specific milestones to ensure comprehensive nationwide engagement. [The Hindu]

India: Intense negotiations on for control of key Parliamentary Standing Committees

(lm) Intense negotiations are ongoing between the government and the opposition over the control of key Parliamentary Standing Committees, nearly three months after the 18th elections to Parliament's lower house. The delay in constituting the 24 Department-related Standing Committees stems from disagreements on which panels each side will chair.

The opposition Indian National Congress (INC), based on its strength, is entitled to chair four committees but has faced rejection from the government for its preferred choices—External Affairs, Finance, and Defence. Instead, the government has offered less prominent committees like Rural Development and Labour. In Parliament's upper house, the INC is pushing to chair the Home Ministry committee, but the government has offered the Science and Technology committee instead.

Other opposition parties, including Trinamool Congress and Samajwadi Party, are also involved in the negotiations, with each expected to chair one committee. [The Hindu]

India: BJP-led NDA crosses majority mark in Rajya Sabha after unopposed election of 12 members

(lm) India's ruling BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) has solidified its majority in Parliament's upper house, the Rajya Sabha, following the unopposed election of 12 new members. This achievement pushes the NDA's strength in the upper house to 121 seats out of the current 237-member composition, surpassing the majority threshold of 119.

The BJP's individual strength in the Rajya Sabha has now risen to 96 seats, bolstered by the unopposed election of nine of its candidates. In addition to the BJP's gains, two members from the NDA's allies were also elected unopposed: one from Ajit Pawar's faction of the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) and another from the Rashtriya Lok Manch (RLM). The NDA further benefits from the backing of six nominated members and one independent member, enhancing its legislative strength.

The Indian National Congress, the main opposition party, saw one of its members, Abhishek Manu Singhvi, elected unopposed from Telangana, bringing the opposition's total to 85 seats in the Rajya Sabha. [India TV News]

India: Parliamentary committee discusses controversial Waqf bill critics say violates constitutional rights

(lm) The Joint Parliamentary Committee convened for its second meeting to discuss the Waqf (Amendment) Bill, a piece of legislation that has generated significant controversy since its introduction on August 8.

The bill is seen as the first major initiative by the BJP-led NDA government to address issues within the Waqf system, with a focus on transparency and accountability. Specifically, it aims to overhaul the registration process for Waqf properties by establishing a centralized portal, a move that the government argues is intended to streamline and modernize the administration of these properties.

During the meeting, the committee, chaired by BJP's Jagdambika Pal, engaged with representatives from various Muslim organizations, including the All India Sunni Jamiyatul Ulama and Indian Muslims for Civil Rights (IMCR), to gather their perspectives on the proposed amendments.

One of the most debated aspects of the bill is the proposal to appoint the district collector as the primary authority responsible for determining whether a property is classified as Waqf or government land. This provision has drawn criticism from opposition parties and some Muslim organizations, who argue that it could lead to undue government interference in Waqf matters and potentially undermine the autonomy of Waqf institutions.

In addition to the changes in property classification, the bill also proposes the creation of a Central Waqf Council to work alongside existing state Waqf Boards. This council would include representation from Muslim women and non-Muslims, a move the government claims is designed to make the Waqf system more inclusive and reflective of India's diverse population.

The bill was introduced in the Lok Sabha on August 8 and was immediately met with resistance from opposition members, who accused the government of using the bill as a tool to target the Muslim community and weaken constitutional protections. The heated debate led to the bill being referred to the Joint Parliamentary Committee for further scrutiny.

In the committee's first meeting, opposition MPs raised several objections to the bill's provisions, expressing concerns about potential overreach by the government and the impact on the Muslim community's religious rights. In contrast, BJP members and supporters of the bill lauded the proposed reforms, particularly those aimed at increasing transparency, empowering women, and ensuring better governance of Waqf properties.[The New Indian Express]

India: Record 83,000 cases pending in Supreme Court despite higher judge count

(lm) Despite an increase in the number of judges, the Supreme Court of India has seen its backlog of cases grow significantly, reaching a record high of nearly 83,000 pending cases. Over the past decade, the backlog has increased eightfold, with the current count being the highest ever recorded. The backlog grew from 50,000 cases in 2009 to 66,000 in 2013, and despite some fluctuations, it has continued to rise, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, reaching around 83,000 cases by 2024.

Efforts to reduce the backlog through technology-driven measures and increasing the number of judges have had limited success. The backlog is composed of a significant portion of recent cases, with 33 percent

being less than a year old. The rate of new cases being filed almost matches the rate of case disposal, indicating ongoing challenges in managing the backlog. [Business Standard]

In the broader judiciary, a recent analysis by Moneycontrol revealed that over 510 million cases are currently pending in Indian courts. Since 2011, nearly 160 million cases have been added, with 81 million added in just the last five years. [MoneyControl]

India: Assam opposition parties file police complaint against chief minister for 'promoting enmity'

(lm) Opposition parties in India's Assam state, led by the United Opposition Forum Assam (UOFA), filed a police complaint against Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma on August 28, accusing him of promoting enmity based on religion and race. The complaint alleges that Sarma's recent statements and actions are inciting communal tension and could potentially lead to riots.

The UOFA, an alliance of 18 parties aligned with the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA), claims Sarma has a history of making provocative remarks against a specific community, including Bengali-speaking Muslims referred to derogatorily as 'Miya.' They also accused Sarma of targeting a journalist with communal undertones and instigating violence against religious minorities in the state. The UOFA has demanded Sarma's removal as Chief Minister and plans to appeal to the Supreme Court for an investigation into his and his family's alleged unaccounted wealth. Despite the complaint being filed, no case has been registered by the police as of yet. [ThePrint]

India: Human Rights Commission notifies Andhra Pradesh government over 'hidden camera' in girls' hostel

(lm) India's National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) has issued notices to the Andhra Pradesh government and the state's police chief following reports that a hidden camera was found in the washroom of a girls' hostel at an engineering college in Krishna district. The NHRC has taken suo motu cognizance of media reports alleging that over 300 photos and videos were taken from the washroom using the hidden camera.

The incident came to light when students discovered the camera, leading to protests. Some boys at a nearby hostel reportedly bought the videos, and a student is being questioned by the police. The NHRC has also sent notices to the Karnataka government and police over a similar incident in Bengaluru.

The Commission has expressed serious concerns about the safety and security of women in these environments and has requested detailed reports from the authorities within two weeks, including the status of the FIR and measures being taken to prevent such incidents in the future. [NDTV]

India: Human Rights Commission asks Maharashtra state authorities to reply on rehabilitation of people with mental health issues

(lm) India's National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) has directed Maharashtra state authorities to submit reports on the rehabilitation of 93 individuals who have recovered from mental health issues but remain unrehabilitated at the Regional Mental Hospital in Thane. This order follows a petition by human rights activist Radhakanta Tripathy, highlighting the plight of these patients, many of whom have been abandoned by their families.

The NHRC has issued reminders to key state officials, including the Chief Secretary and the Director General of Police, to submit Action Taken Reports within eight weeks. Tripathy's petition, filed in June 2022, pointed out that out of 925 patients, 240 have recovered but are not being accepted back by their families, while 239 others have been abandoned for over two years. [The New Indian Express]

India: Use of regional languages in High Courts remains limited

(lm) The use of regional languages in India's High Courts is limited, with only four out of 25 High Courts—Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar—allowed to conduct proceedings in Hindi. Despite growing advocacy for more regional language use to make justice accessible, English remains dominant.

Efforts to expand regional language use in other states have been rejected, although translations of proceedings are being promoted. Advocates argue that

the language barrier in courts alienates many litigants, particularly those from poorer backgrounds, but practical challenges for judges and lawyers remain a concern. [The Hindu]

India: Manipur Chief Minister Biren calls drone attacks on civilian population an act of terrorism

(lm) Manipur Chief Minister N. Biren Singh strongly condemned the recent drone bomb attacks on civilian populations in the state, describing them as acts of terrorism. These attacks, which occurred on September 3 in the Koutruk and Senjam Chirang areas of Imphal West district, resulted in the deaths of two people, including a woman, and left twelve others injured. Singh vowed a strong response to combat such "cowardly" attacks targeting the indigenous population and called for unity against violence and separatism.

These incidents are notable as the first use of drone-based "hi-tech weapons" in the state, marking an escalation in the methods of violence. In response, police and military forces conducted prompt counteroperations, including retaliatory firing and combing operations. Additionally, the Manipur government has ordered increased vigilance and sanitization in areas bordering Imphal West district to prevent further attacks. [The Hindu]

India: Three Coast Guard personnel missing after ALH crashes at sea off Gujarat coast

(lm) Three Indian Coast Guard personnel are missing after a Dhruv Advanced Light Helicopter (ALH) made an emergency landing at sea off the coast of Gujarat. The helicopter, which had four crew members onboard, was on a mission to evacuate a seriously injured crew member from the motor tanker Hari Leela when the incident occurred. One crew member has been rescued, and the search for the remaining three is ongoing.

The Indian Coast Guard has deployed four ships and two aircraft to locate the missing personnel. The wreckage of the helicopter has been found. [The Hindu]

India: MiG-29 fighter jet crashed near Barmer in Rajasthan

(lm) A MiG-29 fighter jet of the Indian Air Force (IAF) crashed near Barmer in Rajasthan during a routine night training mission on September 2. The pilot safely ejected, and no loss of life or property was reported. The crash occurred due to a critical technical snag, and a Court of Inquiry has been ordered to investigate the incident. The IAF operates three squadrons of the upgraded MiG-29 UPG jets, originally procured from Russia.[The Hindu]

Maldives: Debt slumps after second Fitch downgrade

(sa/lm) The Maldives' financial situation has worsened following a second downgrade of its debt by Fitch Ratings within two months, leading to a significant drop in the value of its bonds. Fitch's downgrade to CC, indicating a high risk of default, reflects "intensified pressures" on the country's currency reserves, which have sharply declined. The Maldivian sukuk, a form of debt compliant with Islamic law, fell to 71 cents on the dollar, down from over 80 cents earlier in August.

The crisis is exacerbated by the Maldives' heavy external debt, largely owed to China and India. The island nation's debt, which totals USD 3.4 billion, has been compounded by borrowing from these countries and private creditors to cover budget deficits, especially as the pandemic hit tourism revenues. With debt repayments draining the nation's reserves, the situation has become critical.

In July, the Maldives' net foreign exchange reserves fell below USD 50 million, and gross reserves dropped to under USD 400 million from about USD 500 million in May. Despite an increase in tourist arrivals, the country's reliance on imports and the peg of its currency, the Maldivian rufiyaa, to the dollar continue to pressure reserves.

The Bank of Maldives recently introduced and then reversed limits on foreign currency spending, reflecting the strain on the financial system. The finance ministry has committed to addressing these risks through fiscal consolidation and seeking support from international partners.

Muizzu has announced that China has agreed to defer loan payments and that his government is negotiating with India and China for currency swaps to alleviate

dollar shortages. However, Fitch remains uncertain about the success of these negotiations and notes that support from the IMF or other multilateral donors may require debt restructuring. [Financial Times]

Economic minister accuses sabotage amid financial crises

Against this backdrop, Economic Minister Mohamed Saeed recently alleged a deliberate attempt to disrupt the nation's financial system, echoing President Muizzu's accusations against the opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP). The controversy began after the Bank of Maldives (BML) restricted foreign transactions on debit and credit cards due to the country's depleted dollar reserves, though this decision was quickly reversed. Muizzu's party claims the MDP orchestrated the BML's actions to undermine the government. [Business Today]

Maldives: President Muizzu denies resentment towards Yameen, refutes espionage allegations

(sa) In the Maldives. President Mohamed Muizzu has stated that he holds no resentment towards former President Abdulla Yameen and emphasized that he did everything possible to secure Yameen's release from prison. In a recent interview, Muizzu detailed his efforts to assist Yameen, including advocating for his release during former President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih's administration, and offering support through the Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM).

Muizzu also rejected accusations made by Yameen and his party during recent rallies, including claims that Muizzu had spied on Yameen and received funds from the MMPRC corruption scandal, which involved the embezzlement of millions from the Maldives Marketing and Public Relations Corporation (MMPRC) through fraudulent land leases and bribes. Former President Yameen was implicated in the scandal, accused of money laundering and accepting bribes. He was convicted in 2019, which significantly impacted his political career.

Muizzu strongly denied the allegations, asserting that he had never engaged in espionage, received money from Ahmed Adeeb, or met with him. He expressed surprise that Yameen would believe such claims and reiterated his commitment to Yameen's cause throughout his presidency. [the edition]

Maldives: President Muizzu ratifies amendment to Employment Act

(lm) Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu has ratified an amendment to the Employment Act, introducing a fine of MVR 50,000 (USD 3,250) for employers who are negligent towards expatriate workers. This amendment, passed by Parliament on August 19, also grants the Cabinet the authority to set limits on the number of expatriate workers from specific countries, with a previous cap of 100,000 workers from a single country.

The amendment outlines various requirements for employers, including registering work sites, seeking necessary permits, and applying for quotas for expatriate workers. The regulations under this amendment must be published within three months of ratification. [the edition]

Maldives: Discussions being held on making HDC a public company

(lm) In the Maldives, Minister of Housing, Land, and Urban Development, Ali Haidar Ahmed, announced that discussions are underway to transform the Housing Development Corporation (HDC) into a public company, with the possibility of selling shares to the public. This idea was deliberated in a recent cabinet meeting led by President Muizzu, though no final decision has been made. [the edition 1]

Additionally, the government has decided to merge several state-owned enterprises to reduce operational costs and improve management efficiency. During a press conference, Economic Minister Mohamed Saeed announced that Regional Airports Company Limited (RACL) will be merged with Maldives Airports Company Limited (MACL), both of which will operate under a single Managing Director starting January 31, 2025.

Additionally, Fahidhiriulhun Corporation will now operate under the HDC. The government is also considering merging Maldives Fund Management Corporation (MFMC) and Business Center Corporation (BCC) as part of its reform agenda to cut spending. These changes are expected to significantly reduce operational costs and streamline the operations of the involved companies.

Further, Fenaka Corporation will be run as a subsidiary of STO, with this transition expected to be completed by January 1. [the edition 2]

Maldives: Economy improving under President Muizzu, port chief says

(lm) Maldives Ports Limited (MPL) CEO Mohamed Wajeeh shared that under President Mohamed Muizzu's administration, the Maldives has seen its highest-ever volume of imported goods. A graphic posted by Wajeeh on social media indicated that up to August 2024, the Maldives imported 12,600 tons of general cargo and 5,375 tons of container cargo, marking a 22 percent and 4 percent increase, respectively, compared to the previous year. Additionally, general cargo imports have risen by 35 percent, and container imports by 3 percent since 2018.

Wajeeh attributed these figures to an improving economy under President Muizzu's leadership, highlighting that the administration is preparing to launch significant projects to further enhance the country's economic and financial stability. The Maldives Monetary Authority (MMA) also reported that goods worth USD 2 billion were imported during the first seven months of this year. [the edition]

Maldives: Reduced sentence for inmates participating in rehabilitation

(sa) On August 29, Minister of Homeland Security and Technology Ali Ihusaan announced a new policy under President Muizzu, allowing inmates to have their sentences reduced by one day for each day spent in rehabilitation programs.

During the inauguration of the "Maldivian Cultural Yard" at Maafushi Prison, Ihusaan emphasized the government’s commitment to transforming prisoners into productive members of society rather than simply confining them. The new policy will enable prisoners to gain work experience and skills through various rehabilitation programs, which are now a prerequisite for sentence reduction.

Ihusaan revealed that this initiative is part of a broader effort to reform the prison system and integrate inmates back into society with valuable skills. The "Maldivian Cultural Yard" will offer training in practical skills such as weaving, boat building, and carpentry. [the edition]

Maldives: Civil Court employees file case against Chief Judge with JSC, ACC

(lm) Some employees of the Maldives Civil Court have filed a complaint against Chief Judge Mariyam Waheed with the Judicial Service Commission (JSC) and the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC). The complaint alleges that the Chief Judge showed favoritism during the employee recruitment process, favoring certain groups, and providing undue advantages to selected candidates. Evidence supporting these claims has been submitted.

The complaint also mentions that senior officials at the court have been involved in unethical practices, such as preparing easy exams for favored candidates and using the Chief Judge's login for presentations. [the edition]

Maldives: JSC begins probe into Chief Judicial Administrator Rizna's court case

(lm) The Judicial Service Commission (JSC) has initiated an investigation into several court cases filed against Aishath Rizna, the Chief Judicial Administrator of the Department of Judicial Administration (DJA). The cases involve issues related to the health insurance of judges and alleged unethical conduct during employee enlistment procedures. The JSC has not released detailed information and will refrain from making any statements until a verdict is reached.

Rizna, who also serves as an Assistant Resident Representative at the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), was appointed as Chief Judicial Administrator in September 2020 following amendments to the JSC's governing framework. [the edition]

Maldives: With failure to repay loan, Civil Court orders sale of Dholhiyadhoo

(lm) The Civil Court has ordered the sale of Dholhiyadhoo Island in Shaviyani atoll due to the failure of Dholhiyadhoo Investment Pvt Ltd to repay loans totaling USD 13.4 million and MVR 149.3 million borrowed from the State Bank of India (SBI) in 2014. The island, nearly completed as a five-star resort with 100 rooms, was used as collateral. The Bank of Maldives (BML) and Bank of Ceylon (BOC), which also provided loans for the resort's development, have

intervened in the case. The court has set a minimum sale price of USD 15 million (MVR 231 million) and has granted permission for the sale to be completed within 45 days. The three banks will discuss and agree on how to divide the proceeds from the sale. [the edition]

Maldives: Foreign investors to get residency

(lm) The Maldives government is planning to introduce a foreign investor residency program that will allow foreign investors to purchase housing in designated areas of the country. Economic Minister Mohamed Saeed announced that the program aims to diversify the economy and increase foreign currency inflows, with the initiative set to begin in February next year.

The program will involve the development of luxury residences in specific areas like Gaafaru or Fushidhiggaru. Foreign Minister Moosa Zameer mentioned that the program is being developed in consultation with foreign experts and will be tailored to fit the Maldives' context. [the edition]

Maldives: Human Rights Commission launches investigation into death of suspect while in custody

(sa) The Human Rights Commission of Maldives (HRCM) has initiated an investigation into the death of Adam Athhar, who died while in custody at Dhoonidhoo prison after attempting suicide.

Athhar had been detained following a domestic dispute in Malé, during which he had taken his partner hostage at knifepoint. While in his jail cell, he was discovered trying to hang himself and was promptly taken to Indira Gandhi Memorial Hospital (IGMH). Despite being discharged from the hospital twice, his condition deteriorated, leading to his death.

Upon learning of Athhar's suicide attempt, the HRCM's Rapid Response Team was immediately mobilized. The investigation will examine the circumstances of his death, the use of force by police during his arrest, and the adequacy of the medical treatment he received from the time of his arrest until his passing. [the edition 1] [the edition 2]

Maldives: Undocumented expatriate influx to Kulhudhuffushi rises amid immigration crackdown

(sa) The influx of undocumented expatriates to Kulhudhuffushi Island has increased as Maldives Immigration intensifies its crackdown on illegal expatriates in the capital, Malé City. The Kulhudhuffushi City Council reported a noticeable rise in the number of expatriates arriving on the island, with 20 to 30 people arriving earlier this month and seven more arriving by ferry in late August. Many of these expatriates are believed to be undocumented, with some already engaging in business activities on the island.

This increase in undocumented expatriates coincides with a broader effort by Maldives Immigration, which has deported 3,322 foreigners since November last year for reasons including illegal business activities and involvement in large-scale prostitution rings. [the edition]

Maldives: Former police chief says dangerous criminal recently released as well

(lm) Former Commissioner of Police Mohamed Hameed has raised concerns about the recent release of a notorious criminal who, according to him, poses a significant threat both locally and internationally. Hameed claimed that this individual was released just days before this year's Parliamentary Elections through a manipulation of the system, despite his personal efforts to prevent the release.

The allegations were made in response to a query from MP Ahmed Azan regarding the release of dangerous criminals. The Home Ministry has not yet confirmed or denied Hameed's claims. This incident has sparked discussions about the misuse of the clemency system and its impact on public safety, with Hameed urging the parliamentary Security Services Committee to address these vulnerabilities. The release of prisoners through presidential pardons, including those with serious charges, has been a contentious issue in the Maldives, with similar actions taken during previous administrations. [the edition]

Maldives: Government introduces whale shark protection policy

(sa) The Maldives government has introduced a new policy aimed at protecting whale sharks and their habitats, with updated guidelines set to take effect in three months. The policy, unveiled by the Ministry of Climate Change, Environment, and Energy, revises the existing Code of Conduct first published in 2009.

Key provisions of the policy include maintaining specific distances from whale sharks, prohibiting physical contact, and restricting the use of lights, flash photography, and certain vessels in areas where whale sharks are present. The policy also establishes a 250-meter contact zone around whale sharks with strict speed limits for vessels. Additionally, procedures for handling sick or injured whale sharks are outlined, with violations subject to fines under the Protected Species Act. [the edition]

Nepal: Kathmandu Mayor Balen, CPN-UML clash over child abuse allegations, construction ban

(lm) A heated dispute between Kathmandu Metropolitan City (KMC) Mayor Balendra Shah (Balen) and the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist) (CPN-UML) of Prime Minister Oli has gained significant attention on social media. The conflict escalated when Mayor Balen posted a photo of CPN-UML provincial legislator Rekha Sharma, accusing her of abusing a minor girl for eight years and criticizing the government, including Oli, for not arresting her despite a court ruling.

The dispute intensified after the CPN-UML Kathmandu District Committee submitted a 7-point memorandum to Mayor Balen, opposing KMC's decision to prohibit construction within 20 meters of specified land areas, a decision upheld by the Supreme Court. The CPN-UML warned of serious consequences if the decision is not reversed, but Balen defended the prohibition, urging party leaders not to confuse the public by misinterpreting the court's order.

This isn't the first time Balen has clashed with the CPN-UML and Prime Minister Oli. Earlier in June, Balen accused Oli of involvement in a NPR 100 billion (approximately USD 750 million) scam related to the Giri Bandhu Tea Estate land swap, which also trended on social media. [The Himalayan Times]

Nepal: Prime Minister Oli rejects comparisons to Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, vows to maintain stability

(lm) Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli declared that violent activities and anarchy similar to those seen in Nepal's past will no longer be tolerated. Speaking at the launch of the book "Into the Fire," authored by Captain Rameshwar Thapa, Oli dismissed comparisons made by former Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal between Nepal and political upheavals in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, emphasizing that Nepal has its own identity and will not follow the same path. Oli affirmed the government's commitment to strengthening democracy and maintaining the constitution, rejecting any attempts to disrupt the country's stability.

Former Prime Minister and Nepali Congress President Sher Bahadur Deuba, who also spoke at the event, highlighted Captain Rameshwar Thapa's significant role in shaping the current political landscape. Deuba acknowledged that Thapa played a key part in forming the ruling coalition between the Nepali Congress and Oli's Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist) (CPN-UML). He noted that Thapa, despite his close association with the CPN-UML, had been instrumental in bringing the two leaders together, facilitating cooperation that led to the establishment of the present coalition government. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Supreme Court overturns interim order on 30-year service limit for police

(lm) The Supreme Court of Nepal has upheld the government's 30-year service retirement rule for police officers, ending a legal dispute. The court overturned an earlier interim order that had allowed 21 senior police officers, led by Senior Superintendent of Police Jeevan Kumar Shrestha, to continue serving beyond the 30-year limit. The officers had petitioned against their mandatory retirement scheduled for September 1, citing the rule as unfair.

Initially, Justice Hari Prasad Phuyal had issued an order halting the enforcement of the retirement rule, leading the Nepal Police Headquarters to stop implementing the retirement decisions. However, the Ministry of Home Affairs, viewing this as judicial overreach, appealed to the Supreme Court to vacate the interim order.

After hearings on August 29 and 30, a division bench of Justices Binod Sharma and Sharanga Subedi ruled in favor of the government, allowing the retirement of 91 police officers, including a Deputy Inspector General, on September 1. The court's decision was made despite the officers' legal team boycotting the hearing due to a perceived conflict of interest with Justice Subedi.

This ruling marks a significant development, as the government plans to enshrine the 30-year retirement provision in law. The case is part of a broader context where the government has faced recent judicial challenges, including a court order to adjust the salaries of government officials, which could significantly impact the state's finances. [The Kathmandu Post 1] [The Kathmandu Post 2]

Nepal: Statute of limitations on corruption cases dropped from bill

(lm) The Nepalese government has decided to remove the statute of limitations on corruption cases from the proposed amendment to the Corruption Prevention Act 2002, following significant public backlash.

The initial draft of the bill included a provision that would have imposed a five-year time limit for prosecuting corruption cases, starting from the date the misconduct was discovered. This proposal sparked widespread controversy, with critics arguing that it could allow perpetrators of corruption to escape justice if their crimes were not uncovered within the stipulated time frame.

In response to the public outcry, Home Minister Ramesh Lekhak announced during a meeting of the State Affairs and Good Governance Committee of the House of Representatives that the government is ready to remove the controversial provision. The committee, chaired by Ramhari Khatiwada, is responsible for finalizing the bill, and the removal of the statute of limitations has now been confirmed. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: 10 including ex-DIG and incumbent sub-inspector arrested in Saptari

(lm) Police in Saptari, Nepal, have arrested ten individuals, including a former Deputy Inspector General (DIG), Gyan Bikram Shah, and a current sub-

inspector, Sanjay Neupane, for their alleged involvement in wildlife poaching and smuggling. The arrests occurred on August 28 when the suspects were caught transporting a wild boar. Along with the former DIG and sub-inspector, the arrested individuals include Aakash Baharkher Yadav, the son of a former deputy speaker, and several others from the local area. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Over 800 cases mired in delay at human rights commission

(lm) The National Human Rights Commission of Nepal is facing significant delays in resolving over 800 cases, despite having completed investigations on many of them. This backlog is attributed to the busy schedules of office bearers, misplaced priorities, and a focus on other issues such as transitional justice and an upcoming international conference on gender inclusiveness.

The commission, which is responsible for making recommendations to the government on penalties, compensation, and legal action, has been criticized for its slow progress. Of the 14,000 cases registered, decisions have been made in only around 19,000, with many cases, particularly those related to the Maoist insurgency, rape, torture, and socio-economic rights, still awaiting resolution.

The government has fully implemented only 15.3 percent of the commission's recommendations, with 45.5 percent not implemented at all, often ignoring recommendations to take legal action against human rights violators. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Aryal appointed as new Chief Secretary, despite being fourth on contender list

(lm) The government of Nepal has appointed Ek Narayan Aryal as the new Chief Secretary, succeeding Liladevi Gadtaula, who was Nepal's first female Chief Secretary and retired on August 30. Aryal, previously the Secretary at the Ministry of Home Affairs, was promoted to the top civil service position during a Cabinet meeting last week, despite being fourth on the list of contenders for the role. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Government under fire for ignoring inclusiveness in envoy picks

(lm) The Nepalese government is facing strong criticism from lawmakers across various political parties for overlooking principles of inclusiveness in recent ambassadorial nominations. Despite commitments to ensure representation from diverse communities, the majority of the 17 nominees for diplomatic posts are from the Khas-Arya community, which predominantly includes the Brahmin (Bahun) and Chhetri (Kshatriya) groups—traditionally considered higher castes within the Hindu social hierarchy. In contrast, there is minimal representation of other groups such as Janajatis, and no representation from Madheshi, Dalit, Tharu, or Muslim communities.

The nominations, made by Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli's Cabinet on July 29, have drawn complaints highlighting violations of the constitutionally mandated principle of proportional representation. Lawmakers from both the ruling and opposition parties have urged the parliamentary hearing committee to reject the nominees, citing the government's failure to adhere to its commitments to inclusiveness.

Specific complaints were also raised against some nominees, including allegations of previous misconduct and violations of appointment directives. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: CPN-UML lawmaker demands amendment in constitution to make Nepal 'Hindu State' again

(iz) A Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist) (CPN-UML) lawmaker, Kirankumar Sah, has called for an amendment to Nepal's constitution to reinstate the country as a "Hindu State." Speaking in the lower house of the federal parliament, Sah argued that the secularism adopted in Nepal's 2015 constitution has diminished the country's international standing. He cited Nepal's past success in securing positions like a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council when it was a Hindu state, contrasting it with recent failures, such as losing the election for the World Health Organization's South Asia Regional Director.

Sah criticized the current state of Nepal, highlighting issues such as youth emigration, the decline of industries and agriculture, and the closure of

educational institutions. He argued that the current constitution, which was celebrated as one of the finest in the world, has failed to bring progress or maintain the nation's identity. Therefore, he proposed that the constitution be amended to re-establish Nepal as a "Sanatana Hindu State."

This demand comes against the backdrop of Nepal's 2006 abolition of the monarchy and the declaration of a secular state following the "People's Movement II," which ended King Gyanendra's direct rule. The right-wing Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP) and some factions within the Nepali Congress have also been advocating for the return of the Hindu state and constitutional monarchy. [ANI]

Nepal: Nepal Bar protests planned judge appointments amid hierarchy dispute

(lm) The Nepal Bar Association has initiated protests against the Judicial Council's upcoming judge appointments, opposing a 2023 amendment that alters the hierarchy among judges. The amendment, which places the Supreme Court chief registrar appointed as a high court judge directly under the chief judge of the high court, is seen by the association as unconstitutional and discriminatory. The association argues that the changes unfairly demote judges appointed from among lawyers, placing them below career judges.

The protests began with a sit-in at the Judicial Council's secretariat, and similar actions will continue at district, high, and special courts. The Nepal Bar Association demands that the amendment be revoked before any new judicial appointments are made.

The protests come as the Judicial Council, led by Chief Justice Bishowambhar Prasad Shrestha, is preparing to fill vacant judge positions in the Supreme Court and high courts, with the council aiming to complete the appointments before Shrestha's retirement next month. The association has criticized the council for giving less priority to appointing judges from among lawyers, which has been a point of contention in previous appointments as well. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Ministries split in Gandaki province to accommodate more aspirants

(lm) The Gandaki Province government has increased the number of ministries from seven to nine to facilitate a power-sharing agreement between the Nepali Congress and the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist) (CPN-UML), the two main parties in the ruling federal coalition. This decision was made during a cabinet meeting on September 1, where two existing ministries were split to create the additional ones.

The move is intended to bring the CPN-UML into the Nepali Congress-led provincial government, with the Nepali Congress holding five ministries, including the Chief Minister's position, and the CPN-UML being allocated four ministries.

Independent lawmaker Rajiv Gurung (Deepak Manange) and Phanindra Devkota of the Nepal Socialist Party will be counted among the ministries allocated to the Nepali Congress. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Minister Bhattarai building on predecessor's efforts to tackle political influence in education

(lm) Nepal's Minister for Education, Science, and Technology, Bidya Bhattarai, is continuing the efforts of her predecessor, Sumana Shrestha, to address the issue of political influence in the education sector. Bhattarai has begun consultations with leaders from various political parties to seek their commitment to prevent partisan interference in schools and universities, which she identifies as a major factor in the degradation of the academic sector.

Despite initial discussions with leaders from the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist) (CPN-UML) and the Rastriya Swatantra Party, no concrete conclusions have been reached. Bhattarai is working on an education reform plan that incorporates input from political parties.

Her predecessor, Shrestha, had initiated actions against teachers and professors involved in party politics, resulting in 825 teachers resigning their political party memberships. Bhattarai has also been addressing ongoing disputes over university appointments influenced by political parties, most recently involving a conflict at Tribhuvan University over the appointment of a department head, which led her to request security arrangements from the Minister for Home Affairs. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Landslide survivors struggle with freezing cold and dire conditions

(lm) Survivors of a recent landslide in Ramechhap, Nepal, are facing harsh conditions in temporary shelters, particularly new mothers and the elderly. The landslide, which occurred in Doramba Shailung Rural Municipality, displaced 63 families, left 180 people homeless, and claimed eight lives, with two individuals still missing. The survivors are currently housed in overcrowded and cold shelters, including an old school building and a private house provided by the local government. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Menstruation taboo keeps many girls, female teachers in Achham district from school

(lm) In Achham, a district in Nepal's Sudurpaschim Province, the deep-rooted chhaupadi tradition, which stigmatizes menstruating women and girls as "impure," continues to keep many female students and teachers from attending school.

Despite the practice being outlawed seven years ago, menstruating girls and teachers at Saraswati Basic School in Kuika are still unofficially barred from entering the school during their periods. The school, which serves 66 students, 36 of whom are girls, operates under this unwritten rule due to the prevailing fear that violating the taboo could invoke divine punishment.

Local students and women's rights activists have repeatedly urged school officials and community leaders to create a more supportive environment for menstruating girls, but progress has been slow. The school's female principal, who has defied the tradition herself, acknowledges the challenge but notes that societal norms remain strong. This issue is not isolated to Saraswati Basic School, as several schools in the district face similar challenges. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Finance Ministry approves USD 4.44 million loan to Dairy Development Corporation

(lm) The Ministry of Finance in Nepal has approved a loan of NPR 600 million (approximately USD 4.44

million) to the Dairy Development Corporation (DDC) to settle outstanding payments owed to farmers. This decision follows ongoing protests by farmers demanding the clearance of their dues. Initially, NPR 10 million (approximately USD 74,000) was allocated, but an additional NPR 590 million (approximately USD 4.36 million) will be transferred from the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock Development's budget. The proposal will be submitted to the Council of Ministers for final approval.

The DDC reportedly owes NPR 1.83 billion (approximately USD 13.54 million) to dairy farmers as of mid-May, with total debts, including those from private dairies, reaching NPR 6 billion (approximately USD 44.4 million). [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Ashok Sigdel appointed Chief of Army Staff

(lm) Ashok Sigdel has been appointed as the Chief of Army Staff of Nepal, effective from September 9. President Ramchandra Paudel made the appointment following a recommendation from the Council of Ministers, as per Article 267 (5) of the constitution. Sigdel, who is currently serving as the Acting Chief of the Nepal Army, will take over from the current Chief of Army Staff, Prabhu Ram Sharma, who is on a month-long leave prior to his mandatory retirement. Sigdel is expected to serve in this position for three years, until August 9, 2027. [The Kathmandu Post]

Pakistan: Government rules out talks with ex-PM Khan party without apology over May 2023 riots

(hs/lm) The Pakistan government has made it clear that any potential dialogue with the main opposition Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf (PTI) party, under the leadership of the jailed former Prime Minister Imran Khan, would only be possible if PTI offers an unconditional apology for the violent events of May 9, 2023. These riots erupted following Khan’s arrest, during which PTI supporters allegedly attacked and damaged military and government properties, leading to a significant crackdown on the party's members.

Khan, who has been imprisoned since August 2023 on a range of charges, has proposed conditional talks with Pakistan's military, which he views as the country’s true power brokers. He has even suggested that the

military appoint representatives for these negotiations. This position was reiterated on September 1, when PTI leader Raoof Hasan asserted that negotiations between PTI and the establishment would be in the best interest of the state and emphasized the importance of all institutions working within their defined boundaries. He also mentioned that there would be no positive outcome from talks with the government. [Samaa TV]

However, the military has unequivocally rejected the notion of any discussions without an apology from Khan and his party over the May 9 violence. The riots saw widespread unrest across the country, particularly targeting military installations. In response, the government launched a broad crackdown on PTI members, with many leaders and supporters arrested, some of whom remain in custody awaiting trial.

The military has taken a hard stance, initiating court-martials for over 100 individuals accused of participating in the violence. Meanwhile, several high-profile members of PTI have distanced themselves from Khan, likely due to pressure from the military, although the military denies such interference.

The government's stance is firm, with Asif stating that it is impossible to engage in negotiations with a party that engages in activities undermining the political process. He pointed out that Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif had previously called for discussions on national issues, including a proposed "Charter of Economy" to address Pakistan's ongoing economic challenges, but no meaningful progress was made due to the PTI's stance. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Jailed ex-Prime Minister Imran Khan declares no return for PTI deserters

(ht) Imran Khan, Pakistan's jailed former prime minister and founder of the main opposition party Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), has outlined a clear policy for those who deserted the party during challenging times. Khan emphasized that he is fully aware of who left the party during difficult periods and firmly stated that such individuals would not be allowed to return. He praised those who remained steadfast in their loyalty, even in the face of violence, including torture and blackmail, and assured them of their continued place in the party.

Following the violent protests on May 9, 2023, several high-profile PTI leaders distanced themselves from Khan and the party, with some even being detained for

their alleged involvement in the unrest. These riots led to widespread disturbances across the country, particularly targeting military installations. In response, the government launched a comprehensive crackdown on PTI members, resulting in the arrest of many leaders and supporters, some of whom remain in custody awaiting trial.

Additionally, some former PTI members, including Jahangir Tareen, have gone on to form a new political party, Istehkam-e-Pakistan Party (IPP).

As the February 8 elections approach, reports have emerged that some of these deserters expressed a desire to rejoin PTI, but the party's leadership has decisively rejected their return. [Geo News]

Pakistan: JUI-F to hold own protests, avoid main opposition PTI of jailed ex-premier Imran Khan

(lm) Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F), a prominent religious and political party in Pakistan, has announced that it will stage its own protests on selected issues but will not participate in demonstrations organized by the main opposition Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) of jailed ex-Prime Minister Imran Khan. Senator Kamran Murtaza of JUI-F clarified in an interview that while the party had discussions with PTI leaders, they made it clear that their cooperation would have limits.

JUI-F, led by Maulana Fazlur Rehman, is rooted in the Deobandi school of Sunni Islam and advocates for the implementation of Sharia law. The party has a strong support base in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province and parts of Balochistan, and it wields significant influence in Pakistan's religious seminaries (madrasas). Historically, JUI-F has been an influential player in Pakistani politics, particularly in coalition governments, and has often positioned itself as a defender of Islamic values and traditions. [The Express Tribune]

This development comes as the PTI has decided to hold a public gathering at Minar-e-Pakistan on September 22. In addition, PTI is also organizing another public gathering in the capital Islamabad on September 8, which will be overseen by Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Chief Minister Ali Amin Gandapur, a close aid of Khan, along with an organizing committee. [Samaa TV] [ANI News]

Pakistan: JI leader Mushtaq Ahmed, his wife arrested in Islamabad during pro-Palestine protest

(lm) Islamabad police arrested former Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) Senator Mushtaq Ahmed, his wife, and several other protesters during a pro-Palestine demonstration in the federal capital on August 31. The arrests occurred as the protesters attempted to move towards D-Chowk, an area where the police had prohibited gatherings under Section 144 of the CrPC.

A video shared on social media showed Ahmed being forcefully taken into custody while chanting pro-Palestinian slogans. The police confirmed that the arrests were made due to violations of the ban on gatherings. The situation escalated when the protesters, who had assured the police that they would not block roads, refused to relocate their protest to a different site as suggested by a government official. [Aaj]

Pakistan: Academic links nine-hour police detention to case involving judiciary, top spy agency

(lm) Dr. Riaz Ahmed, a Karachi University professor, was detained by police for approximately nine hours, an incident he believes is linked to his involvement in a high-profile case concerning six Islamabad High Court (IHC) judges. These judges had publicly accused Pakistan's premier spy agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), of pressuring them to deliver favorable verdicts in politically sensitive cases. Among these judges is Justice Tariq Mehmood Jehangiri, whose legal credentials are under scrutiny by Karachi University, with Dr. Ahmed being part of the review process.

Dr. Ahmed stated that his detention, which occurred just hours before he was to attend a university meeting regarding the inquiry into Justice Jehangiri, was intended to prevent him from participating. He was moved between police stations and eventually released without charges. The police claimed they had mistaken him for an absconder, but the Karachi University Teacher Society (KUTS) condemned the incident, arguing that it was an attempt to obstruct his role in the inquiry and a broader attack on academic freedom. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Top economist resigns from Austerity Commitee

(lm) Pakistan's government is continuing efforts to reduce official expenditures by rightsizing all government positions from basic pay scale (BS) 1 to 22, according to a statement from the finance ministry. This follows the resignation of prominent economist Dr. Kaiser Bengali from the government's austerity committee, who cited the government's lack of commitment to reducing expenditures.

The austerity committee, formed in February 2024, was tasked with implementing institutional rightsizing reforms. Dr. Bengali, who joined the committee in March, resigned on August 29, expressing disappointment that the committee had mainly targeted lower-income positions (BS-1 to 16) while sparing higher-paid roles. He also criticized the committee for only recommending the closure of one non-commercial entity out of 70 organizations reviewed.

In response, the finance ministry clarified that the rightsizing exercise includes positions from BS-1 to BS-22, not just the lower scales. The ministry mentioned that approximately 60,000 positions might be rendered surplus, including those in higher pay scales (BS-17 to BS-22). Additionally, the government plans to abolish one ministry, merge two others, and introduce an "obligatory severance package" as part of the rightsizing process, with necessary amendments to the Civil Servants Act, 1973, to ensure fairness.

This rightsizing initiative is part of broader economic reforms aimed at reviving Pakistan's struggling economy, which has faced challenges such as low foreign exchange reserves, currency devaluation, and high inflation. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Pension Management System develops portal to digitalize its pension system

(ht) The Pension Management System (PBC) has introduced a portal for digitalizing pension system, fostering a smoother transparent process. The organization's IT wing will make the data available in just one click for the pensioners. The pensioners will be facilitated to submit e-life certificates through any digital device or a smartphone instead of opting for filing manual certifications. Every pensioner will have access to his or her pensionary record and may apply

for any necessary alterations required. The portal will be available from September 10 and is expected to facilitate almost 3500 pensioners across the country. [The Nation]

Pakistan: Water woes worsen in Islamabad as city populations booms

(ht) Water scarcity is increasing in Islamabad as the population booms while the Capital Development Authority (CDA) is struggling to manage this pressing challenge with the increasing demand. Despite efforts by CDA, the challenge requires a comprehensive approach to ensure long term water availability for the capital. [Daily Times]

Pakistan: Intelligence based operations in Balochistan leave three injured, five dead

(ht/lm) In a series of intelligence-based operations (IBOs) across multiple districts in Balochistan, Pakistani security forces killed five terrorists and injured three others. These operations were conducted in response to a recent wave of violence in which militants from the banned Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) launched attacks across the province, resulting in the deaths of at least 50 people, including 14 security personnel.

In addition to the operations in Balochistan, security forces also conducted IBOs in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Khyber district, targeting militants from the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). These operations have resulted in the elimination of 37 terrorists and significant injuries to 14 others since August 20.

The increase in militant attacks, particularly in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, follows the TTP's decision to break a ceasefire agreement with the government in 2022, leading to a sharp rise in violence targeting security forces. Pakistan has blamed the Afghan Taliban for allowing the TTP to use Afghan soil to launch attacks inside Pakistan, a charge that the Taliban administration has denied. [Dawn News 1]

Recently, Islamabad rejected the Afghan Taliban's offer to mediate talks between Pakistan and the TTP, calling it an insult to the victims of TTP's terrorist activities. Kabul's rulers had suggested that they could facilitate negotiations, with their spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid downplaying the TTP issue as an internal matter of Pakistan. [Dawn News 2]

Against this backdrop, Pakistan experienced a significant surge in anti-state violence in August, marking it as the deadliest month in six years, according to the Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (PICSS). The overall death toll in Pakistan for August reached 254, with 92 civilians, 54 security personnel, and 108 militants among the casualties. Another 150 people were injured in various violent incidents.

Balochistan was particularly affected, recording the highest number of fatalities and attacks. A total of 125 people, including 80 civilians, 22 security personnel, and 23 militants, were killed in the province due to militant activities. The rise in violence in Balochistan was stark, with a 277 percent increase in violent incidents and a 938 percent surge in deaths compared to July 2024. In contrast, some regions, such as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, showed improvements, with a decrease in violent incidents and civilian casualties, though militant casualties increased. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Senior army officer, relatives released days after kidnapping in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province

(lm) A senior Pakistan Army officer, Lt. Col. Khalid Ameer, and three of his relatives were safely released on August 31 after being kidnapped by unidentified gunmen in Dera Ismail Khan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. The abduction occurred while Ameer was visiting his ancestral village for his father's funeral. The military's media wing confirmed their "safe and unconditional" release, crediting the efforts of tribal elders and local notables for their return.

The statement did not provide details about the kidnappers, but the region has seen a rise in militant activity, particularly by the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and other groups. The Pakistani government has attributed the surge in violence to militants taking refuge in neighboring Afghanistan, a claim that Kabul denies. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Newly commissioned Pakistan Navy ship Hunain arrives at Karachi port

(lm) Pakistan Navy's newly commissioned offshore patrol vessel, PNS Hunain, arrived at Karachi port after completing its maiden voyage from Romania. The

vessel is the third of four offshore patrol vessels constructed at the Damen naval shipyard in Romania.

Equipped with advanced electronic warfare systems, anti-ship and anti-aircraft weapons, and a terminal defense system, PNS Hunain is designed to enhance the Pakistan Navy's capability to safeguard the country's maritime frontiers. [Arab News]

Sri Lanka: President Ranil Wickremesinghe forms PSC to investigate cremations during COVID-19

(sa) Sri Lanka's President Ranil Wickremesinghe announced the formation of a Parliamentary Select Committee (PSC) to investigate the accountability of those who recommended the cremation of Muslims and other religious groups during the COVID-19 pandemic. This decision was made in response to a request from the All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama (ACJU), the primary organization representing Islamic scholars and clerics in Sri Lanka. [Daily Mirror 1] [Daily Mirror 2]

The controversy over the cremation of Muslims in Sri Lanka during the pandemic arose when the government – led by President Gotabaya Rajapaksa – mandated cremation for all COVID-19 victims, disregarding Islamic burial practices. This policy sparked significant outrage from the Muslim community and international bodies, as Islamic law prohibits cremation. The government initially defended the policy on public health grounds, but eventually reversed it in February 2021 after widespread criticism.

Sri Lanka: Supreme Court dismisses petition filed against President Wickremesinghe's candidacy

(sa) The Supreme Court has dismissed a petition challenging President Ranil Wickremesinghe's eligibility for the upcoming presidential election. The petition was based on claims that Wickremesinghe had failed to appoint an Acting Inspector General of Police (IGP) and judges to the Supreme Court and Court of Appeal. Consequently, the court has ordered the petitioner to pay LKR 50,000 (approximately USD 155) in court fees. [Daily Mirror]

This comes as the previous IGP was placed on extended leave due to criticism over the mishandling of the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks, which resulted in a

vacancy in this critical position. Filling the IGP role is crucial for effective police administration and addressing ongoing security concerns. [No. 32, August/2024,1]

Sri Lanka: Presidential candidate challenges ‘mini election’ amid surge in complaints

(sa) Janaka Ratnayake, a prominent Sri Lankan businessman and presidential candidate, has expressed concerns about the legality of a recent ‘mini election’ held in Embilipitiya, arguing that it undermines the official presidential election scheduled for September 21. Ratnayake claims that this mock election, organized by an unknown group, used candidates' names in a way that could negatively impact the real election. He has called for an investigation and legal action against the organizers. [Colombo Gazette]

This issue arises amid a broader surge in election-related complaints. According to the Election Commission, 1,592 complaints have been filed concerning the upcoming presidential election, including 112 new cases reported between July 31 and August 31. These complaints mainly involve breaches of election laws, with eight reports of violence included. [Daily Mirror 1]

In a related complaint, the NPP accuses Rajitha Senarathne, a parliamentarian who recently joined President Ranil Wickremesinghe’s camp, of making a threatening statement on a YouTube channel to discourage expatriate workers from returning to Sri Lanka to vote in the upcoming presidential election. [Daily Mirror 2]

Sri Lanka: President Wickremesinghe criticizes election manifesto of left NPP alliance

(sa/lm) Sri Lanka’s incumbent President Ranil Wickremesinghe has criticized the left National People's Power (NPP) alliance’s election manifesto, claiming that its proposed tax reductions would reduce Sri Lanka's annual state revenue by LKR 200 billion (USD 660 million) and harm the country's economy. Speaking at a rally in Mawanella, Wickremesinghe warned that implementing the NPP's pledges would destabilize the economy, likening it to cutting down a

suspension bridge the country is currently crossing [Daily Mirror 1]

Wickremesinghe's comments come as Anura Kumara Dissanayake, the NPP's presidential candidate, gains momentum in the upcoming September 21 election with a strong anti-corruption platform and a critical stance on investment deals with China to avoid further debt traps. Dissanayake has emerged as a key challenger to Wickremesinghe, who has faced criticism for implementing austerity measures as part of an IMF bailout.

Dissanayake's campaign focuses on clean governance, reducing corruption, and ensuring that future investments are productive and transparent. His election manifesto proposes tax reforms, including increasing the income tax-free threshold and removing essential items from the value-added tax to ease the financial burden on citizens. The NPP also plans to enforce stricter oversight on government spending and appointments to combat corruption. [yahoo!news]

A case in point, Dissanayake recently pledged to increase government employees' salaries every six months in proportion to the cost of living. Speaking at the Development Officers' national convention, Dissanayake criticized the current government's claim that it lacks funds to raise salaries by LKR 25,000 (approximately USD 82.50) as promised. He argued that the government could have already implemented this increase if President Wickremesinghe had the will to do so. [Daily Mirror 2]

Against the backdrop of the NPP's emphasis on a strong anti-corruption platform, President Ranil Wickremesinghe recently announced that he will appoint a committee to expedite the enactment of new anti-corruption laws. Speaking during the launch of his election manifesto, he stated that the committee will include members appointed by the Speaker, professional associations, the Bar Association of Sri Lanka (BASL), and the Chamber of Commerce. [Daily Mirror 3]

Sri Lanka: SLPP's Namal Rajapaksa promises railway revitalization if elected president

(sa) SLPP presidential candidate Namal Rajapaksa promised to restore the Yarl Devi railway services to the Northern Province, which have been stalled under the current administration due to inefficiencies. Rajapaksa highlighted the success of his previous

government's efforts to establish these lines post-war. Additionally, he vowed to fast-track the completion of the 114 km Matara to Kataragama railway line. [Daily Mirror 1] [Daily Mirror 2]

In addition, Rajapaksa announced on September 2 the launch of Namal Rajapaksa's election manifesto at the ITC Ratnadeepa Hotel in Colombo. He stated that he will be continuing some of his father's policies. The event was attended by former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, former Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa, SLPP Founder Basil Rajapaksa, and former Speaker Chamal Rajapaksa. [Colombo Gazette]

Sri Lanka: Sajith Premadasa promises 'One Rank One Pay' System for police force

(sa) Opposition Leader Sajith Premadasa has pledged to implement a 'One Rank One Pay' system for police officers to address pay discrepancies. At a rally in Nikaweratiya, Premadasa also promised to continue providing temporary allowances to police and support other public servants. Additionally, he proposed subsidizing fertilizer and fuel under a future SJB government, emphasizing his commitment to addressing economic disparities. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: NPP presidential candidate Anura Kumara Dissanayake faces corruption complaint

(sa) A complaint has been filed with the Commission to Investigate Allegations of Bribery or Corruption against Anura Kumara Dissanayake, the presidential candidate of the left National People's Power (NPP) alliance.

The complaint alleges that Dissanayake improperly received a house in the Madiwela Housing Scheme despite owning a residential property in Kadawatha, located less than 25 kilometers from Parliament. According to regulations, MPs should not receive a house from the scheme if they already own property within this distance.

The complaint also notes that the Kadawatha property was purchased in Dissanayake's wife's name, as declared in his assets statement. [Daily Mirror 1]

In related updates, NPP MP Harini Amarasuriya responded to concerns about Dissanayake traveling in

expensive vehicles for election rallies by stating that the party prioritizes his security. She emphasized that the cost of these vehicles is borne by the party, not by public funds, and that ensuring Dissanayake's safety is crucial as he is the candidate poised to become the president. [Daily Mirror 2]

Sri Lanka: Bar Association demands immediate resignation of BASL President over JAICA fund controversy

(sa) The Bar Council of the Bar Association of Sri Lanka (BASL) has unanimously called for the immediate resignation of BASL President Kaushalya Navaratne after a five-member committee found that he failed to act with transparency in relation to a contract with the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). Until his resignation, the Bar Council has directed Navaratne not to exercise the powers and functions of his office. [Daily Mirror 1] [Daily Mirror 2]

Sri Lanka: Former minister Fowzie receives suspended sentence for misusing ministry vehicle

(sa) Sri Lanka's former minister A. H. M. Fowzie has been handed a two-year rigorous imprisonment sentence, suspended for ten years, by the Colombo High Court for the misuse of a vehicle belonging to the Ministry of Disaster Management. Fowzie pleaded guilty to the charge, which involved spending nearly LKR 1 million (USD 3,300) from the Finance Ministry's funds on the vehicle's maintenance.

Fowzie, who returned to Parliament last year as a member of the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), has recently extended his support to President Ranil Wickremesinghe. [Colombo Gazette]

Sri Lanka: Karunarathna Paranawithanage gazetted as MP following Thalatha Athukorala's resignation

(sa) Karunarathna Paranawithanage, also known as Karu Paranawithana, has been officially named as the new Member of Parliament to replace former Samagi Jana Balawegaya MP Thalatha Athukorala. This follows

Athukorala's resignation from Parliament on August 21. She resigned after expressing disappointment with United National Party (UNP) leaders Ranil Wickremesinghe and Sajith Premadasa, accusing them of selfishness and failing to unify the party.

In a turn of events, Athukorala has announced plans to rejoin the UNP and support President Wickremesinghe's campaign. She is also willing to accept the position of General Secretary of the UNP. Athukorala's decision to return to the UNP comes after she consulted with her supporters, many of whom urged her to assist in the President's election efforts. [Colombo Gazette 1] [Colombo Gazette 2]

Sri Lanka: Economists urge incoming president to protect central bank's independence

(sa) Economists are urging Sri Lanka's incoming president to protect the independence of the Central Bank and address taxation issues, both crucial for stabilizing the economy.

Murtaza Jafferjee, Chairman of Advocata, highlighted the significance of the 2023 Central Bank Act, which prevents the bank from financing the government directly, a change he believes is key to controlling inflation and stabilizing the rupee. He emphasized that preserving the Central Bank's autonomy and correcting misconceptions about taxation are vital for good governance and economic stability.

Verite Research Chairman, Dr. Nishan De Mel, echoed these sentiments, stressing the need to broaden the tax base rather than simply increasing tax rates. He pointed out that better tax enforcement is essential, as some countries with similar tax rates collect significantly more revenue. Dr. De Mel also advised that macroeconomic decisions, particularly regarding international borrowing, should be based on rigorous analysis to avoid future financial crises.[Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Domestic violence against women remains significant problem

(sa) According to a 2019 survey by the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA) and Sri Lanka's Department of Census and Statistics, nearly two in five women (39.8 percent) in Sri Lanka have experienced physical, sexual, or emotional violence by a partner.

The survey, which covered all women above 15 years of age across 25 districts, focused on intimate partner violence. It found that almost half of the women who experienced sexual violence did not seek formal help, primarily because they did not want to leave their children.

The survey also revealed that 21.4 percent of women had not disclosed their experiences of sexual exploitation due to feelings of shame. Additionally, a significant portion of women held traditional views on gender roles, with nearly half agreeing that "a man should be the boss" and that "a good wife obeys her husband even if she disagrees."

The report highlighted the severe psychological impacts of such violence, with a quarter of women reporting symptoms of depression and 35.7 percent having thoughts of suicide. Alarmingly, around 60 percent of women who experienced physical violence from a partner had their children witness or overhear the abuse, leading to early traumatic experiences for the children. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: New firearm policy for MPs in response to security concerns post-2022 protests

(sa) In response to security concerns following Aragalaya – a series of widespread protests and public unrest in Sri Lanka that began in 2022 – the defence ministry has decided to issue repeater shotguns to all 225 Members of Parliament (MPs) upon request and payment. This move replaces the previously issued Chinese-made pistols, many of which are now dysfunctional. The repeater shotguns, capable of firing multiple rounds without reloading, are intended solely for the MPs and cannot be sold or transferred to others.

The decision was initiated around ten months ago at the request of MPs, and the process is currently ongoing, with the shotguns being issued by the Navy. The decision was not directly related to the upcoming presidential election but was likely influenced by heightened security concerns following the violent events of Aragalaya, where a parliamentarian was killed. [Daily Mirror 1] [Daily Mirror 2]

President Ranil Wickremesinghe defends response to protests

In related updates, President Ranil Wickremesinghe defended his actions during the Aragalaya protests,

stating that if he had not intervened, Sri Lanka could have descended into lawlessness, similar to what Bangladesh is experiencing, where violence and instability have led to severe consequences, including the ousting of the Chief Justice. Speaking at an election rally in Kekirawa, he emphasized that he took control of the situation when others, including opposition leader Sajith Premadasa and Sarath Fonseka, refused to accept the responsibility. Wickremesinghe mentioned that he had invited both Premadasa and Anura Kumara Dissanayake to work with him, but they declined. [Colombo Gazette]

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

Brunei: Chairman of Public Service Commission appointed

(ma) Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah, King of Brunei, has appointed Dayang Hajah Norlila binti Dato Paduka Haji Abdul Jalil as new Chairwoman of the Public Service Commission.

Norlila previously served as the Commission's Deputy Chairman. [Radio Television Brunei]

Cambodia: Campaign against fake news announced

(dql) Cambodia's Ministry of Information has announced the launch of the Say No to Fake News!" campaign at the end of the year, as ministries and

institutions are increasingly occupied with combating the spread of fake news.

The latest September 3 incident involved a fake Royal Decree falsely promoting Minister of Interior Sar Sokha to the title of Samdech Krom Preah (“Leading Senior Prince”), which he quickly denied.

The campaign aims to reduce misinformation and promote information security. The ministry urged people to verify information before sharing and to rely on trusted media sources to prevent the spread of disinformation.

Meanwhile, the Cambodian Journalists Alliance (CamboJA), stressed the importance of clearly defining fake news and distinguishing it from legitimate government criticism. He advocated for public education on identifying false information and emphasized that efforts to combat fake news should not infringe on citizens' freedoms. [The Phnom Penh Post]

Cambodia: Five-year disaster risk reduction action plan launched

(dql) On September 2, Cambodia launched a National Action Plan for Disaster Risk Reduction (2024-2028) that aims to minimize the impact of disasters on its people, economy, and society. Senior Minister Kun Kim, first vice president of the National Committee for Disaster Management (NCDM), stated that the plan focuses on addressing disasters such as floods, storms, droughts, fires, and building collapses.

The plan outlines four strategic goals and 18 priority programs, including disaster preparedness, emergency response, and public awareness initiatives.

In 2023, Cambodia, one of Southeast Asia's most disaster-prone countries, saw 103 fatalities from natural disasters, primarily from lightning strikes, floods, and storms. [The Star]

Cambodia: 94 arrested in alleged coup plot

(ma) Cambodian authorities have arrested 94 individuals in connection with an alleged plot to overthrow the government. The arrests follow allegations made by former Prime Minister and current Senate President Hun Sen that a group was conspiring

to destabilize the current administration. The government has claimed that these individuals were involved in a coordinated attempt to undermine national security and has vowed to take firm action against such threats.

The arrests have been widely reported by critics as part of a broader crackdown on dissent and opposition in the country. [Amnesty International] [Human Rights Watch]

They come against the backdrop of ongoing concerns about territorial issues in the Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam (CLV) Triangle Development Area, which includes several northeastern provinces of Cambodia. Protests have erupted in Cambodia and among overseas Cambodian communities over the CLV Triangle Development Area. Activists, concerned that the deal could result in Cambodia losing territory and resources to Vietnam, have voiced their opposition both online and in public demonstrations. On July 22, three Cambodian activists, Srun Srorn, Peng Sophea, and San Sith, posted an 11-minute video on Facebook criticizing the CLV agreement. This video quickly garnered attention and led to their arrest the following day, July 23, as ordered by former Prime Minister Hun Sen, who accused the activists of inciting unrest (see AiR No. 34, August/2024, 3).

Indonesia: Education ministry seeks additional funds for 2025 priority programs

(si) Education and Culture Minister Nadiem Makarim announced that the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology has requested an additional budget to better implement its priority programs in 2025. The current budget ceiling of IDR 83.19 trillion (USD 5 billion) is deemed insufficient to cover essential programs, including teacher and lecturer allowances, operational assistance for state universities, and initiatives aimed at improving education quality. Makarim highlighted that the proposed budget is IDR 14.51 trillion (USD 934 million USD) lower than the previous year, which hinders the ministry's ability to fund mandatory and priority programs effectively.

To address these challenges, Makarim proposed an additional IDR 26.4 trillion (USD 1.7 billion) to support six key areas: early childhood and 12-year compulsory education, higher education, teaching and learning quality improvement, language and culture preservation, vocational education and training, and management support. This request follows President

Joko Widodo's earlier announcement on August 16 that the education sector would receive IDR 722.6 trillion (USD 4.6 billion) in the 2025 State Budget. [Antara]

Indonesia: Minister Risma to resign for East Java governor bid

(si) Indonesia's Social Affairs Minister Tri Rismaharini, known as Risma, announced her intention to step down from her ministerial role to focus on her campaign for the East Java gubernatorial election. Risma, nominated by the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), officially registered her candidacy in Surabaya alongside her running mate, Zahrul Azhar, a prominent Muslim scholar.

The PDI-P is the largest political party in the House of Representatives with 128 out of the 575 seats and in the ruling coalition.

Her decision comes amid growing tensions between Jokowi and PDI-P, to which the president belonged until April, following the February 14 presidential election, where Jokowi endorsed Prabowo Subianto over PDI-P's candidate, Ganjar Pranowo, who finished last in the race. [JakartaGlobe]

Laos: Government mulls increasing employee allowances to counter rising costs

(ma) The Laos government is deliberating an increase in employee allowances to help citizens manage the rising cost of living, driven by soaring inflation, which hit 26.1 percent in July 2024. This consideration was discussed during the August cabinet meeting, where Prime Minister Sonexay Siphandone underscored the need to address various economic issues, including labor shortages, inflation, and currency depreciation. The proposal is seen as crucial to mitigating the financial strain on workers, particularly as economic pressures have led to increased school dropouts and a migration of workers seeking better opportunities abroad.

The government aims to stabilize the domestic workforce and alleviate the impact of inflation on families, particularly as the cost of essential goods continues to rise. The proposed increase in allowances is part of a broader strategy to strengthen economic resilience amid ongoing challenges, including

fluctuating exchange rates and the high cost of imported goods. Additionally, the government is exploring further measures to stabilize the economy and ensure that public sector employees are adequately supported during these difficult times. [The Laotian Times]

Laos: Central bank increases interest rates

(ma) The Bank of Laos (BOL) has raised interest rates on both local and foreign currency deposits to address rising inflation, with rates now at 10.5 percent and 11 percent respectively. This decision follows economic pressures such as global currency fluctuations, trade deficits, and high foreign debt, which have driven inflation to 26.1 percent as of July.

Despite these efforts, challenges remain, including the impact of high U.S. interest rates, unstable gold and fuel prices, and the imbalance between currency supply and demand in Laos.

To further stabilize the economy, the BOL has implemented initiatives like QR code-based cross-border payment options with Thailand and Cambodia and launched the Lao Foreign Exchange platform to boost the domestic use of the Lao kip. These measures aim to improve financial transactions and address inflation, which has been persistently high since May 2022, peaking at 41.26 percent in February 2023. [The Laotian Times]

Laos: Foreign companies required to pay salaries in kip

(dql) The Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare has issued a directive that requires all foreign-owned organizations and companies in Laos to pay their employees in the local currency, kip, rather than foreign currencies.

Starting October 1, wages will be converted to kip based on the exchange rate set by commercial banks within three business days prior to payment, as determined by the Bank of Laos. Employers do not need additional government approval to pay in kip, even during economic instability.

The Lao Federation of Trade Unions has raised concerns about the financial impact of exchange rate fluctuations on companies. The Ministry of Labour and

Social Welfare also noted that high inflation and rising living costs are driving many Lao workers to seek employment abroad. This directive is part of broader efforts to strengthen the nation's currency amid ongoing economic challenges. [The Laotian Times]

Laos: Golden Triangle scam centers raided

(dql) On August 26, authorities in northern Laos raided scam operation centers in the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone, arresting 60 Lao and Chinese nationals just after the government's deadline to shut down illegal call centers. The operation, involving 250 police officers and officials, targeted 16 centers and will continue until all online scamming activities in the zone are eradicated.

The Golden Triangle, located along the Mekong River in Bokeo province, has been notorious for online fraud, human trafficking, prostitution, and illegal drug activities, particularly targeting Chinese visitors. Scamming operations, often run by Chinese nationals, have been rampant, with workers frequently mistreated and confined.

The Lao government had set an August 25 closure deadline following a meeting between provincial officials and the chairman of the Golden Triangle SEZ. Joint raids with Chinese authorities began on August 12, leading to the detention of 771 people, including Vietnamese and Chinese nationals, who were subsequently deported. [Radio Free Asia]

Malaysia: Bersatu Youth files police report against Deputy Prime Minister

(oc) On August 30 Bersatu Youth filed a police report against Deputy Prime Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi who allegedly planned to use taxpayers' money to fund a volunteers group tied to the government.

Meor Nqiuddin, Bersatu's operations secretary, said Zahid has been abusing power. He commented that his recent announcement on how government funds will be used to pay for the party's voluntary body, is wrong. Meor also argued that he is considering filing a complaint to the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission.

Bersatu, a party in opposition to the unity government, has members who also believe that Anwar Ibrahim might have deceived the king in the 2022 general

election. Akmal Zahin Zainal Zahir made another police report against Zahid. He claimed that the Deputy Prime Minister secured 30 statutory declarations from Barisan Nasional MP's who joined the unity coalition and supported Anwar as Prime Minister. Free Malaysia Today]

Malayasia: Government increases funding for road maintenance

(oc) The Deputy Works Minister Seri Ahmad Maslan has unveiled that the government has agreed to commit an additional USD 23 million for road maintenance across the Malaysian peninsular. Ahmad announced this on August 28 after the Peninsular Malaysia-Southern Zone federal Road Maintenance Programme 2024.

When he was asked about the ongoing sinkhole incident at Jalan Masjid India in Kuala Lumpur, which an Indian tourist fell into and has been reported as missing, he said expert advice was given to properly maintain roads. The woman has not been found and after nine days the authorities have called off the search. [Independent] [Malay Mail] [The Economic Times]

Malaysia: Prime Minister Anwar employs new secretariat to save government funds

(oc) The government has announced it will establish a Secretariat for the Rationalization of Federal Statutory Bodies with the aim of saving government funds.

According to Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim the secretariat will perform administrative tasks to ensure duplication of functions is avoided, to save money, combined by a wider overlook on public officers to ensure corruption is stamped out.

He added that an officer of the finance ministry would be stationed at each statutory body and government-related companies authorized to monitor governance and prudent financial management. [The Edge Malaysia]

Malaysia: Kedah to take Penang to court for water usage

(oc) Kedah, like Penang a state in northwestern Malaysia, plans to take the latter to court over the use of water. The Chief Minister of Kedah, Sanusi Nor said Penang has taken raw water from Sungai Muda and therefore has demanded to be paid by Penang state.

Penang's Chief Minister Chow Kon Yeow has consistently clarified over the last few weeks that Kedah should go through court to seek their demands. Yet Kedah public works, natural resources and environment committee chairman seems to be on the side of his Chief Minister, claiming Penang have repeatedly failed to pay Kedah since 2010.

Previously Kedah provided a written demand to Penang. But Chow declared Penang's continued efforts to draw water from its side of Sungai Muda, which he believes international convention deems legal.

Now it has turned into a legal battle. Kedah has appointed lawyers to pursue payment for the raw water. [Free Malaysia Today] [The Star]

Malaysia: DAP member Kit Siang's defamation case in court process

(oc) Kit Siang, member Democratic Action Party (DAP), said PAS MP Mastura Muhammad has used politically defamatory language in a court hearing last week. [DAP Malaysia]

He said the MP for Kepala Batas and member of PAS, a Islamicist fundamental political party in Malaysia, compared him with the late Communist Party leader Ching Peng thereby implying him as a communist. Kit Siang, a veteran in Malaysian politics and former leader of the opposition, announced that political difference is natural and healthy in a democracy. For him politicians will always possess different ideologies and philosophical groundings. But he has accused Masutura Muhammad of not following these rules of toleration and therefore has, in his view, performed political defamation.

He filed a court case over her words used at a political rally during the by-election campaign. Kit Siang also filed this case because she linked him to ex Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. The Penang PAS deputy chief has responded to this by pointing towards Kit Siang's supposed connection to Ching and Kuan Yew. [Malay Mail]

Myanmar: Junta plans census amidst political turmoil and widespread discontent

(sc) On September 2, Myanmar's junta announced a nationwide census scheduled for October 1-15, as a foundational step toward conducting a general election in 2025. Senior General Min Aung Hlaing stated that the census data would be crucial for compiling accurate voter lists to ensure a "free and fair multi-party democratic general election." Despite this, the junta's promise of an inclusive election has been met with skepticism and described as a sham by critics and the opposition, including the National Unity Government (NUG), which has urged the international community to denounce both the election and the census process. [Ministry of Information] [National Unity Government]

The census announcement comes against a backdrop of significant unrest in Myanmar, with the military having seized power from the elected government of Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi in February 2021. Since the coup, the country has experienced widespread protests and a brutal crackdown, leading to an armed resistance movement that includes a coalition of ethnic minority armies. According to a May report by the Special Advisory Council for Myanmar, the junta has lost effective control over 86% of the country's territory, affecting 67% of the population. In addition to the internal conflict, thousands of young people fled abroad earlier in 2024 following a conscription call by the junta, further indicating the extent of the ongoing crisis. [Reuters]

Myanmar: Arakan Army of Rakhine penetrates junta naval base

(tl) The Arakan Army (AA) has entered Myanmar junta Maung Shwe Lay Naval Base, the junta's last remaining stronghold in Thandwe Township, Rakhine State. Arakan Army official Mr. Khaing Thu Kha claimed on August 29that currently AA fighters are attacking the last remaining junta positions protecting its Maung Shwe Lay naval base. The AA launched the onslaught on the base after seizing Thandwe town and the adjacent Ngapali Beach in July.

The junta responded by reinforcing its fleet of patrol boats with naval vessels from Pathein in Ayeyarwady Region. The base now houses around eight Navy boats, which the regime uses to ship reinforcements and artillery supplies. Junta forces are also conducting

aerial attacks on villages surrounding the base as clashes intensify, inflicting civilian casualties.

Since launching its Rakhine offensive in November, the AA has seized Pauktaw, Kyauktaw, Ponnagyun, Mrauk-U, Minbya, Myebon, Rathedaung, Buthidaung, Ramree townships and seized most of Maungdaw Township on the border with Bangladesh. [The Irrawaddy][Radio Free Asia]

Myanmar: UWSA intensifies recruitment efforts amid escalating conflicts

(sc) On August 30, the United Wa State Army (UWSA), the largest ethnic armed organization in Myanmar, issued a directive for Wa men from the southern part of "Wa State", currently in Lao PDR, to return and register for military service. The directive, which mandates registration between August 31 and September 7, warns of arrest and prosecution for non-compliance. This move is part of a broader recruitment effort where the UWSA plans to enlist 4,000 personnel from each of both the southern and northern regions of "Wa State" to bolster its military ranks amid ongoing regional tensions. [Radio Free Asia]

Further recruitment activities have been reported in the Mongton Township since early August, targeting individuals over the age of 15 from both genders to join the forces. This recent drive follows a meeting between the junta and United Wa State Party (UWSP) on August 15 in Kengtung, marking an aggressive push by the UWSA to strengthen its military presence particularly in areas near the Thai border. This development represents the first recruitment effort in Mongton Township, indicating a strategic expansion of UWSA's military engagement. [Shan Herald Agency for News]

The No. 171 UWSA's Southern Military Region, located in Monghsat District of eastern Shan State and bordering Thailand, is actively deploying its newly recruited forces to the northern Shan State where severe battles are ongoing. Comprising five brigades and 25 battalions, this region houses around 100,000 Wa residents, all of whom are subjected to mandatory military service by the household. This extensive recruitment reflects UWSA's efforts to fortify its position amidst escalating conflicts within the region. [Shan Herald Agency for News]

Myanmar: Rebel group in Northern Shan captures two junta's artillery battalion headquarters

(tl) The Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) and allied resistance forces seized two artillery battalion headquarters in Taung Hkam Village, Nawnghkio Township, in northern Shan State last week, after weeks of fighting with Myanmar junta troop.

According to former Myanmar military soldier and pro-democracy Captain Zin Yaw, the TNLA and its allies overran the junta's fortifications and took control of Artillery Battalions 206 and 406. Artillery Operations Command 902 and Artillery Battalion 354 are the two surviving regime units that the TNLA and its allies are attempting to take control of in Taung Hkam village.

TNLA has not made the official announcement yet. However, Taung Hkam village is currently crowded with forces from both sides, with junta military units stranded and reinforcements sent from the Myanmar military's Eastern Command in Taunggyi city. Myanmar junta's military goal in Taung Hkam is a defensive strategy, aiming to prevent the TNLA and its allies from entering southern Shan State. [The Irrawaddy] [EBO Myanmar]

Myanmar: Junta doubles electricity rates amid economic turmoil

(sc) On September 1, the Myanmar junta has enforced a significant increase in electricity rates, a move announced in the state-run newspaper on August 30. This rate hike escalates the cost for household electricity from MMK 50 (approximately USD 0.008 based on the current exchange rate of MMK 6,300 per USD) for the first 50 units to MMK 300 (approximately USD 0.048) for usage above 201 units, up from a previous cap of MMK 125 (approximately USD 0.02).

The industrial sector, businesses, foreign embassies, and international organizations will now pay between MMK 250 (approximately USD 0.04) and MMK 500 (approximately USD 0.08) per unit, depending on usage levels, marking a substantial increase from the prior maximum of MMK 180 (approximately USD 0.03). [Myanma Alinn Daily]

The new pricing structure is part of the junta's strategy to manage escalating production costs and dwindling financial resources, amidst a backdrop of rising general

commodity prices due to prolonged political instability following the coup d'état over three years ago.

The abrupt surge in electricity bills has sparked widespread public discontent as it adds another layer of economic burden on both households and businesses already grappling with the country's financial downturn. The increase in utility costs reflects the junta's desperate attempts to generate revenue in the face of halted foreign investment, particularly in critical sectors like electricity generation. This economic isolation, compounded by ongoing internal conflicts, has deterred foreign investors, further straining Myanmar's ability to sustain its power infrastructure and stabilize its economy. [Myanmar Now] [The Irrawaddy] [BBC]

Myanmar: Residents in Arakan State face cash shortages and travel blockades

(tl) Arakan State faces cash shortages as fighting intensified in Thandwe and Gwa townships which led to a reduction in access to cash for aid providers. Banks in the state are closed, and any open ones allows only cash withdrawals. This has made it difficult for people to transfer money online to an agent's bank account, who then pays the cash, minus their commission. Arakan Army suggests people to keep using damaged banknotes as long as their serial numbers remain visible.

Internet and phone line outages in Arakan Sate have also made it harder for agents to operate and provide cash, resulting in higher commissions. Myanmar junta has closed all roads in the townships of Thandwe and Gwa, which has resulted in a serious lack of food and medications, which has raised their price. [Burma News International 1]

Tens of thousands of people have fled the townships and are in urgent need of food and medicine. Heavy fighting between the AA and the junta is ongoing near the junta's Maung Shwe Lay Naval Base in Thandwe Township and in Kyeintali Town in Gwa Township. [Radio Free Asia]

Moreover, Myanmar Junta has imposed travel restrictions on Arakan residents with National Registration Cards (NRCs) beginning with the numbers 11/xxx. Arakanese residents with 11/xxx NRCs are able to purchase highway bus tickets if they can produce recommendation letters from the ward administration and the local police station.

This has made it difficult for Arakan residents with 11/xxx NRCs to travel. Travelers have reported that recommendation letters are only valid for one day and are stressful and inconvenient to travel with family members for health issues.

Travelers have to bribe police officers and administrators 2,000 to 5,000 MMK for their recommendation letters. Myanmar junta has also banned residents of Shan State, who are also from the Wa, Palaung (Ta'ang) or Kokang ethnic groups, from travelling. People from Bago, Sagaing and Magway Division are also facing extra scrutiny and questioning when they travel, often having to show they have the correct travel documents. [Burma News International 2] [Development Media Group][Mizzima News]

Myanmar: Junta forces returnees from Thailand to join Junta army

(tl) Myanmar nationals who returned from Ranong, Thailand to Kawthaungko, Tanintharyi, Myanmar were arrested and forced to bribe money to the Myanmar military officers. The returnees were detained in Khlara 262, based in Kawthaungbe, and families are forced to choose with money. A family member reported that Myanmar nationals who had been arrested in Thailand for various reasons and returned to the country after their release date had been taken by Myanmar military officers to Khlara 262 based in Kawthaungbe since July.

The military also took away 70 of the repatriates who were sent back to their homeland from Thailand in July, including many local residents and people from other provinces and territories. Family members and locals said that since July, the army has been recruiting such returnees as soldiers, and if they cannot pay, they will send them to the army. [VOA Burmese] [Radio Free Asia]

Myanmar: Junta officers deploy youths to army front lines without training

(tl) Myanmar's junta is arresting young people in Magway Region and sending them to the front lines without any military training, according to residents. These youths are not on the conscription list and are arrested after having their phones or National Registration Cards checked by junta soldiers. If anything, suspicious is found, they are detained.

Junta soldiers demand MKK 5 million (USD 2,400) from the arrested, and if they cannot pay, they are sent directly to the front lines. A young person was arrested while traveling from Magway Town to Taungdwingyi Town and sent to the front lines without military training.

In Pwintbyu Township, junta ward administrators are collecting bribes to avoid conscripting, while in Salin Township, junta soldiers are raiding young people's homes to conscript them. [Burma News International]

Myanmar: Pharmaceutical import rules tightened

(sc) As of September 1, the junta introduced stringent new regulations on pharmaceutical imports aimed at conserving the nation's foreign currency reserves, which have been severely depleted. Announced by the regime's Foreign Exchange Supervisory Committee and detailed in a notice to the Myanmar Chamber of Commerce for Pharmaceuticals and Medical Devices on August 28, these regulations mandate that pharmaceutical importers must now repatriate their export earnings to qualify for an import license. This policy shift also includes changes to the application process, notably discontinuing online submissions via the TradeNet 2.0 system and requiring re-application for USD 103.822 million worth of import licenses previously filed by 116 companies in October 2023. [Eleven Media Group]

Junta's controlled Department of Trade has recently voided 716 license applications, valued at over $103 million, which were initially submitted by 116 pharmaceutical companies in October 2023. These regulatory adjustments are expected to significantly impact the availability and pricing of medications within Myanmar, exacerbating an already critical shortage of essential drugs. Industry insiders and a Yangon-based business analyst have expressed concerns that the new rules will complicate import processes, potentially leading to increased smuggling and higher drug prices. The requirement that imports funds must derive directly from export earnings is particularly challenging, indicating the junta's desperate measures to manage economic isolation and sanctions. Nearly three years post-coup, Myanmar faces soaring prices for necessities and a stark increase in consumer goods scarcity, signaling deepening economic and healthcare crises. [Myanmar Now] [People's Spring]

Myanmar: Junta rebrands resistance groups as terrorists

(sc) On the evening of September 2, the Myanmar junta's Anti-Terrorism Central Committee officially designated the Three Brotherhood Alliance, including the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), and the United League of Arakan/Arakan Army (ULA/AA), as terrorist organizations. This decision, announced through notifications (1/2024 for MNDAA and TNLA, and 2/2024 for ULA/AA), cited ongoing acts of violence and destruction attributed to these groups. According to the junta, these organizations have been actively involved in attacks that compromise public security, target vital infrastructure, and result in civilian casualties and property damage. These actions include the detonation of roads and bridges, mining operations, assaults on populated areas with heavy weaponry, and widespread destruction of state-owned assets. [Ministry of Information] [Ministry of Information]

This reclassification marks a significant shift, particularly for the ULA/AA, which had its terrorist designation temporarily revoked on March 11, 2021, as part of a “peace initiative” facilitated by China. However, the reinstatement of the “terrorist” label indicates a deterioration in relations and peace efforts. The declaration comes after "Operation 1027," initiated by these groups on October 27, 2023, which involved coordinated attacks and the occupation of towns in Shan and Rakhine States. An observer of the China-Myanmar situation noted that this designation might hinder any potential negotiations with the junta, likely escalating the conflict further. He pointed out that the junta's framing of the conflict not as a civil war but as terrorism suggests a strategic shift, possibly aiming to garner international counter-terrorism support. [Narinjara News] [Shan Herald Agency for News]

Philippines: Police in ongoing standoff with followers of fugitive preacher Quiboloy

(rr) Since August 24, nearly 2,000 Philippine police officers have been involved in a standoff with followers of Apollo Quiboloy, a controversial preacher who is facing charges of child abuse and human trafficking. The standoff centers around a large church compound in Davao City, where Quiboloy is believed to be hiding.

Quiboloy, a well-known televangelist and close ally of former President Rodrigo Duterte, is accused of running a sex trafficking ring that exploited young women and girls, charges he has denied. He is also wanted by the FBI, with a U.S. indictment including charges of sex trafficking and labor trafficking involving victims as young as 12 years old.

Vice President Sara Duterte, daughter of the former president, has criticized the police operation, accusing them of harassing church members. Meanwhile, Quiboloy's legal team has denied the allegations and indicated plans to file countercharges against the police. [Rappler] [Bangkok Post] [CNN]

As the operation reached its 10th day, the Philippine National Police (PNP) confirmed that Quiboloy remains inside the Kingdom of Jesus Christ (KJC) compound, despite suggestions from Vice President Duterte that he may have left. [Inquirer 1]

In a related development, the Philippine government is unlikely to grant Quiboloy's request for a written guarantee that he will not be extradited to the United States. Justice Undersecretary Raul Vasquez emphasized that such a guarantee would violate the Philippines' obligations under its extradition treaty with the U.S., suggesting that Quiboloy's best option is to surrender and face the charges in the Philippines, where he would be assured a fair trial. [Inquirer 2]

Philippines: Authorities detain more than 160 people over suspected cybercrime operation

(ga/lm) Philippine authorities recently conducted a major raid on a suspected illegal online gaming and cybercrime operation in Lapu-Lapu City, Cebu province, detaining over 160 individuals, including Chinese, Indonesians, and other Southeast Asians. This operation is part of a wider crackdown initiated by President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., who in July 2024 banned Chinese-run online gaming operations, which are believed to be linked to various criminal activities such as financial scams, human trafficking, and even murder.

The raid targeted the Tourist Garden Resort, a sprawling compound with multiple buildings, swimming pools, and entertainment facilities. This location was identified following a request from the Indonesian Embassy in Manila to rescue several Indonesian nationals reportedly forced to work in the illegal gaming operation. The authorities found 162

foreign nationals working within the compound, including 83 Chinese, 70 Indonesians, 6 Myanmar nationals, 2 Taiwanese, and 1 Malaysian. These individuals were involved in running online scams that defrauded victims through fraudulent love, gaming, and investment schemes.

The detained individuals are expected to be flown to Manila for further investigation by the Bureau of Immigration and could face deportation. The owner of the resort has been arrested and may face criminal charges for harboring illegal foreign workers.

Moreover, the crackdown has exposed deep-seated corruption within Philippine regulatory agencies, with allegations that the flourishing illegal online gambling industry has been protected by large payoffs to officials. This situation was further highlighted by the case of Alice Guo, a former mayor of a small town in Tarlac province, who was linked to a large online gambling operation. Guo, who fled the country in July, is believed to be hiding in Indonesia and faces multiple charges, including fraudulently hiding her Chinese nationality to hold public office in the Philippines. [Associated Press]

Philippines: Senator pushes more indictments over pandemic deals

(lm) In the Philippines, Senator Joel Villanueva has called on the Office of the Ombudsman to extend its accountability efforts by filing charges against additional companies and officials involved in the questionable procurement of pandemic supplies. This follows the Ombudsman's filing of graft charges against former Health Secretary Francisco Duque III and former Budget Undersecretary Lloyd Christopher Lao. Villanueva emphasized that these recent charges could represent only the "tip of the iceberg" and stressed that the pursuit of justice must continue to ensure that no one responsible for the misuse of public funds escapes accountability.

Villanueva also highlighted that Lloyd Christopher Lao was implicated in the procurement of overpriced laptops for the Department of Education (DepEd), a matter that Villanueva believes also requires urgent action due to its irregularities.

Former Senator Richard Gordon echoed Villanueva's sentiments, praising the Ombudsman's actions but asserting that the "big fish" behind these schemes have not yet been held accountable. Gordon led the Senate investigation into the contracts awarded to

Pharmally Pharmaceutical Corp., a company with a paid-up capital of PHP 625,000 (approximately USD 11,250), which secured PHP 11 billion (approximately USD 198 million) worth of contracts for pandemic supplies, the largest single amount awarded to any supplier during the pandemic.

Both senators are urging the Ombudsman to ensure that all those involved in these procurement irregularities face justice, emphasizing that the misuse of public funds during the pandemic cannot go unpunished. [Inquirer]

Philippines: Legislature passes bill establishing career progression system for public school teachers

(ga) The House of Representatives has approved the "Career Progression System for Public School Teachers Act" House Bill (HB) on its third and final reading. The bill establishes a structured career progression system for public school teachers across primary, secondary, and senior high schools. The measure aims to create a clear promotion pathway and enhance the status and compensation of educators.

The bill authorizes the Department of Budget and Management (DBM) to establish five new teaching positions, along with their corresponding salary grades. It also mandates that teacher promotions be based on merit and performance assessments rather than vacancies or quotas. Additionally, the measure prohibits the demotion of current employees or reductions in their salaries and benefits.

Under the new system, incumbent head teachers will be allowed to retain their positions or apply for reclassification. The DBM will ensure that necessary funds for teacher promotions are included in the annual government budget. [House of Representatives Philippines] [Manila Bulletin]

Philippines: Government distributes financial aid to students' parents

(ga) The Philippine government launched the Tulong Eskwela Program on August 30, distributing PHP 5.28 billion (approximately USD 95.04 million) in financial aid to 1.32 million parents of senior high school students. This initiative aims to reduce the educational financial burden on families, enabling more students

to complete their senior high school education and pursue further opportunities.

The program proceeded simultaneously in 220 areas nationwide, providing PHP 3,000 (approximately USD 54) to 660,000 parents through the Department of Social Welfare and Development's program and PHP 5,000 (approximately USD 90) to another 660,000 parents through the Department of Labor and Employment's program. [House of Representatives Philippines] [Philippine Star]

Philippines: Espenido reveals quota and reward system led to abuses in ex-President Duterte's drug war

(rr/lm) Police Colonel Jovie Espenido, a key figure in former President Rodrigo Duterte's anti-drug campaign, provided critical testimony during a House investigation into the controversial war on drugs. He disclosed that the quota and reward system implemented during the Duterte administration incentivized serious abuses and human rights violations by police officers.

Espenido claimed that orders to "neutralize" drug personalities, issued by then-PNP Chief and now Senator Ronald "Bato" dela Rosa, were interpreted by many officers as directives to kill. This led to the targeting and killing of ordinary drug users and small-time pushers rather than the intended drug lords.

Espenido further revealed that financial incentives, including a reward of PHP 20,000 (approximately USD 360) per kill, contributed to the widespread extrajudicial killings. These rewards were allegedly funded by intelligence budgets and money from Philippine offshore gambling operations (POGOs), which were funneled through high-ranking officials close to Duterte, such as Senator Christopher Lawrence "Bong" Go.

Expressing regret, Espenido noted that many of those killed were merely victims who deserved a second chance. He emphasized that during his assignments in regions like Leyte, Ozamiz City, and Bacolod City, he focused on encouraging suspects to surrender for rehabilitation rather than participating in the rampant killings that characterized the campaign elsewhere. [Philippine News Agency 1]

The PNP criticized Espenido's statements as overly broad and damaging to the police force's integrity. While acknowledging that some officers may have

strayed, officials stressed that these individuals do not represent the majority of the PNP, who are dedicated to their duties. The PNP also challenged Espenido to provide evidence to support his claims, reaffirming their commitment to ongoing reforms and human rights under President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s administration. [Philippine News Agency 2]

Philippines: Two nabbed for cops' killing over Tagaytay 'land dispute'

(lm) Two suspects have been charged with double murder after a shootout in Tagaytay City, Cavite, on September 1 led to the deaths of two police officers and a lawyer. The incident occurred reportedly due to a land dispute. [Philippine News Agency]

Philippines: Government plans USD 33 billion military upgrade with mid-range missiles, fighter jets

(rr/ga) The Philippines is planning a significant upgrade to its military by acquiring mid-range missiles and up to 40 advanced fighter jets as part of a modernization program aimed at enhancing its defense capabilities amidst rising regional tensions, particularly with China. The modernization effort, which could cost at least PHP 1.894 trillion (approximately USD 33.74 billion), is focused on strengthening the country's external defense.

The Philippine military's goal is to secure cutting-edge weaponry, including mid-range missile systems, to bolster its deterrence capabilities. This initiative was highlighted during a joint media conference by Armed Forces Chief Romeo Brawner and U.S. Indo-Pacific Commander Samuel Paparo, who discussed the increasing security cooperation between the Philippines and the United States, including the possibility of the largest joint military exercises next year.

Defense Secretary Gilberto Teodoro mentioned that the government is reviewing tenders for these acquisitions, although specific details about the countries involved or the jet models being considered were not disclosed. The potential cost for the fighter jets alone is estimated to be between PHP 300 billion and PHP 400 billion (USD 5.3 to USD 7.1 billion), with the government exploring financing options such as syndicated loans.

This move follows the recent deployment of a U.S. intermediate-range missile system in the northern Philippines during military drills, which had drawn criticism from China. The Philippines' ongoing tensions with China in the South China Sea are a driving factor behind this push to modernize its military. [Reuters] [Aerospace Global News] [Flight Global]

Philippines: Government optimist about achieving a peace deal with communist rebels

(ga) Philippines's Office of the Presidential Adviser on Peace, Reconciliation and Unity (OPAPRU) expressed strong optimism about achieving a peace agreement with the Communist Party of the Philippines, its armed unit, the New People's Army, and the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (CPP-NPA-NDFP).

OPAPRU highlighted that exploratory talks are still underway. The negotiation process involves developing a vision statement, a framework agreement, and a final peace agreement.

The discussions aim to address the socioeconomic and political factors fueling the conflict and achieve a comprehensive resolution to the decades-long insurgency. [Manila Times] [Daily Tribune]

Singapore: Citizens prioritize leadership quality over gender in response to push for more women in Parliament

(lm) Singaporeans reacted to Prime Minister Lawrence Wong's recent call for greater female representation in Parliament with mixed responses, emphasizing the importance of leadership quality over gender. While Wong highlighted the progress made in increasing the number of women MPs from none in the 70s and early 80s to nearly one-third today, many netizens expressed concerns about the focus on gender. They argued that what truly matters is having leaders who can effectively address pressing issues like the high cost of living.

Comments on social media stressed that leadership ability and the capacity to solve key problems should take precedence over merely increasing the number of women in Parliament. Some also voiced that the gender of the candidates is irrelevant if they are unable to perform and address citizens' concerns,

particularly those related to economic challenges. [The Independent]

Singapore: Court 'will not tolerate' questions on attire that imply victims invited sexual assaults

(lm) A Singapore High Court judge emphasized that while it is acceptable for lawyers to question victims of sexual crimes about their clothing to understand the context of the offense, the court will not tolerate any questioning that implies the victim's attire invited the assault.

This point was made by Justice Vincent Hoong as he upheld the conviction and 16-month jail sentence of a tutor for molesting a 10-year-old pupil. The judge acknowledged that the lawyer's comments regarding the victim's clothing could have been better phrased but concluded that they did not perpetuate harmful stereotypes or cross ethical lines. Additionally, Justice Hoong addressed the use of shielding measures for vulnerable witnesses, stating that such measures are intended to reduce trauma without implying any threat from the accused. [The Straits Times]

Thailand: New Cabinet set for royal approval amid coalition shifts

(msz/lm) Thai Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra announced that the new cabinet lineup has been finalized and will be submitted for royal endorsement this week. The 35 candidates have undergone a thorough vetting process, and the new coalition government, led by Paetongtarn's Pheu Thai Party, is expected to take office on September 15, pending royal approval.

Military-affiliated Palang Pracharath party ousted from government coalition

Notably, the Pheu Thai Party decided to exclude the military-affiliated Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP) and invite the long-time rival Democrat Party in the governing coalition. This decision follows dissatisfaction among Pheu Thai MPs with PPRP leader Gen Prawit Wongsuwon, who failed to attend the vote for electing Paetongtarn as prime minister on August 16. There are also suspicions that Gen Prawit was involved in a group of senators' move to petition the Constitutional Court to dismiss Srettha for appointing

ex-convict Pichit Chuenban as a PM's Office Minister. [Bangkok Post 1] [Thai PBS World]

Palang Pracharath party member lashes out at Prime Minister Paetongtarn

Against this backdrop, PPRP deputy leader Paiboon Nititawan criticized Prime Minister Paetongtarn on August 29 for not honoring her promise to include the PPRP in the new coalition government. Paiboon questioned Paetongtarn's ethical standards, arguing that she had publicly assured the PPRP that they would remain coalition partners with the same cabinet quota, a promise which influenced the PPRP's decision to support her as the country's 31st prime minister.

Paiboon referenced Section 362 of the Civil and Commercial Code, which holds individuals legally accountable for public promises, but clarified that the PPRP would not petition the Constitutional Court over the matter. Instead, he suggested that Paetongtarn's actions could be questioned on moral grounds. [Bangkok Post 2]

Democrat party joins Pheu Thai-led government amid intraparty rifts

Conversely, the opposition Democrat Party has decided to join the Pheu Thai-led coalition government, despite its long-standing rivalry with the party. In a unanimous vote, 34 Democrat board members and MPs approved the decision, though party leader Chalermchai Sri-on abstained as per party rules. This alliance marks a significant shift, as former Democrat leaders, including ex-prime minister Chuan Leekpai, had strongly opposed any collaboration with Pheu Thai, fearing it could further diminish the party's popularity. [Bangkok Post 3]

The decision has caused internal rifts, with some members and supporters expressing disappointment. Sirichok Sopha, a long-time Democrat MP, resigned from the party before the final vote, citing irreconcilable differences. He noted that many long-time members had already left, and he believed he might be among the last to depart. Watanya Bunnag, another prominent Democrat, criticized the move, warning that joining Pheu Thai could erode the remaining trust among the party's supporters and compromise the party's integrity.[Bangkok Post 4]

Minor party leaves government bloc

Meanwhile, the Seri Ruamthai Party, led by its sole MP Pol Gen Sereepisuth Temeeyaves, has withdrawn from the PTP-led government. Sereepisuth cited frustration

with being overlooked by the PTP and expressed dissatisfaction with the ruling party's lack of commitment to police reform. The decision to leave the coalition was made by the party's executive board, which voted 7:4 in favor of the move. Sereepisuth, a former national police chief, revealed that his long-standing relationship with Thaksin Shinawatra, PTP's de facto leader, had soured. He claimed that despite his support for Thaksin and his family, including helping PTP win many House seats, Thaksin did not promote him to key posts in the police force. Sereepisuth also mentioned that he had severed ties with Thaksin after 51 years of friendship. He denied that his departure was motivated by not receiving a deputy prime minister position in the new government. [Bangkok Post 5]

Pheu Thai secures 17 Cabinet posts in new lineup; key allies retain strategic ministries

Against this backdrop, the ruling Pheu Thai Party is set to secure 17 cabinet posts, with key figures like Phumtham Wechayachai expected to serve as both Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister, and Suriya Jungrungreangkit likely retaining his roles as Deputy Prime Minister and Transport Minister.

The Bhumjaithai Party, Pheu Thai's largest coalition partner, will receive eight cabinet positions, with Anutin Charnvirakul staying on as Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister. The United Thai Nation Party (UTN) will hold four cabinet posts, including Pirapan Salirathavibhaga as Deputy Prime Minister and Energy Minister.

Other key appointments include Varawut Silpa-archa as Social Development and Human Security Minister, and Chalermchai Sri-on as Natural Resources and Environment Minister. [Bangkok Post 6]

Thailand: 2025 fiscal budget bill set to pass; bill cut by USD 231 million ahead of final house reading

(lm) The 2025 fiscal budget bill, totaling THB 3.75 trillion (approximately USD 108 billion), is expected to pass the lower house of Parliament smoothly. The bill, which has already been approved in its first reading, is now undergoing a three-day debate starting September 3. Chief government whip Wisut Chainarun is confident of strong support from at least 320 coalition MPs.

The budget allocates THB 152.7 billion (about USD 4.4 billion) for a digital wallet handout scheme, which has drawn criticism from opposition parties. The government plans to fund this scheme with THB 450 billion (approximately USD 13 billion) from both the 2024 and 2025 budgets, as well as from the central budget and unused funds.

To cover a budget deficit, the budget will be financed by THB 2.88 trillion (around USD 83.5 billion) in tax revenue and a THB 865 billion (approximately USD 25 billion) loan. Despite the increased deficit, there is a proposed 27.9 percent rise in investment, bringing it to THB 908 billion (about USD 26 billion). [Bangkok Post 1]

Ahead of the second and third readings, it has been reported that the budget has been reduced by nearly THB 8 billion (USD 231 million). A 72-member special committee, led by Finance Minister Pichai Chunhavajira, made these cuts, impacting areas such as revolving funds, the Defence Ministry, the Interior Ministry, the Prime Minister's Office, and the Ministry of Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives. These reductions affect construction, disaster management, and research programs. [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: Royalist activist files petition to probe eligibility of Prime Minister Paetongtarn

(msz) On August 28, royalist activist Ruangkrai Leekitwattana announced that he had filed a petition with the Election Commission, asking the poll body to investigate the eligibility of Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra to hold her position. The investigation focuses on whether Paetongtarn resigned from her executive roles in 21 family-owned companies by August 15, as required, or if she only did so on August 19, three days after being elected prime minister by the House of Representatives on August 16.

Ruangkrai's petition questions whether this delay violates Sections 170(5) and 187 of the constitution, which deal with the ethics of cabinet ministers and prohibit ministers or their spouses from holding shares in commercial companies. The petition cites a report that Paetongtarn authorized a close aide to submit her resignation documents to the Department of Business Development, which was done on August 19. [Bangkok Post 1] [The Nation Thailand]

Prime Minister Paetongtarn, the ruling Pheu Thai Party leader, is the youngest daughter of former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who is widely seen as the

party's de facto leader. On the other hand, Ruangkrai is a serial petitioner known for filing petitions against non-establishment politicians and political parties. In February, he sent a petition to the National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC) to investigate the 44 MPs of the now-disbanded Move Forward Party, who attempted to amend Section 112 of the Criminal Code or the lese-majeste law. [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: Election Commission chair denies existence of dissolution petition against ruling Pheu Thai Party

(msz) During his visit to Ratchaburi province on September 1, Election Commission (EC) chairman Ittiporn Boonpracong clarified that he has not received any anonymous request for the dissolution of the ruling Pheu Thai Party, contrary to earlier reports. If a complaint is received, the EC will assess its validity and, if necessary, form a probe committee to investigate, even if the petitioner is anonymous.

The clarification follows a report that a petition had been lodged, alleging that the Pheu Thai Party was under the influence of Thaksin Shinawatra, a former party member and ex-convict, which would be illegal under political party laws. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Main opposition People's Party officially recognized

(lm) The People's Party (PP), the successor to the now-defunct main opposition Move Forward Party (MFP) has been officially recognized, according to Pakornwut Udompipatskul, a list-MP for the PP and acting chairman of the opposition coordination committee. The Election Commission has informed the Secretariat of the House of Representatives to update the records and status of MPs from the dissolved MFP to reflect their new membership under the PP. The formal process of appointing Natthaphong Ruengpanyawut, the PP leader, as the opposition leader will take place after the government presents its policies to the parliament. [Bangkok Post 1]

Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit confident in People's Party victory

In related updates, Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, leader of the Progressive Movement and co-founder of the now-defunct Future Forward Party (FFP), dismissed

former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's prediction of a landslide victory for the ruling Pheu Thai Party in the next election.

Thanathorn expressed confidence that the PP will secure a majority win in the 2027 election. He criticized the repeated dissolution of political parties by the Constitutional Court, arguing that such decisions should be left to the voters. [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: Anti-graft body late in receiving CCTV footage of Thaksin's hospital stay

(lm) Thailand's National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC) is currently investigating allegations of preferential treatment given to former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra – the de facto leader of the ruling Pheu Thai Party – during his hospitalization at Police General Hospital. The inquiry focuses on whether Thaksin received special care compared to other prisoners.

The NACC has requested CCTV footage from the hospital's 14th floor to verify Thaksin's treatment but has not yet received this footage. The commission is working to determine whether the footage exists and if it is suitable for their investigation. In addition to the CCTV footage, the NACC has sought Thaksin's medical records and other related documents but has only received partial information so far.

The delay in obtaining the evidence from both the hospital and the Department of Corrections is under scrutiny. The NACC plans to summon officials from Bangkok Remand Prison and Police General Hospital to provide testimonies, including correctional officers and medical staff involved in Thaksin's treatment.

The situation is further complicated by recent statements from Seri Ruam Thai Party leader Pol Gen Sereepisuth Temeeyaves, who has announced his party's withdrawal from the Pheu Thai-led coalition government and claimed to possess sensitive information about Thaksin's treatment. The NACC is considering whether to call Pol Gen Sereepisuth to testify. The Human Rights Commission's findings, which suggested that Thaksin received better treatment than other prisoners, will also be taken into account by the NACC as they continue their investigation. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Senator's bid to target outspoken judge shot down

(lm) On September 2, a Senate motion calling for an investigation into Constitutional Court Judge Udom Sittiwirattham's comments about the dissolution of the now-defunct main opposition Move Forward Party (MFP) was dismissed. The motion, introduced by Senator Nanthana Nanthawarophas, accused the judge of mocking the MFP during a seminar where he remarked—partially in jest—that the dissolution might have a silver lining, given the new People's Party's rapid fundraising success.

Nanthana argued that the judge's comments were inappropriate and constituted an ethical violation, urging the Senate to investigate the matter. The Senate, however, debated the motion and largely deemed it non-urgent. Most members felt that Nanthana should address the issue through an independent agency like the National Anti-Corruption Commission rather than the Senate. Following the debate, the motion was put to a vote and was overwhelmingly rejected, with 117 members voting against it and 37 in favor. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Fresh election ordered for Pathum Thani PAO chairman

(lm) Thailand's Election Commission (EC) has disqualified Charn Phuangphet, the winner of the June 30 election for chairman of the Pathum Thani Provincial Administration Organisation (PAO), due to allegations of vote buying. Charn allegedly hosted a pre-election party to influence voters. As a result, a fresh election will be held, although no date has been set yet.

Despite his disqualification, Charn is allowed to run again in the upcoming election. Charn, who ran as a Pheu Thai Party candidate, had narrowly won the previous election against former PAO chairman Pol Lt Gen Kamronwit Toopkrajang. Additionally, Charn faces a malfeasance trial related to his past performance as PAO chairman over a decade ago, specifically regarding the procurement of relief supplies during the 2011 floods. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Government's THB 10,000 digital wallet scheme faces delays amid economic skepticism

(lm) The Thai government's THB 10,000 (approximately USD 290) digital wallet scheme, designed to provide financial assistance to up to 50 million citizens, faces potential delays that could push its implementation to the next fiscal year starting October 1. This signature policy of the ruling Pheu Thai Party has encountered significant challenges, particularly in securing the necessary funding and addressing widespread skepticism about its effectiveness in stimulating the economy.

Chalermphol Pensoot, the director of the Budget Bureau, stated that if the program does not commence by next month, it will be postponed, requiring a new budget allocation if it is to be resumed later. The initial rollout was intended to begin in September, with funding already earmarked—THB 122 billion from the 2024 fiscal budget and an additional THB 20 billion from the central budget. However, the exact amount and final approval are still pending from the Ministry of Finance.

The program aims to prioritize approximately 15 million of the most vulnerable citizens, including around 14 million state welfare cardholders and people with disabilities, as the first recipients of the digital cash. The broader distribution to the remaining 30 million registered individuals is contingent on the program's initial success and the verification process to prevent duplicate payments.

The registration process for the digital wallets has been completed, and the government is prepared to move forward. However, if unforeseen delays occur and the program cannot be launched as scheduled, it will be suspended until the next fiscal year. This would necessitate a re-evaluation and reallocation of funds to support the program's continuation.

The digital wallet scheme has been promoted by the Pheu Thai Party as a key initiative to boost economic activity by injecting liquidity directly into the hands of consumers. However, critics have raised concerns about its long-term economic benefits, arguing that the one-time cash injection may not provide the sustained economic lift the government hopes for. [Bangkok Post 1]

Deputy Prime Minister Phumtham confirms digital money handout scheme to proceed

Speaking against this backdrop, caretaker Deputy Prime Minister Phumtham Wechayachai confirmed that the new coalition government will begin implementing its policies, including the digital money handout scheme, within the next two weeks. He

dismissed rumors that the digital wallet handout might be excluded from the government's policy statement, affirming that the economic stimulus measure would proceed. [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: Parliament's upper house leaning toward referendum bill

(lm) Thailand's parliamentary upper house, the Senate, has generally agreed on a referendum bill passed by the House of Representatives, although some senators expressed opposition due to the bill's replacement of the referendum's double majority requirement with a single majority, where more than half of the votes cast would suffice. In a vote on August 27, the Senate passed the bill in its first reading with 179 votes in favor, 5 against, and 3 abstentions.

Senator Phisit Aphiwatthanaphong opposed the removal of the double majority requirement, which traditionally requires both a majority of eligible voters to participate and a majority of those votes to approve the referendum. He argued that the change could result in a referendum passing with the support of only a small portion of the total electorate. Other senators, like Prapart Pintobtang, noted that the double majority has discouraged voter turnout in the past. Senator Tewarit also suggested that Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra revise the cabinet's approach to include more comprehensive questions in the referendum. [Bangkok Post]

The referendum bill is part of broader efforts to amend the current constitution, which came into effect in 2017, and which has been criticized for entrenching military influence in politics and limiting democratic participation. The bill itself focuses on the process by which a new or revised constitution could be approved by the public through a referendum. One of the key issues in the bill is the change from a "double majority" requirement—where a majority of both eligible voters and those who actually vote must approve the referendum—to a "single majority" system, where only a majority of votes cast is needed for approval.

This change is significant because it lowers the threshold for passing constitutional changes, potentially making it easier to enact reforms. However, this has raised concerns among some senators and political observers who worry that the single majority system could allow significant constitutional changes to pass with relatively low voter turnout, potentially undermining the legitimacy of the process.

Thailand: New out-of-prison detention rules defended

(lm) Thailand's Justice Minister Tawee Sodsong has defended the introduction of new regulations allowing convicts to be detained outside of prison, amidst growing concerns that the rule could potentially benefit former Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra, the aunt of incumbent premier Paetongtarn Shinawatra, if she decides to return to Thailand.

The regulation, proposed by the Department of Corrections, is intended to address severe overcrowding in the prison system, which currently houses approximately 220,000 inmates, far exceeding its capacity of 150,000 to 160,000. The new regulation outlines guidelines and eligibility criteria for inmates who may qualify for detention outside of prison, though it does not specify how many years an inmate must have left on their sentence to be eligible. Eligible inmates could include those who are seriously ill, over 70 years old, or pregnant. Each prison will assess inmates' behavior and decide on the suitability of alternative detention locations.

Tawee described the regulation as an innovative solution that aligns with Sections 33 and 34 of the 2017 Corrections Act. These sections allow for alternative detention facilities, including hospitals, particularly for sick inmates. The regulation is designed to ensure that these alternative facilities do not offer undue convenience to inmates but focus instead on rehabilitation and career training.

Moreover, he was quick to clarify that the regulation has no connection to Yingluck, who was sentenced in absentia to five years in prison by the Supreme Court's Criminal Division for Persons Holding Political Positions in 2017. Yingluck fled Thailand shortly before her sentencing, avoiding incarceration. Despite rumors, Tawee stated that the Ministry of Justice is unaware of any plans by Yingluck to seek a royal pardon.

The announcement has prompted calls for transparency from figures like former Democrat leader Jurin Laksanawisit, who questioned whether those convicted of corruption, like Yingluck, would be eligible under the new rules. He emphasized the need for clarity to prevent further public division and perceptions of preferential treatment for high-profile convicts.

This discussion arises in the context of the recent return of Yingluck's brother, former Prime Minister

Thaksin Shinawatra, to Thailand after 15 years of self-exile. Thaksin, who was sentenced to eight years in prison on his return, saw his sentence reduced to one year under a royal pardon and was quickly granted parole due to his age and health. Thaksin's release, and the circumstances surrounding it, have fueled speculation about potential similar outcomes for Yingluck should she choose to return to Thailand. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Incumbent beats People's Party rival in Ratchaburi election

(lm) Incumbent candidate Wiwat Nitikanchana was re-elected as chairman of the Ratchaburi Provincial Administration Organisation (PAO) on September 1, defeating People's Party candidate Chairath Sakissarapong. Wiwat, who ran as an independent but was believed to have backing from the Palang Pracharath Party, received 242,297 votes, while Chairath garnered 175,353 votes, according to unofficial results with 91 percent of votes counted. Voter turnout was 67 percent.

The election was seen as a test of the People's Party's popularity in local elections. Despite the loss, People's Party leaders, including former Move Forward chief adviser Pita Limjaroenrat, expressed determination to continue their efforts in future contests. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: More moonshine deaths, investigation widens

(lm) The death toll from the methanol moonshine poisoning in Bangkok has risen to eight, with six individuals remaining hospitalized, five of whom are on respirators. In response, authorities have broadened their investigation into the illegal production and sale of the toxic liquor. The probe now includes not only the original 18 liquor stalls in northern Bangkok but also additional locations in Lat Krabang, Khannayao, and Pathum Thani. [Bangkok Post 1]

A 49-year-old woman suspected of supplying the toxic moonshine to the closed stalls has been charged with illegal liquor production and recklessness causing death and serious injury. Police found hazardous levels of methanol in samples from the closed stalls and warned the public against consuming illegal alcohol. [Bangkok Post 2]

Meanwhile, a House committee is set to discuss measures with health and excise authorities to address the issue of unregulated herbal moonshine. The committee, chaired by Wisarn Techathirawat, aims to enforce the Alcohol Control Act and introduce new regulations to prevent similar tragedies. The Excise Department has been instructed to crack down on illegal alcohol production, with penalties for offenders including fines and jail terms. [Bangkok Post 3]

Against this backdrop, a Thammasat University scholar, Suthikorn Kingkaew, is advocating for a revision of Thailand's alcohol laws to better support tourism and business. He suggests extending alcohol retail hours, lifting the total ban on alcohol advertisements in favor of ads with health warnings, reducing import tariffs on alcoholic beverages, and revising the excise tax structure to tax drinks based on their alcohol content. Suthikorn argues that current restrictions, including alcohol sales bans on religious holidays and during certain hours, negatively impact tourism businesses, especially in a sluggish economy.

He also highlights the vague nature of the alcohol advertisement ban, which he believes is susceptible to abuse by corrupt law enforcement. A recent survey he cited showed that most respondents, including both Thais and foreign tourists, drink alcohol regularly without experiencing serious problems, apart from hangovers. The president of the Thai Hotels Association, Thienprasit Chaiyapatranun, supports these proposed changes, especially lifting the 2 p.m. to 5 p.m. alcohol sales ban in hotels, arguing that it would boost business and better serve international guests who expect more flexible drinking hours. [Bangkok Post 4]

Thailand: Court bans controversial teachings

(lm) A Surat Thani court has ordered a couple to stop teaching their controversial version of Lord Buddha's teachings and to take their eight-year-old son, who they claim has "mind-connecting powers," to see a psychiatrist. The court's decision came after local authorities filed a petition under the Child Protection Act 2003, aiming to safeguard the child.

The ruling prohibits the couple from broadcasting their teachings or sharing content that distorts Buddhist teachings on any media or social platforms. Additionally, the parents must ensure their son meets with a psychiatrist within 15 days and attend follow-up sessions within six months. The boy's mother

expressed her intention to appeal the ruling, believing the court's decision was influenced by manipulated images and videos on social media that misrepresented their actions. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Eight arraigned in Red Bull heir hit-and-run case

(lm) Eight high-profile individuals, including former national police chief Pol Gen Somyot Poompanmoung and former deputy attorney-general Nate Naksuk, were arraigned by public prosecutors at the Central Criminal Court for Corruption and Misconduct Cases in connection with the notorious Red Bull heir hit-and-run case. The charges stem from allegations of dereliction of duty and other misconduct related to their handling of the investigation following the 2012 incident where Vorayuth Yoovidhya, the heir to the Red Bull fortune, fatally struck a police officer with his Ferrari.

The arraignment follows a lengthy investigation by the National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC), which accused the defendants of deliberately mishandling key aspects of the case. One of the central allegations is that the speed of Vorayuth's Ferrari was altered in official reports, which played a crucial role in the dismissal of charges of reckless driving causing death —a charge that is set to expire in 2027. Other charges against Vorayuth have already been dropped, contributing to the perception of judicial leniency due to his influential family background.

The arraigned individuals include top law enforcement and forensic officials who were directly involved in the original investigation. They face serious charges that highlight concerns about corruption and the integrity of the legal process in high-profile cases involving powerful figures. Despite the gravity of the charges, the court granted bail to all eight defendants but placed restrictions on their travel, prohibiting them from leaving the country. They are required to submit their pleas by September 10.

Vorayuth Yoovidhya, the primary figure in the case, has been a fugitive since the incident, reportedly living abroad in locations such as London. His evasion of justice, coupled with the mishandling of the investigation, has drawn significant public and media scrutiny, raising questions about the influence of wealth and power on the Thai legal system.

During the arraignment, Pol Gen Somyot expressed unease about proving his innocence in court and

refrained from commenting further, stating that the matter is now in the hands of the judges. Prosecutor Suvej Chompong, who represented the Office of the Attorney-General, indicated that the prosecution would not oppose bail requests from the defendants, signaling a complex and potentially contentious legal battle ahead. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Office of the Attorney-General receives case file on cop bribes

(lm) The Office of the Attorney-General (OAG) has received a case file involving 31 suspects, including 19 police officers and 12 civilians, who allegedly attempted to extort THB 140 million (USD 4.06 million) from six online gambling suspects.

The case, which took over a year to investigate, involves a Chon Buri police chief, Pol Maj Gen Kamphon Leelaprapaporn, who is accused of offering to drop charges in exchange for money. The investigation led to a reduction of the extortion amount to THB 65 million (USD 1.88 million), which was paid by one of the suspects for his release.

The case summary, spanning over 20,000 pages, has been handed to the OAG's Corruption Litigation Office, which will decide whether to prosecute the suspects in the Central Criminal Court for Corruption and Misconduct Cases. Among the charges are bribery, neglect of duty, and violations of the Prevention and Suppression of Torture and Enforced Disappearances Act. One suspect remains at large. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: 15 Chinese scammers arrested in Chon Buri

(lm) Fifteen Chinese nationals were arrested in Chon Buri province for allegedly running a fraudulent investment scheme targeting their compatriots. The arrests occurred during a raid on a rented luxury home in Bang Lamung district, where authorities seized 18 computers and 90 mobile phones. The suspects, including 14 men and one woman, are accused of using the Work Puls application to scam over 1,000 victims, resulting in losses exceeding THB 100 million (USD 2.9 million). They were charged with working without permission and will face further legal action, deportation, and permanent blacklisting from Thailand. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Postgraduate jailed for royal defamation; activist seeks asylum in New Zealand

(lm) In Thailand, a postgraduate student has been sentenced to two years in jail for distributing books containing protest speeches that violated Section 112 of the Thai Penal Code, the royal defamation law.

In related updates, Panupong "Mike Rayong" Jadnok, a Thai political activist facing a royal defamation charge in Thailand for posting a defamatory message about the country's king, has surfaced in New Zealand, where he is expected to seek political asylum.

Panupong was sentenced in May 2024 to three years in prison after his sentence was reduced from four years due to his cooperation during the trial. An arrest warrant was issued for him after he failed to appear in court for sentencing in March. Eakapop Luara, a former red-shirt activist who also fled to New Zealand to escape similar charges, welcomed Panupong's arrival on social media. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Local offices 'main source' of data leaks

(lm) The Digital Economy and Society Ministry (DES) has identified Local Administrative Organizations (LAOs) as the primary source of personal data leaks among state agencies. Between November 2023 and July 2024, the ministry conducted checks on 31,561 state-run units and found 6,086 cases of data breaches, with LAOs accounting for 2,850 of these incidents. The "Eagle Eye" center of the Personal Data Protection Commission (PDPC) conducted the surveillance.

Although the rate of data leaks has improved, dropping from 31 percent in November to 1.6 percent in July, the issue remains significant in state agencies responsible for public services. The DES minister, Prasert Jantararuangtong, has vowed to address these breaches, educate the public about the Personal Data Protection Act (PDPA), and hold state agencies accountable, including possible legal action for data abuse. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: CAAT probes certificate claim

(lm) The Civil Aviation Authority of Thailand (CAAT) is investigating allegations that it issued an airworthiness certificate for a Commander 114 aircraft that was not fit to fly. Concerns about substandard repairs and the issuance of the certificate were raised on social media by the aircraft's owner. Despite no formal complaint, CAAT began its investigation due to safety concerns. The aircraft had undergone repairs and maintenance by different teams over two years, and after receiving its airworthiness certificate, it experienced serious issues during a test flight, including an improperly installed propeller governor, leading to a re-inspection that revealed multiple faults. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Government seeks to prevent Social Security Fund collapse

(lm) Thai Labour Minister Phiphat Ratchakitprakarn has pledged to implement measures to prevent the potential collapse of Thailand's Social Security Fund (SSF) within the next decade due to insufficient funding. Although the SSF currently holds THB 2.6 trillion (USD 75.4 billion), projected to grow to at least THB 4 trillion (USD 116 billion) by 2034, concerns remain over its long-term sustainability due to a shrinking workforce and an ageing population.

To address this, proposed measures include increasing contributions, raising the retirement age, encouraging the elderly to work part-time, and attracting more migrant workers to contribute to the fund. Additionally, the government may adjust the SSF's investment strategy to focus more on higher-risk assets, potentially increasing the investment cap from 40 percent to 50 percent.

The Social Security Office will continue to explore these options in upcoming sessions, with international experts providing insights. The SSF currently supports various expenses, including accidents, illness, unemployment, and retirement benefits for eligible members. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Juvenile justice expert's future uncertain amid DJOP budget cuts

(lm) The Department of Juvenile Observation and Protection (DJOP) is facing a potential brain drain as it considers whether to extend the contract of Thicha Nanakorn, a veteran juvenile justice expert who has served as the director of the Baan Kanchanapisek

Vocational Juvenile Training Centre for Boys for 20 years. Due to budget cuts for hiring experts, the DJOP has a policy to reduce staff, particularly specialists, for the 2025-2028 fiscal years.

Thicha announced her resignation via Facebook, expressing a mix of humor and resignation about ending her long tenure. The DJOP is currently evaluating her performance to determine if her contract will be extended, although the department could also appoint an executive of director level to replace her. Thicha has been deeply involved in juvenile justice and political cases, including those related to Thailand's royal defamation law. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Ministry targets university hazing with new measures to prevent violence

(lm) The Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research, and Innovation (MHESI) is taking steps to address and prevent hazing violence – harmful or abusive behaviors that are inflicted on individuals, often new members of a group, as part of an initiation process – in universities.

Minister Supamas Isarabhakdi held a meeting with university representatives to discuss collaborative efforts to curb hazing, particularly during the "rap nong" events, which are traditional welcoming activities for freshmen. The ministry and universities have agreed to implement regulations ensuring that hazing activities are conducted with the consent of students and are creative rather than coercive or violent. The ministry has also emphasized that any hazing-related violence will lead to accountability for university executives and punishment for involved students.

Efforts to reduce hazing violence have shown positive results, with a noted decline in such incidents, and institutions like the Pathumwan Institute of Technology have introduced successful models to combat the issue. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: ACT probes Koh Rap title deeds amid stunted 'park'

(lm) Police officers from the Anti-Corruption Division (ACD) are investigating the issuance of 33 land title

deeds on Koh Rap, an island in Surat Thani province, despite plans to declare the area as part of the Hat Khanom-Mu Koh Thale Tai National Park. The investigation aims to verify the legality of the title deeds, which cover more than 400 rai (640,000 square meters).

Koh Rap is set to be part of the national park, but the official designation has been delayed for 34 years, during which nearly 72,000 rai (115.2 square kilometers) of the intended parkland has been lost due to overlapping claims. If the title deeds are found to have been issued improperly, the land will be seized, and the deeds revoked.

Authorities are using historical aerial photographs and land documents dating back to 1955 as part of the investigation. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: 'Dodgy' types buying up land on Koh Chang island

(lm) Chaiwat Limlikhit-aksorn, the chief of Thailand's National Parks Office, has raised concerns about the increasing acquisition of land on Koh Chang island by investors suspected of having ties to dubious businesses. These investors are buying large areas of land from locals, leading to the expansion of big businesses that are overshadowing local enterprises. Chaiwat emphasized the need for government and local officials to monitor these developments closely.

He also highlighted the importance of using modern technologies to combat encroachment on protected lands and stressed the need for local communities to preserve the island's forests and natural environment to ensure sustainable water resources.

Additionally, Chaiwat noted the importance of maintaining Koh Chang's cultural uniqueness amidst growing tourism and development, while also addressing concerns over activities like jet-skiing in the Koh Chang National Marine Park, which is designated as a conservation area with restricted tourism activities. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Government drawing up bill to get Land Bridge infrastructure project going

(lm) The Thai government is progressing with the Land Bridge megaproject by drafting the Southern Economic Corridor (SEC) bill, essential for its continuation, according to Transport Minister Suriya Jungrungreangkit. The one-trillion-baht project aims to create a shipping shortcut connecting Ranong and Chumphon, offering an alternative route for cargo ships between the Andaman Sea and the Gulf of Thailand, which is expected to boost the south's economy.

The SEC bill is currently being prepared and will be submitted for approval, with the SEC Act anticipated to be enacted by September 2025. The act will guide the development of Surat Thani, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Chumphon, and Ranong.

Environmental assessments are expected to conclude by the end of next year, with construction slated to begin in the third quarter of 2026. The Land Bridge is projected to be fully operational by 2030, and the government is inviting international investors to participate in the project. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Wide support for Koh Chang bridge at first public hearing

(lm) At the first public hearing for the proposed bridge to Koh Chang in Trat province, the Expressway Authority of Thailand (EXAT) presented four potential routes. The four proposed routes vary in length from 5.59 to 9.95 kilometers, with construction expected to begin in 2029 and completion in 2033. The hearing, held in Muang district, showed strong support for the project, with participants advocating for a route that would pass through Muang district to boost the local economy.

Attendees also suggested that the bridge toll be lower than current ferry fares and that it should accommodate motorcycles, bicycles, and include viewpoints. EXAT agreed that the bridge should contribute to Trat's economic growth and confirmed that the bridge would not impact the island's coral and seagrass. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Government revives controversial USD 5.8 billion water management project

(lm) The Thai government plans to revive a THB 200 billion (USD 5.8 billion) water management project to address severe flooding in the Yom River basin in northern Thailand. This initiative, initially launched under the Yingluck Shinawatra administration but halted by the 2014 military coup, includes controversial plans for the Kaeng Sua Ten Dam. The project aims to create flood storage areas similar to those along other major rivers.

Caretaker Deputy Prime Minister Phumtham Wechayachai announced the revival and emphasized making water management a national priority, proposing the plan to the cabinet. However, there is opposition to the dam, with concerns about its environmental impact and outdated data. [Bangkok Post 1]

Against this backdrop, around 150 residents in Phrae's Song district protested on September 1 against the revival of the Kaeng Sue Ten Dam project, which they argue would impact thousands of households and destroy over 10,000 rai (approximately 1,600 hectares) of prime forest.

The protesters criticized politicians for pushing the project following recent floods. They expressed concerns that the dam would only marginally reduce flooding in the Yom River basin while devastating large areas of forest, potentially worsening future droughts and floods. Additionally, the dam's location on a fault line raised fears of a possible disaster if it were to fail.

The villagers called on the government to abandon the project and seek sustainable water management alternatives. The protest is set to continue on September 7. [Bangkok Post 2]

Prime Minister Paetongtarn confident there will be no repeat of 2011 floods

Speaking under the impression of the severe flooding in northern Thailand, Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra expressed confidence that Bangkok will not experience a repeat of the devastating 2011 floods. During a visit to flood-affected areas in Sukhothai province, she reassured residents that current water levels are dropping and the situation is improving.

She emphasized that the upper dams have sufficient capacity to prevent downstream flooding and that no significant storms are expected, making Bangkok safe from flooding. Paetongtarn also noted that the rainfall this year is not anticipated to reach the levels seen in 2011.

Meanwhile, in Nakhon Phanom, authorities declared Na Thom and Sri Songkhram districts as disaster zones after tributaries of the Mekong River overflowed, flooding over 20,000 rai (roughly 3,200 hectares) of paddy fields. [Bangkok Post 3]

Thailand: Parliament's lower house rejects People Party's transport bill

(msz) The House of Representatives in Thailand rejected a transport bill proposed by the main opposition People's Party (PP) that aimed to allow local administrators to independently operate transport services and approve other transport operations. The bill, introduced by PP list-MP Surachet Pravinvongvuth, was discussed on August 21 but postponed for a vote until the following week. The House ultimately voted 251 to 151 against the bill, with two abstentions.

Ruam Thai Sang Chart Party list-MP Anucha Burapachaisri argued against the bill, stating that it would create a conflict of interest by allowing provincial administration organisation (PAO) executives to act as both operators and regulators of transport services, which deviates from the norm.

After the bill's rejection, the PP expressed disappointment but vowed to continue advocating for accessible and affordable public transport. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Defence Minister Suthin presses ahead with annual military reshuffle

(lm) Thailand's Defence Minister Sutin Klungsang is moving forward with the annual military reshuffle despite uncertainty about whether he will retain his position in the new cabinet under Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra. Sutin held a meeting with the defence permanent secretary and leaders of the armed forces, who submitted their reshuffle lists to the Defence Ministry. The reshuffle must be completed by September 15 and is expected to be finalized by September 10, with the lists requiring royal endorsement.

Army chief Charoenchai Hintao has nominated Gen Pana Klaewplodthuk, the current army chief-of-staff, as his successor, with Gen Pana potentially holding the top post until 2027. Gen Pana is part of the elite "red-rim soldier" fraternity, trained as Royal Guards.

The most notable aspect of this year's reshuffle involves the Royal Thai Navy, where rumors suggest that navy chief Adm Adoong Pan-iam has nominated Adm Jirapol Wongwit, a special adviser, to succeed him. Adm Jirapol's nomination could be controversial due to his education background, as he graduated from a naval academy overseas and lacks key positions traditionally held by a navy chief. In the past, similar concerns about foreign education backgrounds have influenced leadership appointments in the navy.

Three other candidates for the navy's top position are deputy navy commander Adm Suwin Jangyodsuk, assistant navy chief Adm Chonlathis Navanugraha, and navy chief-of-staff Worawut Prueksarungruang. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Last two workers trapped in collapsed tunnel found dead

(lm) The bodies of the last two workers trapped in a collapsed high-speed rail tunnel in Nakhon Ratchasima, Thailand, were found on August 30. The two victims, both Chinese nationals, were trapped when the tunnel, part of the Sino-Thai high-speed railway project between Bangkok and Nong Khai, collapsed on August 24. Their bodies were discovered about three meters from the location where a Myanmar worker's body had been recovered the previous day. [Bangkok Post 1]

Against this backdrop, a team of investigators has been appointed to examine the collapse of the railway tunnel. The investigation will involve interviews with workers, the contractor, and engineering representatives to determine whether the construction adhered to design, regulations, and safety standards. The State Railway of Thailand (SRT) is also conducting an inquiry. Tunnel construction has been halted pending further safety discussions. [Bangkok Post 2]

Vietnam: Google considering building large data center

(wn) Google is considering building a large "hyperscale" data center near Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, marking the first such investment by a major U.S. tech company in the country. This potential investment could be significant for Vietnam, which has struggled to attract major foreign capital in data centers due to infrastructure challenges and regulatory issues. The

data center could be ready by 2027, but a decision has not yet been finalized.

Hyperscale data centers are massive facilities with power consumption comparable to that of a large city, and such a center in Vietnam could cost between USD 300 million and USD 650 million. Google's motivation for this investment is driven by the growing number of its cloud service clients in Vietnam and the country's rapidly expanding digital economy.

Despite challenges like power shortages, unattractive investment incentives, and weak internet infrastructure, Google is moving forward with its plans in Vietnam. The company has already opened a representative office in the country, hired local staff, and is offering scholarships and support for AI startups. This move aligns with Google's broader strategy, following a recent USD 2 billion investment in a data center in Malaysia. [Bangkok Post]

Vietnam: Celebrities targeted for being pictured with South Vietnamese flag

(lm) A controversy has emerged in Vietnam where several Vietnamese celebrities are facing backlash for being pictured performing at events in the United States where the flag of the now-defunct Republic of Vietnam (South Vietnam) was displayed. This flag, which is still used by the Vietnamese diaspora, especially in the U.S., is seen in Vietnam as a symbol of hostility towards the communist government.

The controversy began when singer Myra Tran was criticized for performing at a funeral in the U.S. where the South Vietnamese flag was present. She later issued an apology, stating that she did not intend to oppose national security. Following her case, other celebrities have been targeted for similar reasons, including Pham Khanh Hung, Phan Dinh Tung, Toc Tien, and Viet Huong. The backlash has led some of these celebrities to publicly apologize and express willingness to cooperate with authorities.

The incident has sparked discussions about the broader implications of such actions, including potential restrictions on overseas Vietnamese artists performing in Vietnam unless they sever ties with the diaspora community. Critics suggest that this controversy is part of a larger effort by the Vietnamese Communist Party to reinforce its control, particularly ahead of the 50th anniversary of the fall of Saigon in 2025. [Radio Free Asia]

Vietnam: *Radio Free Asia* blogger to stand trial on September 10

(lm) Nguyen Vu Binh, an independent journalist and contributor to *Radio Free Asia*'s (RFA) Vietnamese Service, is set to stand trial on September 10. Binh, 56, was arrested in February and charged under Article 117 of Vietnam's Penal Code for "creating, storing, disseminating, or propagating information" against the state, a charge often used to silence journalists and dissenters. His arrest followed live streams he participated in with exiled human rights lawyer Nguyen Van Dai in 2021 and 2022.

Binh's sister, Nguyen Thi Phong, confirmed the trial date after being informed verbally by the Hanoi People's Court. Binh has not been allowed to see his family since his arrest, and they have only been able to send supplies to his detention facility.

Binh was previously convicted of espionage in 2002 and sentenced to seven years but was released early in 2007. Despite this, he continued to advocate for human rights and democracy, contributing to RFA's blog. Human Rights Watch has twice honored him with the Hellman-Hammett Award. In response to his recent arrest, RFA, the Committee to Protect Journalists, and PEN International have called for his release. [Radio Free Asia]

Vietnam: Authorities probe orphanage after Buddhist abbot praises 'barefoot' monk

(lm) Vietnamese authorities are investigating the Minh Dao Monastery's orphanage in Ba Ria-Vung Tau province after its abbot, Thich Minh Dao, praised Monk Thich Minh Tue, who gained viral attention on social media for his barefoot pilgrimage across Vietnam. The state-sanctioned Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS) rebuked Minh Dao for his comments, leading him to renounce his monastic vows, though he continues to manage the orphanage while wearing a monk's robe.

The VBS has requested that local officials inspect the legitimacy of the orphanage, questioning Minh Dao's role now that he is no longer officially a monk. The investigation appears to be in retaliation for his defiance of the VBS, as authorities also assess whether the orphanage's operations, including the care and legal documentation of the children, comply with the

law. Critics believe this action reflects the VBS and local authorities' unwillingness to forgive Minh Dao for his perceived disrespect. [Radio Free Asia]

Vietnam: Activist released after six years, remains proud of his stand against injustice

(wn) Vietnamese activist Nguyen Ngoc Anh has been released after serving six years in prison for charges related to his activism against the Vietnamese government. Anh was arrested in August 2018 for "making, storing, disseminating, and propagating information and documents aimed at opposing the Socialist Republic of Vietnam." His activism included raising awareness about China's territorial claims in the South China Sea and the environmental pollution caused by the Formosa Plastics factory in 2016.

Despite his imprisonment, Anh expressed pride in standing up against what he perceived as injustices. He highlighted the support of his family, particularly his wife, who faced harassment from local authorities during his incarceration. Anh's health deteriorated in prison, affecting his eyesight, hearing, and voice.

The United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention described his detention and trial as arbitrary, violating international human rights conventions that Vietnam has ratified. [Radio Free Asia]

Vietnam: Government reduces registration fees to boost car sales

(wn) The Vietnamese government has announced a temporary reduction in registration fees for domestically produced and assembled cars by 50 percent. This policy will be effective until November 30 and is intended to boost the domestic auto market, which has experienced a significant decline in sales, with a 15 percent drop in the first half of 2024 compared to the same period in the previous year.

The reduction is also a response to the growing competition from imported vehicles, which have been outselling local models. The policy is expected to reduce state revenue by approximately VND 867 billion (USD 34 million) per month. The current registration fees vary by location, being 12 percent in Hanoi and Hai Phong, and 10 percent in Ho Chi Minh City.

This is not the first time the Vietnamese government has implemented such a measure; a similar fee reduction was applied in the last six months of the previous year to stimulate car sales. [The Star]

International Relations, Geopolitics and Security in Asia

UN condemns China’s ongoing Xinjiang policies

(alk) The UN Human Rights Office has called China's ongoing policies in Xinjiang "problematic," two years after its report cited potential "crimes against humanity" in the region. China is accused of detaining over 1 million Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities in Xinjiang, accusations Beijing strongly denies.

On August 27, the rights office (OHCHR) revealed it had held discussions with Chinese officials since February 2023, leading to UN human rights chief Volker Turk sending a team to Beijing from May 26 to June 1 this year. The team focused on China's counter-terrorism policies and criminal justice system.

The OHCHR claims that "many problematic laws and policies remain in place" and urged China to review its national security and counter-terrorism laws, ensure minority protections, and investigate alleged human rights violations, including torture. The 2022 OHCHR report cited evidence of torture, forced medical treatment, sexual violence, and forced labor in Xinjiang. China denies these allegations, claiming it operates vocational training centers in Xinjiang to combat extremism and promote development.

The OHCHR also discussed concerns regarding the human rights of ethnic and religious minorities in Xinjiang and Tibet, and concerns in Hong Kong, with further visits under discussion. The UN has urged China to release individuals arbitrarily detained, though implementation remains uncertain. [Channel News Asia] [UN News]

China denies EU officials access to human rights advocate trial

(alk) On August 28, EU diplomats were barred from entering a Suzhou courtroom where the trial of two Chinese human rights advocates, Yu Wensheng and Xu Yan, was set to begin. The couple was detained in April 2023 on their way to meet EU officials in Beijing.

In response, the EU condemned the denial of access as "highly regrettable," stating it undermines trust in China's due process and called for the immediate release of the detainees.

Yu, a well-known human rights lawyer, was previously imprisoned from 2018 to 2022 for advocating constitutional reforms. The couple was arrested under the charge of “picking quarrels and provoking trouble,” often used by Chinese authorities against activists.

The EU also raised concerns about the sudden detention of two other lawyers who attempted to attend the trial and sought clarification from Chinese authorities.

Amid human rights concerns, the Chinese foreign ministry has previously stated that Chinese authorities handle cases according to the law. [South China Morning Post]

China hosts international counter-terrorism forum

(alk) From August 27-30, Beijing hosted its Great Wall-2024 International Forum on Counter-terrorism, focusing on using unmanned technology to combat terrorism and highlighting China's role in global counter-terrorism efforts

The forum included discussions on equipment, tactics, and training for unmanned operations. Hosted by China's armed police, it featured over 170 delegates from more than 50 foreign armed forces and over 150

Chinese representatives, making it the largest and highest-level forum yet, according to Chinese sources.

The Chinese People's Armed Police Force emphasized adapting to new forms of terrorism and sharing effective counter-terrorism practices.

Launched in 2016, this is the forum's fifth edition, aiming to foster consensus and promote global collaboration in fighting terrorism. [Global Times]

China spends USD 15.3 billion on Pacific exercises in 2023

(alk) In a recent report, Taiwan estimated that China spent around USD 15 billion, or 7 percent of its defense budget, on military exercises in the Western Pacific in 2023, reflecting Beijing's increased military activity around Taiwan and neighboring regions amid rising tensions.

The report, compiled by Taiwan's defense ministry in May, analyzed Chinese military operations in the Bohai Sea, East China Sea, Taiwan Strait, South China Sea, and Western Pacific Ocean. Using Taiwanese surveillance and intelligence, the report estimated the cost of these activities based on fuel and other consumables.

China's estimated USD 15.3 billion expenditure represents about 7 percent of its reported 2023 defense budget of USD 218 billion. However, diplomats and experts say this figure is often considered opaque or not fully inclusive. In March, China announced a 7.2 percent increase in defense spending for 2023, bringing the total to USD 235 billion.

According to a senior Taiwanese official, China is heavily investing in gaining control of the First Island Chain, an arc of archipelagos stretching from Indonesia to Japan. Both the US and China have increased military exercises across Asia in recent years, though China's drills are reportedly less extensive.

In 2023, Chinese military aircraft made over 9,200 flights, totaling about 29,000 hours in the air, while the Chinese navy conducted more than 70,000 sailings, accumulating over 1.7 million hours at sea. [Reuters]

Japan's prime minister may skip UN speech due to LDP election timing

(sw) Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida is considering skipping his September 26 speech at the UN General Assembly due to a scheduling conflict with the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) leadership election, set for September 27. Kishida, whose popularity has declined amid a political funds scandal, has announced that he will not seek re-election as LDP president (see AiR No. 34, August/2024, 3).

As Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa, who is running in the LDP race (see AiR No. 35, August/2024, 4), may also not attend the UN Assembly, Japan's ambassador to the United Nations might step in to deliver the speech instead.

During his stay in New York, Kishida is expected to meet with US President Joe Biden, participate in a QUAD summit, and attend the US Summit of the Future. He will also join the "Fissile Material Cut-off Treaty Friends talks," which aim to negotiate a fissile material cut-off treaty to halt the production of materials for nuclear weapons.

This trip will be Kishida's last overseas visit before stepping down as prime minister. [Japan Today]

Mongolia and World Bank strengthen cooperation on energy and economic reforms

(to) On August 27, Mongolian Deputy Prime Minister Dorjkhand Togmid met with Taehyun Lee, the World Bank Country Manager for Mongolia, in order to discuss advancing key projects and economic reforms. The Deputy Prime Minister, recently appointed head of the subcommittee for investments in the energy sector and tariff reforms, expressed gratitude for the World Bank's longstanding support.

The World Bank reaffirmed its commitment to supporting Mongolia's efforts to create a favorable environment for business, trade, and investment. Both parties highlighted the importance of close cooperation on ongoing energy sector projects, with a focus on tariff reforms and boosting investment in this critical area. [Mongolian News Agency]

US checks in on North Korean noncompliance with UNSC resolutions

(jb) As the US, South Korea, Japan and other nations work towards alternatives to the recently expired mandate concerning the 1718 Committee of Experts, the US emphasized the need for "timely, accurate and unbiased" reporting on North Korea's noncompliance with UN security council resolutions concerning sanctions, which the Committee previously monitored. [Korea Herald]

Russia, which vetoed the resolution for renewal of the Committee in the UNSC on March 28 (see AiR No. 14, April/2024, 1), has been accused by the US and several other nations of allowing North Korea to flout restrictions imposed by UN sanctions under its jurisdiction. Ambassador Robert A. Wood, the Alternative Representative for Special Political Affairs of the US to the UN, previously released an official explanation for Russia's veto, stating that Moscow had not only obstructed the work conducted by the Committee but also "undermined the prospect of a peaceful, diplomatic resolution of one of the world's most dangerous nuclear proliferation issues".

He further warned that the US would not stand by as UNSC resolutions were repeatedly violated and stressed the need for strict measures to ensure North Korea's compliance with the sanctions. The UN Panel, which had originally been adopted in 2009, was renewed annually until 2024, when Russia's veto caused it to lapse. [US Mission to the United Nations] [Korea Herald]

Japan-South Korea-US ties to remain strong regardless of leadership change in Washington and Tokyo

(jb) South Korea Unification Minister Kim Young Ho on August 28, announced that Japan, the US and South Korea will continue to maintain strong ties regardless of shift in political leadership. The address was delivered during the 8.15 Unification Doctrine discussion in Seoul, jointly held by the Unification Ministry and the National Research Council for Economics, Humanities and the Social Sciences.

Anticipating the change in leadership in Japan and the US, with leadership election of Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party upcoming in September and the US presidential election on the November respectively, Kim stood firm in his statement that their relationship would remain unchanged.

The statement came at a time of confusion which stemmed from both the Democrats and the

Republicans standing for American elections removing the agenda of denuclearization from their party platforms (see AiR No. 35, August/2024, 4). [Radio Free Asia]

Pacific Islands Forum reaffirms Taiwan's participation amid pressure from China and Solomon Islands

(jp) The Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) recently reaffirmed Taiwan's participation as a "development partner," countering efforts by China and the Solomon Islands to exclude Taiwan from the organization. During the summit held from August 26-30 in Tonga, the PIF emphasized adherence to its 1992 decision on relations with Taiwan, rejecting attempts to strip Taiwan of its involvement. The Solomon Islands, which has deepened ties with China since switching diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing in 2019, reportedly proposed barring Taiwan from future PIF events, a move that was met with significant resistance from member countries like Australia, New Zealand, and Taiwan's allies (see AiR No. 35, August/2024, 4).

During the summit, New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon expressed support for Taiwan's ongoing participation, stressing that any exclusion should only occur through collective agreement. The U.S. Department of State also reiterated its backing for Taiwan’s inclusion in international organizations, emphasizing Taiwan's value as a democratic and responsible global partner. The U.S. vowed to continue supporting Taiwan's involvement in such forums, reflecting a broader international stance on the issue. [Focus Taiwan 1]

On August 31, a communique issued by the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) that initially mentioned support for Taiwan was removed and later republished without referencing Taiwan, following pressure from China. The incident has sparked condemnation from Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), which criticized China's "irrational behavior" for undermining regional peace and stability and emphasized that the alteration of the communique does not affect Taiwan's status as a "development partner" in the PIF or its future participation rights. The original communique, released after the PIF's 53rd summit held from August 26-30 in Tonga, included a line reaffirming the PIF's long-standing arrangements with Taiwan. However, this mention was deleted in the revised version, reportedly due to direct intervention by China's special envoy for the Pacific, Qian Bo, who confronted PIF

Secretary General Baron Waqa about the Taiwan reference, deeming it "unacceptable." [Focus Taiwan 2]

Despite these diplomatic challenges, Taiwan has secured a new cooperation agreement with the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) Secretariat, extending its support for the organization from 2025 to 2027, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) announced on September 1. The agreement was signed during the annual Taiwan/Republic of China-Forum Countries Dialogue, held on August 30 in Tonga, by Deputy Foreign Minister Tien Chung-kwang and a representative from the PIF Secretariat. While MOFA did not disclose the financial details of the three-year pact, the ministry emphasized that the agreement underscores Taiwan's commitment to the development of the Pacific region. [Focus Taiwan 3]

IMF optimistic about lending Bangladesh additional USD 3 billion

(lm) The International Monetary Fund (IMF) is considering lending an additional USD 3 billion to Bangladesh, contingent on the interim government's reform plans. This was discussed during Finance Adviser Salehuddin Ahmed's first meeting with the IMF, where the lender inquired about reforms and the potential increase in the tax-to-GDP ratio. The IMF has already provided USD 2.3 billion under a previously approved USD 4.7 billion loan program.

Bangladesh's central bank initiated discussions for the additional loan to address foreign liabilities and bolster foreign exchange reserves. The IMF is assessing how much more it can lend without exceeding Bangladesh's borrowing quota, with a decision possibly coming during the World Bank-IMF annual meeting in October.

The IMF has emphasized the need for Bangladesh to prioritize sustainable revenue generation, reduce subsidies, and improve banking sector resilience. These measures are seen as crucial for maintaining social welfare investments and supporting economic growth.

Additionally, Finance Adviser Salehuddin mentioned that Russia is positive about extending the loan repayment period for the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant project, though a decision will be made after the plant begins operations. The project, funded by a USD 12.65 billion loan from Russia, requires Bangladesh to begin principal repayments in 2027, though the government has proposed starting in 2029. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh’s government led by Yunus signs UN convention involving enforced disappearance

(gs/lm) Bangladesh's interim government, led by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus, has signed the instrument of accession to the United Nations' International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances.

Yunus, who assumed leadership earlier this month after former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina fled to India amidst widespread protests and unrest, signed the convention during a weekly meeting of the interim government's advisory council. The signing was met with applause from council members, with Yunus calling it a "historic occasion." The timing of this action is symbolic, coming just a day before the International Day of the Victims of Enforced Disappearances.

Under Hasina's 15-year rule, Bangladesh was marred by numerous allegations of enforced disappearances, especially targeting critics and opposition activists. Human Rights Watch, in a recent letter to Yunus, highlighted that more than 600 enforced disappearances were carried out by security forces since 2009. While some of the disappeared were later released, appeared in court, or were reported dead in alleged armed encounters, nearly 100 people remain unaccounted for. Leaked military intelligence records suggest that some of those forcibly disappeared were killed while in custody, leaving their families without justice or closure.

In response to these longstanding human rights violations, the Yunus-led interim government has established a commission to investigate the cases of enforced disappearances that occurred during Hasina's tenure. This move is part of broader efforts by the new government to restore political stability in a country that has been deeply shaken by recent events.

Sheikh Hasina, who led the Awami League government for over a decade, is now facing numerous legal challenges. On the day the convention was signed, Hasina was charged in her 100th case, all related to murder accusations stemming from the recent violent student protests. The United Nations has reported that nearly 650 people have died since the protests escalated on July 15, with many of these deaths occurring after Hasina fled the country on August 5.

Further complicating the situation, a father of a student killed in the protests filed a complaint against

52 individuals, including Hasina and several prominent journalists, teachers, and writers. The case accuses them of inciting Hasina to commit mass murder by using security forces to suppress the protests. Many of the accused journalists have since gone into hiding, fearing arrest and harassment, while Human Rights Watch has expressed concern over the justice system's apparent continuation of arbitrary arrests and partisan actions, even after the fall of Hasina's government. [The Daily Star] [Associated Press]

Bhutan to host regional seminar on anti-corruption compliance

(lm) Bhutan, in collaboration with the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), will host the 2024 Anti-Corruption Initiative for Asia and the Pacific's regional seminar from September 25 to 27 in Thimphu. This is Bhutan's second time co-hosting the seminar, the first being in 2016.

The seminar, themed "Government Incentives for Corporate Anti-Corruption Compliance," will gather hundreds of delegates, anti-corruption experts, and practitioners from 34 member economies, including representatives from civil society, international organizations, and the private sector. The event aims to address ways governments can create incentives for businesses to adopt ethical practices and comply with anti-corruption regulations.

Bhutan's Corruption Perception Index (CPI) score has remained at 68 for five consecutive years, placing it 25th globally and sixth in the Asia-Pacific region. The seminar is seen as an opportunity to enhance Bhutan's ease of doing business and address challenges such as complex administrative procedures and limited access to finance. [Kuensel]

Indian Prime Minister Modi leaves for two-nation visit to Brunei, Singapore

(lm) India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi is on a two-nation visit to Brunei and Singapore, focusing on strengthening trade, energy ties, and technological cooperation.

In Brunei, Modi will meet with Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah, where they will sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on space cooperation, building on a 2018

agreement. Discussions will also cover increasing India's intake of liquefied natural gas (LNG) from Brunei and exploring initial moves on defense cooperation.

The visit to Brunei, strategically located in the Indo-Pacific region, is also significant for India's Act East Policy, emphasizing the importance of cultural and economic links with its maritime neighbors. Modi's trip to Brunei is the first bilateral visit by an Indian Prime Minister to the country.

In Singapore, Modi will meet newly appointed Prime Minister Lawrence Wong and witness the signing of four agreements related to semiconductors, digital cooperation, healthcare, and skilling. Singapore is a key partner for India, being its largest trading partner in ASEAN and the biggest source of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). Modi's visit aims to set the stage for stronger bilateral ties, with plans to address CEOs of major companies to showcase India's growth prospects. This visit to Singapore comes after the second India-Singapore Ministerial Roundtable, which included discussions on deepening economic ties. [The Hindu 1] [The Hindu 2]

India, European Union introduce new funding program to enhance research collaboration

(cr) India and the European Union (EU) have launched a new joint funding initiative to enhance research cooperation under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions (MSCA) staff exchanges, part of the EU's Horizon Europe program. This initiative, facilitated by the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), will allow CSIR institutes to engage in collaborative research with European and international partners. The program, set for the 2025-2027 period, aims to promote researcher mobility, knowledge-sharing, and long-term collaborations, strengthening scientific and technological ties between India and Europe. This marks a significant step in advancing the political commitment outlined in the EU-India Joint Roadmap 2025.

Since 2014, the MSCA has supported numerous research and innovation projects involving Indian organizations, making India the leading non-European country in participation, with over 2,800 Indian researchers benefiting from the program in the last decade. This new initiative is expected to further accelerate joint innovation and address global

challenges by pooling expertise from both regions. [Hindustan Times]

India’s President Droupadi Murmu supports New Delhi's bid to host 2036 Olympics

(cr) Indian President Droupadi Murmu has expressed strong support for New Delhi’s bid to host the 2036 Olympics, viewing it as a significant opportunity to inspire the nation and promote sports meritocracy. She highlighted her admiration for indigenous sports like kabaddi and emphasized the positive impact the Games would have on encouraging sports participation in India.

The decision on the host country for the 2036 Olympics will be made between 2026 and 2027. Other countries, including Poland, Mexico, Indonesia, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, have also shown interest. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has also voiced confidence in India’s capability to host the event. [The Times of India]

Maldives to join UN's Atomic Energy Agency to support cancer hospital development

(sa) The Maldives plans to join the United Nations International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), as announced by Foreign Minister Moosa Zameer. This move aims to support the construction of a cancer hospital, a key priority for President Mohammed Muizzu. By joining the IAEA, the Maldives seeks to access modern medical equipment and waste management services crucial for the hospital's development.

The country, alongside Bhutan, is one of the few in the region not yet a member of the IAEA. Membership could also pave the way for future benefits from atomic energy advancements, potentially reducing reliance on renewable energy and hydrocarbons. [the edition]

Nepal’s China, India envoys-in-waiting highlight priorities for boosting bilateral ties

(lm) During a parliamentary hearing on September 1, the proposed ambassadors to China and India outlined their priorities for strengthening Nepal's bilateral relations with these neighboring countries.

Krishna Prasad Oli, nominated as ambassador to Beijing, emphasized his commitment to advancing Nepal's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects, promoting high-level visits, enhancing North-South connectivity, and attracting more Chinese tourists to Nepal, especially given the large Buddhist population in China. He also pledged to improve the operation of the Tatopani customs point, which has struggled since the 2015 earthquakes.

Shankar Prasad Sharma, proposed as ambassador to India, outlined his plans to promote the Buddhist-Ramayana circuit, enhance cross-border financial transactions, and attract investments in hydropower, tourism, infrastructure, and agriculture. He also expressed his intention to expedite the Pancheshwar Hydropower Project. However, he clarified that the issues related to the Eminent Persons' Group (EPG) report and Nepal-India border disputes are beyond his purview and must be addressed at higher levels.

Other nominees interviewed included Sumnima Tuladhar for Denmark, who plans to focus on Nepal's economic development and tourism, and Shail Rupakheti for Germany, who aims to strengthen economic relations through export promotion, investment attraction, and technology transfer. [The Kathmandu Post]

China, Nepal to issue five-year passes for Himalayan districts

(lm) Nepal and China have agreed to issue five-year entry and exit passes for residents of 15 northern districts in Nepal that border China. This new arrangement aims to facilitate trade, pilgrimage, work, and other daily activities for these residents, who rely on Tibet for many of their needs. The passes will allow them to enter and exit China's Tibetan Autonomous Region more easily.

The decision comes after bilateral discussions and revisions to the operating procedures, including the incorporation of biometric security features at China's request. The passes will be issued digitally and will be valid for five years, exclusively for residents of the designated districts. However, the passes will not allow travel beyond 30 kilometers into China, and holders

cannot stay in the border districts for more than a month.

This new system replaces previous one-year entry permits, which were reduced to day-long passes during the COVID-19 pandemic. [The Kathmandu Post]

Japan provides Nepal with USD 3.14 million scholarship grant for civil servants

(lm) Japan has committed to providing a scholarship grant of approximately NPR 423 million (equivalent to USD 3.14 million) to Nepal under the human resource development scholarship (JDS) project. This grant will allow selected young civil servants from the Government of Nepal to pursue two-year Master's degrees and three-year PhD programs at various universities in Japan. Since the program's inception in 2016, 165 Nepali students have benefited, and the new agreement will support an additional 22 students. [The Kathmandu Post]

MCA-Nepal signs contract for 18 km cross-border transmission line

(lm) Millennium Challenge Account-Nepal (MCA-Nepal) has signed a contract for the construction of an 18-kilometer cross-border transmission line under the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) Nepal Compact. Th transmission line will run from the 400 kV New Butwal Substation in Bardhaghat, Nawalparasi West, to the Nepal-India border and is expected to be completed within 21 months. The contract, valued at USD 12.36 million, has been awarded to the Indian company Transrail Lighting Limited.

This contract is a key component of the broader MCC Nepal Compact, a USD 500 million grant program aimed at addressing critical infrastructure needs in Nepal, with a focus on improving electricity supply and enhancing road maintenance. The MCC Nepal Compact was signed in 2017, and its implementation has been closely watched as it represents one of the largest single grant investments in Nepal’s history. The Compact's energy projects are designed to increase the availability of electricity for households and businesses, reduce energy costs, and support economic growth.

MCA-Nepal has indicated that preparations for the remaining 297 km of transmission line are on track,

with the bid expected to be launched before the end of this year. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal, United Kingdom sign USD 48.5 million grant support agreements

(iz) Nepal and the United Kingdom have signed two memorandums of understanding (MoUs) for approximately NPR 6.5 billion (USD 48.5 million) in grant support.

The first MoU focuses on the Resilience, Adaptation, and Inclusion in Nepal (RAIN) program, with funding of NPR 6.5 billion (USD 48.5 million), aimed at strengthening disaster risk management and climate change adaptation in Karnali, Lumbini, and Madhesh provinces.

The second MoU concerns the Samartha program, with funding of NPR 6.58 billion (USD 49.1 million), designed to enhance provincial and local governments' capacities to deliver quality social services, particularly in education and health, in Lumbini and Madhesh provinces. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal, Oman set to sign major bilateral deals

(lm) Nepal and Oman are set to sign several major bilateral agreements this year, focusing on labor, tourism, health, and institutional cooperation. The decision was made during bilateral talks between Nepal's Foreign Minister Arzu Rana and Oman's Foreign Minister Badar bin Hamad Al Busaidi in Kathmandu. Discussions highlighted Nepal's request for Omani investment, particularly as Nepal aims to transition from a least developed country by 2026 and achieve middle-income status by 2030. Nepal also seeks to attract more Omani investment in tourism and hydropower.

Oman expressed interest in establishing an embassy in Nepal and resuming direct flights, potentially to Pokhara and Bhairahawa. Additionally, both countries are close to finalizing an updated labor agreement, with Oman indicating a willingness to hire more Nepali workers, recognizing their dedication and honesty. [The Kathmandu Post]

South Asia's major rivers contribute significantly to global marine plastic pollution

(lm) A World Bank report, titled "Waves of Plastic: A Snapshot of Marine Plastic Pollution in South Asia," highlights the significant role South Asian countries play in the transboundary transport of plastic pollution. The report focuses on two major river basins in the region: the Ganges-Brahmaputra Meghna (GBM) basin, which includes Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal, and the Indus River basin, encompassing Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan. These rivers serve as major conduits for transporting pollution, including plastics, industrial effluents, and microplastics, across borders.

The report indicates that Sri Lanka has the highest plastic waste leakage rate in South Asia, while Pakistan has the lowest. Despite being landlocked, Bhutan and Nepal contribute to oceanic plastic waste through their rivers. India and the Maldives, on the other hand, have higher collection rates compared to other countries in the region. The more populous nations, such as Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan, have relatively lower per capita plastic leakage rates due to their higher recycling rates.

The World Bank emphasizes the importance of effective national policies and their implementation at both the local and sub-national levels to curb plastic waste entering rivers and oceans. Strong leadership, institutions, and infrastructure are essential to reducing marine plastic pollution in the region. The report warns that if legally binding global policies are not introduced, marine plastic pollution could rise 2.6 times by 2040.

In a related study by the 5 Gyres Institute, it was noted that by 2019, an estimated 171 trillion plastic particles were afloat in the oceans. The study also highlighted that global plastic production has increased significantly, with less than 10 percent of plastic waste being recycled worldwide. The surge in plastic pollution since 2005 underscores the urgent need for more robust measures to combat this environmental challenge.

Pakistan reports fifth case of Mpox virus, Peshawar emerges as epicenter

(ht) Peshawar has emerged as a potential epicenter for the mpox virus in Pakistan, with the city reporting its

fourth case of the year on September 1, 2024. This brings the country's total mpox cases to five in 2024, with four of these occurring after the World Health Organization (WHO) declared mpox a global health emergency. The latest patient, a 47-year-old man, tested positive after returning from the Gulf region, raising concerns about the virus's spread through travelers from the Middle East. [Geo News]

India, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Mauritius sign charter establishing Colombo Security Conclave Secretariat

(lm) India, Sri Lanka, Mauritius, and the Maldives have signed a Charter and Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to establish the Colombo Security Conclave (CSC) Secretariat in Colombo. The CSC aims to enhance regional security and stability in the Indian Ocean Region by addressing various security challenges. The signing ceremony, hosted by Sri Lanka, included India's National Security Advisor Ajit Doval and representatives from the Maldives, Mauritius, and Sri Lanka.

Ajit Doval emphasized the importance of the CSC in tackling traditional, non-traditional, and emerging hybrid security threats, advocating for sustained regional cooperation across five key security pillars: Maritime Safety and Security; Countering Terrorism and Radicalization; Combating Trafficking and Transnational Organized Crime; Cyber Security and Protection of Critical Infrastructure and Technology; and Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief. [News On Air]

EU launches election observation mission for Sri Lanka's 2024 presidential election

(sa) The European Union has launched an Election Observation Mission (EU EOM) in response to an invitation from Sri Lanka's Election Commission for the upcoming presidential election on 21 September. Led by Chief Observer Nacho Sánchez Amor, a Member of the European Parliament, the mission began on August 14 with a core team of 10 election experts. The mission expanded on August 29 with 26 long-term observers deployed across Sri Lanka's nine provinces.

This mission marks the seventh time the EU has deployed such an observation mission to Sri Lanka since 2000, underscoring the importance the EU places

on its partnership with Sri Lanka and its commitment to democratic values. A preliminary statement will be released two days after the election, followed by a comprehensive final report with recommendations for electoral reforms approximately two months later. [EEAS] [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lankan President Wickremesinghe stresses adherence to IMF agreement as election looms

(sa) As Sri Lanka nears a crucial presidential election, scheduled for September 21, incumbent President Ranil Wickremesinghe has stressed the importance of sticking to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) agreement to maintain economic stability. peaking at the 37th Annual Conference of the Organization of Professional Associations of Sri Lanka, Wickremesinghe highlighted that the agreement, reached after complex negotiations with the IMF, World Bank, Asian Development Bank, and various creditors, has provided significant relief and stability, extending payment timelines until 2042.

Wickremesinghe outlined plans to transition Sri Lanka's economy from import dependence to an export orientation, supported by new legislative measures like the Public Debt Management Act and the Economic Transformation Act. His priorities include boosting productivity, modernizing agriculture, and expanding tourism and technology. [Daily Mirror 1]

He also mentioned ongoing negotiations with the IMF to revise the Pay As You Earn (PAYE) tax system, with the aim of reducing living costs. Wickremesinghe's approach focuses on increasing income sources and production rather than offering direct subsidies, with more details to be outlined in his upcoming manifesto. [Daily Mirror 2]

Politically, Wickremesinghe has criticized rivals, such as Anura Kumara Dissanayake of the National People's Power (NPP) and Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) candidates, for their tax reduction promises, arguing they lack clarity on maintaining state revenue. [Daily Mirror 3]

UN Human Rights Council to discuss Myanmar, Sri Lanka on opening day of its 57th Session

(sa) The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) in Geneva will address the situation of human rights of Rohingya Muslims and other minorities in Myanmar, as well as the promoting reconciliation, accountability and human rights in Sri Lanka on the opening day of its 57th session, scheduled for September 9.

Myanmar

In its resolution 39/2, the UNHRC established an ongoing independent mechanism to gather, preserve, and analyze evidence of serious international crimes and violations of international law committed in Myanmar since 2011. The purpose of this mechanism is to facilitate and expedite fair and independent criminal proceedings in courts or tribunals that have or may in the future have jurisdiction over these crimes, in line with international law. The resolution also mandates that the mechanism report its main activities to the Council annually.

The Council will review the report of the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar (A/HRC/57/18) during an interactive dialogue.

Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka has been a subject of significant scrutiny at the UNHRC due to allegations of human rights violations, particularly during the final stages of the civil war. These concerns include accusations of war crimes, enforced disappearances, and the lack of accountability for those responsible. In response to these issues, the UNHRC has passed several resolutions over the years, urging the Sri Lankan government to pursue meaningful reconciliation and ensure justice for victims.

The upcoming session will feature the presentation of a report by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), which has been closely monitoring Sri Lanka's progress in these areas. This report will not only assess the current human rights situation but also evaluate the impact of Sri Lanka's ongoing economic crisis and widespread corruption on human rights. The economic challenges, exacerbated by political instability, have led to protests and civil unrest, further complicating the human rights landscape in the country. [UN Human Rights Council]

Visa-free entry for 38 countries implemented with streamlined process in Sri Lanka

(sa) The Sri Lankan Cabinet has approved an immediate implementation of a visa-free policy for 38 countries, adopting a streamlined "one chop" system inspired by Singapore. This system simplifies the visa or visa extension process by requiring just one official stamp or seal on the applicant's passport, eliminating the need for additional approvals or procedures. This decision, initially set to begin on October 1, 2024, has now been enacted right away to expedite and simplify the visa process for travelers from these countries. [Daily Mirror]

Cambodia to receive ADB loan to boost efforts in improving rural water supply, sanitation

(dql) The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has approved USD 93.6 million in loans and grants to enhance climate-resilient and inclusive water supply, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) facilities for 88,000 households across 400 villages in nine Cambodian provinces.

The program helps the government provide universal access to safe water and sanitation in rural areas, with a focus on affordability and private sector involvement. It also seeks to integrate climate change considerations into the planning and implementation of WASH facilities. Prioritizing rural populations in remote areas, the initiative includes governance reforms to improve community-managed WASH facilities. A USD 3 million grant from the Japan Fund for Prosperous and Resilient Asia and the Pacific will focus on provinces with the greatest need, while a USD 600,000 technical assistance grant will help strengthen government capacity for key sector reforms.

As of 2022, only 20 percent of the country's rural areas had access to safely managed water, and 34 percent to sanitation. Some two million people are still practicing open defecation. [ADB]

Indonesia and Malaysia to challenge EU deforestation regulation

(si) Indonesia announced plans to intensify its opposition to the European Union's Deforestation-Free Regulation (UEDR), which aims to ban products linked to deforestation from entering the EU market. In response, Indonesia, along with Malaysia, will send a delegation to Brussels this month to negotiate with the EU, focusing on concerns that the regulation unfairly

targets Indonesian palm oil and other forestry products. Eddy Martono, Chairman of the Indonesian Palm Oil Association (Gapki), emphasized that the Indonesian government is fully supporting efforts to mitigate the potential negative impacts of the UEDR.

Martono pointed out that while large companies in Indonesia have been subject to restrictions under Presidential Instruction No. 5/2019, small-scale farmers could be disproportionately affected by the new EU regulation.

The upcoming Joint Task Force (JTF) meeting on September 12 will be the third such meeting between Indonesia, Malaysia, and the EU. As Europe is Indonesia's third-largest export market, the regulation could also impact other Indonesian commodities, such as cocoa, coffee, rubber, and wood products. [JakartaGlobe]

Indonesia urges transformative change to achieve SDGs

(si) National Development Planning Minister Suharso Monoarfa emphasized the urgent need for transformative change to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at the High-Level Forum on Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships (HLF MSP) in Badung, Bali, held during September 1-3. He highlighted that only 15 percent of the SDG targets are on track, with many regressing, placing over half of the world's population at risk of being excluded from development.

Monoarfa pointed to global challenges like geopolitical tensions, inequality, climate change, and trade fragmentation as exacerbating factors. He referenced World Trade Organization (WTO) research indicating that a division into two global trading blocs could reduce global GDP by up to 5 percent.

Consequently, Indonesia is advocating for stronger international cooperation, particularly between the Global South and North, to address these issues effectively. The forum's discussions focused on how multi-stakeholder partnerships could enhance cooperation, sustainability, and innovative financing to unlock the full potential of Global South countries. [Antara]

Myanmar rights-based group claims some aircrafts from Europe are supporting war crimes in Myanmar

(tl) Justice for Myanmar, a rights-based group has revealed an international network of companies that allowed Myanmar's military to access and operate at least ten French-manufactured turbo aircraft over the past 14 years despite a ban on their sale to the Myanmar junta. The aircraft are manufactured by France-based Avions de Transport Regional (ATR), which is owned by Airbus and Rome-headquartered Leonardo. The fuselages and tails are made in Italy, the wings in France, and the engines are supplied by Pratt & Whitney Canada.

Justice for Myanmar's investigation found that international companies, arms brokers, and commercial airlines have transferred ATR aircraft to Myanmar's military, "in some cases hiding the end user in an apparent attempt to evade sanctions." Myanmar and international companies have also sold parts and provided maintenance to the military's ATR fleet. Myanmar junta is now using these aircraft to transport troops and weapons for its nationwide campaign of terror, supporting indiscriminate attacks on civilians that amount to war crimes.

Companies based in the European Union (EU), including ATR and Sabena Technics in France, and Axis Flight Simulation Systems in Austria, ensured that the military's ATRs could keep flying by repairing key components, spare parts, and enabling the training of air force pilots. This was often done through commercial airlines in Myanmar that own ATRs but have close ties to the military.

Justice for Myanmar is calling on EU governments to urgently block the Myanmar air force and its brokers from accessing spare and replacement parts, receiving flight crew and maintenance training, and accessing instructions needed for the continuing airworthiness of its ATR aircraft. Targeted and coordinated sanctions should be extended to all Myanmar companies supporting the military's ATR fleet, including 24 Hour Group, KT Group, International Gateways Group, and Htoo Group. [Justice for Myanmar] [Myanmar Now]

Around 160 people including Myanmar citizens detained for cybercrimes in the Philippines

(tl) Over 160 people, including some Myanmar nationals, have been arrested in the Philippines for suspected illegal online gambling and cybercrime operations. The arrests were carried out by over 100 authorities in the central city of Lapu-Lapu, with the help of military intelligence.

Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. takes tough measures against internet gambling companies run primarily by Chinese and catering to the gaming industry's clientele in China, where gambling is illegal.

The majority of the arrested individuals were Chinese and Indonesian nationals, with some Taiwanese and Malaysians also involved. The Immigration Department is investigating the cases, and some may be repatriated. [VOA Burmese] [Business Standard]

UN allocates USD 12 million to aid Myanmar amid global humanitarian funding crunch

(sc) On August 30, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) announced the release of USD 100 million from the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) to bolster humanitarian efforts in ten critically underfunded regions worldwide, including Myanmar. Myanmar is set to receive USD 12 million of this allocation, marking the second CERF disbursement to the country within the year, aimed at addressing its dire humanitarian needs. The funding is part of a broader U.N. effort, which has identified a global requirement of USD 49 billion to assist 187 million vulnerable individuals worldwide, although just 29 percent of these funds have been secured so far this year. [United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs]

The allocation for Myanmar comes as part of a larger initiative to provide emergency relief to countries overwhelmed by conflict, climate change, and other crises, with Yemen and Ethiopia receiving the largest shares of the current CERF funding round. Joyce Msuya, Acting Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, emphasized the critical nature of these funds in saving lives and alleviating suffering where traditional funding streams fall short. The ongoing financial shortfall underscores the growing disparity between the escalating humanitarian demands globally and the limited donor contributions, highlighting the urgent need for sustained and increased financial support from the international community. [Xinhua]

China, Philippines trade blame over latest vessel collisions in disputed South China Sea

(rr) The latest incident in the ongoing South China Sea dispute saw both the Chinese and Philippine coast guards trading accusations over a series of collisions near the contested Sabina Shoal on August 31. The incident marked the fifth maritime clash between Beijing and the Manila in a month, reflecting ongoing tensions over the disputed South China Sea.

According to the Chinese Coast Guard (CCG), a Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) ship deliberately collided with one of its vessels while it was conducting what China described as "normal law enforcement" activities. The CCG emphasized that the responsibility for the collision lies entirely with the Philippines. On the other hand, the Philippine Coast Guard presented a different narrative, accusing the Chinese vessel of intentionally ramming their ship, BRP Teresa Magbanua, three times without any provocation.

Sabina Shoal, the focal point of these clashes, is a disputed atoll located just 86 miles off the west coast of the Philippines and 745 miles from China. Despite its proximity to the Philippines, China claims sovereignty over almost the entire South China Sea, including Sabina Shoal, a claim that has been rejected by an international ruling.

This escalation comes just weeks after China and the Philippines reached a temporary agreement aimed at de-escalating tensions that had been rising throughout the summer, particularly at another nearby reef where China's assertive tactics had alarmed both regional players and the United States, a defense ally of the Philippines.[Al Jazeera] [bbc] [CNN]

International responses

International reactions were swift. The European Union condemned China's actions as "dangerous," asserting that they violated international law by threatening maritime safety and freedom of navigation. In response, China urged the EU to remain "objective and fair," arguing that the EU, not being a direct party to the South China Sea disputes, should refrain from making judgments. [Voice of America]

The United States also condemned China's actions, accusing Beijing of deliberately colliding with the Philippine vessel and disrupting lawful operations in the South China Sea. The US called on China to adhere

to international law and cease such dangerous conduct.

Japan joined the call for de-escalation, emphasizing the importance of upholding the rule of law at sea and supporting the Philippines' commitment to peaceful dispute resolution, as affirmed by the Arbitral Tribunal under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). [Philippine News Agency]

Philippines hosts annual Indo-Pacific military conference

(ga) Over 200 senior military and defense leaders from 29 nations gathered in Manila for the 35th annual International Military Law and Operations Conference (MILOPS) to strengthen the upholding of international law, co-hosted by US Indo-Pacific Command (USINDOPACOM) and the Philippine Department of National Defense from August 27-30.

The event addressed critical legal challenges in the Indo-Pacific, such as safeguarding freedom of navigation, defending sovereignty, and reinforcing the rule of law. The conference concluded with a renewed commitment to international law and collaboration in the Indo-Pacific. [USINDOPACOM 1] [USINDOPACOM 2]

US military official meets President Marcos and visits Philippines air base

USINDOPACOM commander Admiral Paparo meets President Marcos at Malacañang Palace to discuss defense and security issues. Paparo also inspects the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) sites, such as Basa Air Base, which are aimed at improving joint military capabilities and interoperability. [Manila Times]

Paparo also chairs the US-Philippines Mutual Defense Board and Security Engagement Board 2024 meeting at the Philippine Military Academy during his visits. This meeting focused on modernization and joint training, with both countries remaining committed to upholding international maritime laws amid ongoing regional challenges. [USINDOPACOM 3]

Polish Foreign Minister begins Southeast Asia tour with focus on security, economy

Singapore

(ga) Poland's Minister of Foreign Affairs Radosław Sikorski visited Singapore from September 2 to 3 on his Southeast Asia tour to reaffirm strong bilateral ties and discuss exploring areas for further cooperation, particularly in food security and trade.

Both countries acknowledged the ongoing collaboration at international fora, highlighting their shared commitment to a rules-based international order. Singapore emphasized the potential for both countries to act as gateways to their respective regions, stating that the EU-Singapore Free Trade Agreement could further enhance bilateral trade and investment. [TVP World] [Polish Press Agency]

Philippines

Minister Sikorski will officially visit the Philippines from September 3 to 5, which coincides with the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the Philippines and Poland and marks the first standalone visit by a Polish foreign minister to the Philippines.

The visit is expected to discuss enhancing bilateral relations and addressing regional and international issues. The focus is on stabilizing the maritime situation in the South China Sea, which continues to pose significant regional challenges, especially for the Philippines. [Polskie Radio] [Department of Foreign Affairs Philippines]

Malaysia

Minister Sikorski held bilateral talks during his visit to Putrajaya and attended a working luncheon with Malaysian counterparts. The discussions focused on strengthening economic ties, enhancing trade and investment cooperation, and deepening partnerships in defence, higher education, agriculture, and tourism.

Both sides also addressed regional and international issues, including the Middle East situation and the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Malaysia expressed support for Poland's application to become a High Contracting Party to the ASEAN Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, while Poland pledged its support for Malaysia's ASEAN Chairmanship in 2025. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia]

United Nations Secretary-General visits Singapore, discusses multilateral cooperation and sustainability

(ga) UN Secretary-General António Guterres made an official visit to Singapore from 31 August to 2 September and met with President Tharman Shanmugaratnam, Prime Minister Lawrence Wong, and Senior Minister Lee Hsien Loong.

Discussions focused on enhancing multilateral cooperation, sustainable development, and new technologies. Prime Minister Wong reaffirmed Singapore's strong support for the UN and praised Guterres' leadership.

Guterres was hosted on a tour focused on Singapore's water security, flood resilience, and climate action, followed by a briefing on digital inclusion policies. He also discussed international cybercrime and technological advancements during a dinner. In recognition of his visit, a new orchid hybrid was named in his honor. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs Singapore] [The Straits Times]

Thailand to replace aging F-16s with Sweden's Gripen E/F fighters

(msz) On August 27, the Royal Thai Air Force (RTAF) officially announced its decision to acquire Saab JAS 39 Gripen E/F fighters to replace its aging F-16A/B fleet, confirming earlier reports from July 2024. While no contract has been signed yet and the exact number of Gripen E/Fs to be procured is not specified, Saab acknowledged the RTAF's interest and expressed eagerness to continue discussions.

The RTAF currently operates a fleet of Gripen C/Ds, which were upgraded to the MS20 configuration in 2022, enhancing their weaponry and radar capabilities. The RTAF's existing F-16A/Bs, received in 1998, number around 36 F-16As and 14 F-16Bs out of 59 originally delivered. The Air Force also operates approximately 23 F-5E/TH Tiger II fighters and three F-5THF trainers.

In January 2022, the RTAF was approved to proceed with acquiring new-generation fighters, initially planning to procure eight to twelve aircraft over two batches, with procurement expected to commence in 2023.[Bangkok Post] [Thai PBS World]

Thailand's anti-graft body, OECD collaborate to strengthen country's anti-bribery laws

(lm) The National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC) of Thailand and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) recently collaborated on a project aimed at enhancing Thailand's anti-bribery laws.

On August 30, the NACC hosted a meeting in Bangkok to unveil the "Reinforcing Thailand's Anti-Corruption Framework" project report and recommendations. The project, which began in 2023, evaluates Thailand's current anti-corruption legal and policy frameworks and provides recommendations for alignment with OECD standards.

The event featured presentations by Pol. Gen. Watcharapol Prasarnrajkit, President of the NACC, and Elodie Beth, Senior Manager at the OECD's Anti-Corruption Division. Key topics included the country's roadmap to OECD membership, criteria for accession to the OECD Anti-Bribery Convention, and recommendations on issues like foreign bribery, corporate liability, law enforcement, and the non-tax deductibility of bribes.[Bangkok Post]

Mekong riverine nations unite to tackle fake news, cybercrime, boost online safety

(lm) Representatives from six countries along the Mekong River—Cambodia, China, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Thailand—have pledged to collaborate on combating fake news, cybercrime, and enhancing online safety for young people through shared legislation. This commitment was made during the "Lancang-Mekong International Video and Photography Week 2024" held in Yushu, Qinghai Province, China. The event included diplomats, journalists, and local officials, along with observers from Canada and the United States.

The discussions emphasized the importance of regional cooperation in preserving the environment, cultural ties, and improving information sharing to fight fake news. Additionally, China's contributions to the region, such as medical aid to Laos and support for development in Cambodia's Sihanoukville, were also highlighted.[Bangkok Post]

Thailand withdraws reservations to Article 22 in UN Convention on the Right of the Child

(lm) On August 30, Thailand withdrew its reservation on Article 22 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, thereby extending rights protections to include refugee children. Thailand originally signed the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)—the most significant international treaty on children's rights—in 1992, but had placed a reservation on Article 22, which specifically guarantees the rights of refugee children. By withdrawing this reservation, Thailand has now committed to upholding those rights. [The Nation]

Chinese scammers operating calls center scams in Laos flee to Thailand's Chiang Rai border town

(lm) Chinese nationals involved in call center scams in Laos have fled to Chiang Rai, Thailand, after Lao and Chinese authorities intensified crackdowns on scam networks and illegal businesses. Recent incidents include the arrest of two Chinese nationals who illegally crossed the Mekong River into Chiang Rai, and nine fugitives, including seven Chinese and two Thai nationals, who were transporting illegal immigrants.

The crackdown, particularly in the Kings Roman area of the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone in Laos, led to the arrest of 1,398 suspects, primarily Chinese and Vietnamese. Many scammers have since relocated to Myanmar and Cambodia, while others have caused a surge in hotel occupancy in Chiang Saen, Chiang Rai. [Bangkok Post 1]

Teen rescued from scammers in Cambodia

In related updates, a 17-year-old Thai teenager, the son of a secretary to the Chaiyaphum mayor, was safely rescued and returned to Thailand after being abducted to Cambodia by scammers posing as police officers. The teenager was lured from his university dorm in Pathum Thani, Thailand, under the false pretense of being involved in drug trafficking, and was then taken to Cambodia. His father received a ransom demand of THB 2 million (approximately USD 58,000) for his son's release, with threats to kill the boy if the demand was not met. [Bangkok Post 2]

Man caught stringing suspected scam cables across river to Myanmar

Separately, a man was arrested in Mae Sot district in Thailand's Tak province for allegedly attempting to illegally string power and communication cables across the Moei River to Myanmar. The suspect was caught with equipment including iron pipes, rolls of wire,

optical fiber cables, a water rocket, and other tools. [Bangkok Post 3]

Thai Parliament gives unanimous support to EU-Thailand Partnership and Cooperation Agreement

(msz) The Thai parliament has given its unanimous approval to the EU-Thailand Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA), which is set to take effect in 30 days. This milestone follows the signing of the agreement on December 14, 2022, in Brussels by Thailand's then-foreign minister Don Pramudwinai, alongside key EU figures including Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala, acting as the president of the EU Council, and Joseph Borrell, Vice President of the European Commission and High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.

The EU-Thailand PCA is designed to strengthen and expand political dialogue and cooperation across a wide range of policy areas, including environmental protection, energy, climate change, transport, science and technology, trade, employment, human rights, and more. The agreement serves as a comprehensive framework for deepening bilateral, regional, and international collaboration between Thailand and the 27 EU member states.

Thailand's Foreign Minister, Maris Sangiampongsa, highlighted that the PCA framework will lay the groundwork for future discussions, potentially leading to an expansion of cooperation in the areas mentioned, as well as others such as maritime governance, innovation, and counter-terrorism. The framework agreement also includes guidelines that both sides will follow to ensure effective implementation.

The PCA is expected to significantly benefit Thailand by enhancing trade and investment opportunities, particularly by accelerating negotiations for a Thailand-EU Free Trade Agreement (FTA). The EU is currently Thailand's fourth-largest trade partner and sixth-largest investor, making this agreement strategically important for both sides. The pact aims to make Thai businesses more competitive, improve their access to EU research funding, and strengthen Thailand's role on the global stage.

Additionally, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) is actively working on negotiating Schengen visa exemptions for Thai passport holders, further

enhancing the benefits of this partnership. [Bangkok Post]

UK warns travelers against smuggling Cannabis amid surge in arrests

(lm) The UK's National Crime Agency (NCA) has issued a warning to travelers from Thailand, Canada, and the United States, emphasizing that smuggling cannabis into the UK could result in severe legal consequences, including prison sentences. This warning follows a significant increase in arrests, with 378 air passengers detained for attempting to smuggle cannabis into the country this year.

UK authorities have seized approximately 15 tons of the drug at airports in 2024, triple the amount seized in 2023. The majority of the cases involve cannabis originating from Thailand, Canada, and the US, where the drug is legal to varying degrees. The NCA highlighted that organized criminal gangs are exploiting legal cannabis sources overseas and recruiting couriers to transport it to the UK. So far this year, 196 individuals have been convicted, receiving sentences totaling nearly 188 years. [Bangkok Post]

Philippines, Vietnam set to sign a defence cooperation agreement

(wn/lm) Vietnam and the Philippines plan to sign a memorandum of understanding on defence cooperation to strengthen joint activities at sea in response to China's growing assertivness in the South China Sea. During a meeting in Manila on August 30, Vietnamese Defense Minister Phan Van Giang and his Philippine counterpart, Gilberto Teodoro, discussed ways to deepen collaboration on maritime security. This meeting marks Giang's first visit to the Philippines as defense chief, where he also met with Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.

Both nations agreed to enhance their military cooperation, particularly through disaster response and military medicine, and are expected to sign a formal defense cooperation agreement by the end of the year. They also underscored the importance of resolving disputes peacefully and in accordance with international law, emphasizing the need to maintain peace, stability, and freedom of navigation in the South China Sea—a region where tensions with China have been escalating.

The meeting comes at a time when the South China Sea is a focal point of international concern, with frequent clashes between the Philippines and China, as the latter continues to assert its expansive territorial claims. Despite these challenges, both Vietnam and the Philippines are committed to working together, even as they navigate their complex relationships with China.

In addition to the bilateral discussions, the two countries' coastguards recently conducted their first joint exercises in Manila, focusing on fire-fighting drills and search-and-rescue operations. [Radio Free Asia] [Reuters]

China, Vietnam Coast Guards strengthen ties through joint exchange in Hai Phong

In separate but related updates, the Vietnam Coast Guard (VCG) and the China Coast Guard (CCG) participated in a collaborative exchange on August 28 in Hai Phong, Vietnam. This meeting was part of their first exchange program focused on party and political affairs. The Vietnamese delegation was led by Lieutenant General Bui Quoc Oai, Political Commissar of the VCG, while the Chinese delegation was headed by Major General Liu Houjie, Deputy Political Commissar of the CCG.

During the exchange, the Vietnamese and Chinese coast guards reaffirmed their commitment to enhancing cooperation. Major General Tran Van Tho, Commander of Vietnam’s Coast Guard Region 1, emphasized the growing comprehensive relationship between the two nations and highlighted the successful joint patrols and anti-crime initiatives in the Gulf of Tonkin. [Vietnam Pictorial]

This joint exchange is noteworthy, coming as it does after China earlier this year announced new baseline claims in the Gulf of Tonkin, which have sparked concerns from Vietnam and other international observers. These new baselines extend China's territorial claims in the northern part of the Gulf of Tonkin, an area known in China as the Beibu Gulf, potentially expanding its maritime jurisdiction up to 50 nautical miles from the shore. Vietnam's response has been cautious but critical, emphasizing the need for Beijing to adhere to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and respect previously negotiated agreements.

Vietnam's Minister of Public Security presents proposals to combat

transnational crimes in ASEAN

(wn) During the 18th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime (AMMTC-18) in Vientiane on August 28, Senator Lieut. Gen Lương Tam Quang, Minister of Public Security, urged increased regional cooperation to combat transnational crime. Quang proposed several measures to strengthen collective efforts against cross-border criminal activities, including improving information sharing on criminal activities, establishing joint task forces to investigate crimes across borders, and coordinating patrols to combat drug and human trafficking, organised crime, and cybercrime. He emphasised the need for better coordination in monitoring and addressing crimes committed by citizens of one country in another. He stressed the importance of diverse regional media campaigns to raise public awareness and prevent threats such as human trafficking, terrorism, and cybercrime proactively.

The minister emphasised the need for better handling of mutual legal assistance requests, extradition, and transfer of criminals among the ASEAN countries. This includes efforts to locate and recover assets and ensure compliance with legal regulations and diplomatic requirements. Quang suggested enhancing cooperation in high-level sci-tech innovations to combat transnational crime. Participants at the event also proposed recommendations aimed at strengthening cooperation in combating transnational crime in the future. [Asian News Network]

Bangladesh-India relations strained: MoU reviews, forced resignations, misinformation allegations

(lm/cr) The interim government of Bangladesh, led by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus, is considering reviewing and potentially scrapping some Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) signed with neighboring India during the tenure of the previous administration of ousted Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. These MoUs, signed in June, include seven new agreements and three renewals. The current government believes that Hasina may have shown undue favor to India in these agreements.

In addition to the review of MoUs, Dhaka's interim government might seek Hasina's return to Bangladesh if deemed necessary, though the final decision on this matter lies with Indian authorities. According to Foreign Affairs Adviser Touhid Hossain, the specifics of

Hasina's current status in India remain unclear, particularly since her red passport has been canceled by Bangladesh.[The Daily Star]

Amid these developments, tensions between Bangladesh and India have been further strained by the spread of misinformation and rising domestic unrest. India recently dismissed as "fake news" reports from Bangladeshi media that claimed New Delhi had imposed a visa ban on six Bangladeshi student leaders for allegedly stirring "anti-India" sentiments. These reports were refuted by official sources in New Delhi. [mint]

Concurrently, Bangladesh's interim government is under fire for the forced resignation of at least 49 teachers from minority communities, a move described by Hasina's Awami League as a "wholesale purge" that institutionalizes intolerance within the educational sector. This action has drawn significant scrutiny, particularly from human rights advocates, who condemned the silence of interim leader Yunus on the issue. [Hindustan Times] [NEWS 18]

Meanwhile, in India, the dissemination of fake news by a Bangladeshi journalist has added another layer of tension between the two nations. Bengaluru police have filed an FIR against Salaha Uddin Shoaib Choudhury, a Bangladeshi journalist, and Aditi, a contributor to "The Jaipur Dialogues," for allegedly spreading false claims about Rahul Gandhi, the Leader of Opposition in India's Parliament, and his mother, Sonia Gandhi. [Deccan Herald]

Separately, Ishaque Ali Khan Panna, a leader of the ousted Awami League party, was found dead in a betel nut plantation near the India-Bangladesh border in East Jaiñtia Hills district. According to police, Panna had been fleeing following the fall of the Awami League government and is believed to have suffered a cardiac arrest while attempting to cross into India. [Hindustan Times]

Bangladesh, Pakistan agree to cooperate for South Asia's progress

(ht) On August 30, Pakistan and Bangladesh committed to closer cooperation to advance regional prosperity. This follows a recent period of strained relations under former Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who faced criticism for human rights abuses and had to flee the country in early August.

Against this backdrop, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif of Pakistan extended aid to Bangladesh's interim government, led by Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus, to help address severe flooding and congratulated Yunus on his new role. Both leaders have agreed on the importance of strengthening bilateral ties through enhanced collaboration in commerce, culture, and people-to-people exchanges. [Dawn News]

Swiss business delegation explores investment opportunities in Bhutan

(lm) A Swiss business delegation visited Bhutan for the third time, comprising 23 members from 18 Swiss companies. The delegation explored investment opportunities in sectors like wood processing, finance, tourism, and infrastructure. The networking session, facilitated by the Bhutan Chamber for Commerce and Industry (BCCI), aimed to connect Swiss firms with Bhutanese decision-makers and potential partners. The visit highlighted successful collaborations, such as SELISE, a Swiss tech company operating in Bhutan. [Kuensel]

Cambodia’s Ream Naval Base to receive two warships from China

(ma) Cambodia's Ream Naval Base, located on the Gulf of Thailand, is undergoing significant expansion with support from China. This development includes the construction of new facilities and the upgrade of existing infrastructure, bolstering the base’s strategic capabilities. The expansion has sparked concerns among regional and international observers due to the close ties between Cambodia and China, with some fearing that the enhanced base could be used to project Chinese military power in the region.

In a latest development, China is reportedly expected to soon transfer two warships, a deep-draft pier capable of accommodating aircraft carriers, and other facilities it developed at Cambodia's Ream naval base. About 100 Chinese naval personnel have been working intensively at the base in Sihanoukville province, with the handover anticipated by the end of September. The section of the base, previously off-limits to Cambodian staff, was entirely funded and developed by China. Analysts suggest that in return, China may have secured privileged access to the base, where

foreign vessels have previously been prohibited from docking. [Radio Free Asia]

The Cambodian government has emphasized that the upgrades are intended to enhance maritime security and improve the base's operational capabilities. Cambodian officials assert that the project is purely for national defense and does not pose a threat to neighboring countries. Despite these assurances, the increased military presence and the involvement of China have led to heightened scrutiny and speculation about potential geopolitical implications.

The United States and its allies have expressed apprehensions regarding the military expansion at Ream. They worry that the base could become a strategic asset for China, potentially affecting the balance of power in Southeast Asia. [The Diplomat]

Cambodia, Philippines seek strengthened ties

(ma) On August 27, Cambodian Prime Minister Sok Chenda Sophea paid a courtesy call on Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. The meeting was part of Chenda Sophea's September 27-28 trip to the Philippines to co-chair the fourth meeting of the Cambodia-Philippines Joint Commission for Bilateral Cooperation (JCBC) with Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs secretary Enrique Manalo.

Chenda Sophea and Marcos discussed multiple issues, including air connectivity, bilateral trade, investment and tourism, with the letter expressing his intention to deepen bilateral relations with Cambodia. Marcos emphasized the potential for increased cooperation between the two countries in various sectors, including trade, investment, and security. He highlighted the strategic importance of strengthening ties to enhance regional stability and mutual prosperity. [The Cambodia Daily] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Cambodia]

During the JCBC meeting, the two foreign ministers reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening bilateral cooperation in a wide range of areas, encompassing defense and security, transnational crime, tourism, culture and sports, and to exploring ways to deepen engagement in other areas such as health, environment and energy. Both sides also welcomed the signing of a double tax avoidance agreement later this year to further enhance bilateral relations and committed to "expediting the finalization of agreements on agriculture, labor, technical and

vocational education and the prevention of looting and illicit trafficking of cultural artifacts within the year".

In addition, the situation in the South China Sea, Myanmar and Gaza was discussed. [Department of Foreign Affairs, The Philippines] [The Phnom Penh Post]

Cambodia to conclude double taxation agreements with Laos, Philippines

(ma) According to Cambodian officials, Cambodia is on the verge of finalizing Double Taxation Agreements (DTAs) with Laos and the Philippines, which will help prevent businesses and individuals from being taxed twice on the same income in both countries.

These agreements are part of Cambodia's strategy to enhance its trade relations and attract more foreign direct investment by providing a clearer and more stable tax environment. In addition to these DTAs, Cambodia plans to negotiate similar agreements with other countries, including Myanmar, France, and Japan, to further integrate into the global economy.

These DTAs are expected to remove tax barriers and stimulate economic growth, benefiting both domestic and foreign businesses operating in Cambodia. By reducing the tax burden, the agreements will likely encourage more cross-border trade and investment, contributing to the country's long-term economic development goals. [The Laotian Times]

Australian warship docks at Cambodia's Sihanoukville Autonomous Port

(dql) On September 3, the Australian Navy's HMAS Perth arrived at Sihanoukville Autonomous Port for a three-day visit, aimed at strengthening ties and expanding cooperation between Cambodia and Australia. The ship, carries 193 personnel, including 32 officers and a helicopter.

This visit marks the 16th time since 2003 that Australian warships have visited Cambodia.

During the visit, Cambodian and Australian Navy personnel will conduct in joint activities that encompasses a tour, small boat operations demonstration, firefighting techniques, and a friendly volleyball match. [Khmer Times]

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China and US hold strategic talks to stabilize relations

(to) In a series of high-level meetings from August 27-29, 2024, U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan visited Beijing to engage in strategic communication with Chinese officials, including Chinese President Xi Jinping and Foreign Minister Wang Yi. This visit, the first by a U.S. National Security Advisor in eight years, aimed to manage the complex and contentious U.S.-China relationship. The meetings concluded with commitments to maintaining open communication channels and exploring areas of cooperation, despite ongoing competition and disagreements.

During the visit, Sullivan and Wang Yi engaged in candid and constructive discussions on a range of issues, including Taiwan, the South China Sea, and the war in Ukraine. Both sides emphasized the need to avoid conflict and to pursue a stable and sustainable bilateral relationship. President Xi Jinping reiterated China's commitment to a stable U.S.-China relationship, urging both nations to view each other's development as an opportunity rather than a challenge.

Sullivan, in turn, conveyed President Biden's commitment to responsibly managing the relationship and expressed hopes for peaceful coexistence. He reaffirmed Vice President Kamala Harris' commitment to "responsibly managing" the U.S-China relations if she wins the presidential election in November, in a bid to reassure that Harris would not pursue a more hostile approach to the relationship than US President Joe Biden. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs The People's Republic of China] [The White House] [Financial Times]

The meetings also set the stage for a future call between President Biden and President Xi, as both countries seek to navigate their differences through continued diplomacy. [South China Morning Post 1] [South China Morning Post 2]

Head of U.S. Space Command demands improved space debris reporting from China

(to) During a panel discussion at the Peterson Space Force Base in Colorado Springs on August 31, General Stephen Whiting, head of the U.S. Space Command, called on China to improve its reporting on space

debris, following a series of incidents involving China's rocket launches. The discussion showcased concerns over the increased frequency of Chinese satellite launches, particularly related to the Qianfan Constellation, a massive 14,000-satellite network aimed at rivaling SpaceX's Starlink.

Whiting's remarks came after on August 6, China launched 18 satellites using a Long March 6A rocket from the Taiyuan Satellite Launch Centre, resulting in over 700 pieces of trackable debris in low-Earth orbit. This incident, one of the largest rocket break-ups in history, follows a similar event in November 2022.

Whiting emphasized the importance of better communication between the US and China to mitigate the risks associated with space debris and ensure the sustainability of space activities. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs acknowledged the incidents and confirmed that measures were being taken to monitor and mitigate debris, with spokesman Lin Jian stating the country's commitment to protecting the space environment. [South China Morning Post]

US fines aerospace and defense company RTX for exports to China

(alk) The US has fined American multinational aerospace and defense conglomerate RTX Corp USD 200 million for violating export laws by sharing data and products with prohibited countries, including China. The fine stems from RTX's failure to properly classify and control defense exports, including classified items, under the International Traffic in Arms Regulations.

RTX voluntarily disclosed the violations and revealed in a July 25 earnings call that it had set aside USD 1 billion to resolve three legal issues identified during the integration of Rockwell Collins and Raytheon into RTX.

The first issue, disclosed by the U.S. State Department on August 30, involved mistakenly sharing sensitive technology with China, including details about an aluminum display housing component of the F-22 Raptor Fighter Aircraft.

As part of the settlement, RTX will retain independent compliance monitors over the three-year term of the agreement. [Reuters]

US postpones final determination on China tariffs

(alk) On August 30, the Biden administration postponed its final decision on steep US tariff hikes for Chinese-made electric vehicles, batteries, semiconductors, and solar cells, stating that an announcement will be made soon.

The US Trade Representative (USTR) is still finalizing its determination on modifying tariffs originally imposed during the Trump administration in 2018 and 2019.

The planned tariff increases, including 100 percent on EVs, 50 percent on semiconductors and solar cells, and 25 percent on lithium-ion batteries and other key imports, were initially set to take effect on August 1. However, the USTR delayed the implementation to September to review over 1,100 public comments. A new deadline of August 31 was set but has now been extended again.

The delay follows White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan's recent talks in Beijing, where both U.S. and Chinese officials emphasized the need to manage bilateral relations. This decision marks the first major trade action since Vice President Kamala Harris became the Democratic Party's presidential nominee after President Biden stepped aside.

Easing tariffs may attract criticism from Republicans, who argue that Harris is being lenient on China, especially as Trump has pledged to impose even higher tariffs if re-elected. Many industries and some Congress members have also expressed concerns about rising costs due to the tariffs. For example, EV battery makers like Ford have urged the USTR to reconsider the 25 percent duty on graphite, as they still heavily rely on Chinese supplies. Port operators have also highlighted the increased costs for Chinese cranes, with no US producers available as alternatives. [Reuters]

US lauds Canada’s steep new tariff on Chinese EVs and metals

(alk) On August 29, U.S. Trade Representative Katherine Tai endorsed Canada’s decision to impose a 100 percent tariff on Chinese-made electric vehicles and a 25 percent tariff on Chinese steel and aluminium, as the U.S. prepares to announce similar duties.

Tai praised Canada's strong stance against China's "unfair and anticompetitive non-market policies," emphasizing that it ensures fair competition for Canadian workers and companies in the EV, steel, and aluminium industries. Tai also noted that the U.S. shares Canada's concerns about China's unfair practices, including labor rights violations and lack of environmental protections.

Canada announced the tariffs on August 27, set to take effect on October 1, targeting EVs made in China, including those by U.S.-based Tesla, as a response to China's state-directed policies that have led to excess production capacity in these industries. [South China Morning Post]

US pilots China-focused programme to address technological gaps

(alk) The "Red Ventures" pilot program, aimed at identifying gaps in US technological innovation compared to China, has entered its second phase. The program focuses on addressing economic security concerns and highlights the US's emphasis on the innovation and hi-tech competition with China.

Its goal is to create an "innovation pipeline" to address US vulnerabilities and compile a list of key challenge areas related to China for various innovation communities.

This initiative follows US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan's recent visit to China, where economic security and technology competition were major topics of discussion. [South China Morning Post]

China condemns US sanctions over Ukraine war

(alk) On August 27, China condemned US sanctions on its entities over the Ukraine war as "illegal and unilateral" and "not based on facts." The criticism came ahead of White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan's visit to Beijing for high-level talks.

The US recently imposed sanctions on over 400 entities and individuals (see AiR No. 35, August/2024, 4), including Chinese companies accused of helping Russia bypass Western sanctions and bolster its military. Washington has repeatedly warned Beijing against supporting Russia's defense industry and has

issued numerous sanctions to limit Moscow's access to military technologies.

China's special envoy for Eurasian affairs, Li Hui, who has been engaged in diplomatic efforts, criticized the sanctions as an attempt to shift blame and fabricate a "China responsibility theory." Li argued that these sanctions threaten countries with normal economic ties to Russia. China's commerce and foreign ministries have also opposed previous sanctions.

Despite its opposition to the sanctions, China has portrayed itself as actively seeking a solution to the conflict. In 2023, it has set out 12-point peace plan outlining general principles for ending the war. This year, China and Brazil jointly called for Russia-Ukraine peace talks. Li expressed hope that more countries would support China's peace efforts, which include proposals for prisoner exchanges and opposition to nuclear weapons. However, China has yet to offer detailed plans for ending the war. [Reuters]

China, Japan urged to manage friction as tensions rise

(alk) Veteran Chinese diplomat Liu Jianchao urged Japanese lawmakers to adopt a long-term view on Sino-Japanese relations and manage differences constructively amid high tensions. This call came on August 27, a day after China's alleged airspace incursion into Japan.

During an August 28 meeting in Tokyo with Japan-China Friendship Parliamentarians' Union representatives, Liu, head of the CCP's International Department, stressed that relations were at a critical point and urged for increased strategic communication, cooperation, and dialogue between the two countries.

This comes amid rising tensions in the already strained Sino-Japanese relations. In addition to the recent airspace incursion, tensions have remained high over issues such as Japan's alignment with the US-led regional security architecture aimed at countering China, the release of treated radioactive water from the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant, and disputes over the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands.

Liu had previously visited Japan in May, leading to the resumption of regular discussions between the two countries' ruling parties after a six-year gap. In July, Hiroshi Moriyama, chairman of the LDP's general council, visited China and met with Chinese Foreign

Minister Wang Yi, who advocated for increased communication and cooperation. Further interactions included a visit by Japanese Health Minister Keizo Takemi to China, resulting in an agreement to cooperate on managing future infectious diseases. Additionally, Chinese Foreign Vice-Minister Ma Zhaoxu re-initiated the China-Japan strategic dialogue in Tokyo after a four-year hiatus. However, much of these efforts have had limited success in cooling tensions. [South China Morning Post]

China, Pakistan cooperation facing militant attacks

(alk) Attacks by separatist militants in Pakistan's Balochistan province aim to disrupt China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif said on August 27. The assaults, starting on August 25, have killed over 70 people and are the most extensive by ethnic militants in years, seeking the province's secession.

Sharif labelled the militants as "terrorists" intent on halting CPEC and driving a wedge between Islamabad and Beijing.

China condemned the attacks, pledging continued support for Pakistan's counter-terrorism efforts and cooperation to maintain regional security. Beijing has also previously expressed concerns about the safety of its workers in Pakistan. In March, six Chinese engineers working on a dam project were killed in the northwest. Separatist militants have also targeted Chinese projects, including Gwadar port.

The CPEC, with USD 65 billion in development commitments, is part of China's Belt and Road initiative. Balochistan, rich in resources but underdeveloped, has seen Pakistan seek China's assistance for infrastructure projects. [Reuters]

China’s Y-20 transport plane showcases military capabilities in Egypt

(to) On August 27, 2024, China’s Y-20 transport aircraft, accompanied by six J-10 fighter jets from the Bayi Aerobatic Team, made a flyover of the Pyramids in Egypt ahead of participating in the inaugural Egypt International Airshow.

The airshow, held this week at El Alamein International Airport, marks China’s expanding military influence in

the Middle East and Africa. The Y-20, known for its long-range mobility and ability to transport goods and personnel, flew nearly 10,000 kilometers from northwestern China to Egypt, showcasing China's military reach and operational capabilities.

This mission follows recent deployments, including joint counterterrorism exercises in Tanzania and a high-profile presence in Russia's Far East. The appearance at the Egypt International Airshow highlights China's growing role as a major arms supplier in the region, with increasing interest from Middle Eastern and North African nations in Chinese military technology. [South China Morning Post]

Nigeria's president to visit China seeking economic cooperation

(alk) Nigeria's President Bola Tinubu is set to meet Chinese leader Xi Jinping during a visit to China from September 4-6 to discuss cooperation on the economy, agriculture, and satellite technology. Tinubu, who is implementing significant reforms in Nigeria, will attend the China-Africa Cooperation Summit in Beijing alongside other African leaders.

The meeting aims to address mutual interests, including economic cooperation, and national, regional, and international security.

During his visit, Tinubu will tour Huawei Technologies, and the China Rail and Construction Corporation as Nigeria aims to complete a high-speed rail line from Ibadan to Abuja. He will also meet with CEOs from key Chinese companies in sectors such as ICT, oil and gas, aluminium production, seaport construction, financial services, and satellite technology.

Africa is a focus of China's Belt and Road Initiative. While Nigeria is seeking Chinese investment to help its economy, which faces challenges such as double-digit inflation, foreign currency shortages, and crude oil theft. [Reuters]

China and South Africa elevate bilateral relations with strategic partnership

(to) Chinese President Xi Jinping and South African President Cyril Ramaphosa have announced the elevation of their countries' bilateral relations to an all-round strategic cooperative partnership. The announcement was made during Ramaphosa's state

visit to China to attend the 2024 Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), held in Beijing from September 4-6. This upgrade in relations is aimed at fostering deeper collaboration in different sectors, including trade, investment, technology, and energy. [Xinhua] [The State Council of The People's Republic of China]

During their meeting at the Great Hall of the People, the two leaders discussed ways to address the trade imbalance between their nations. South Africa, which has a trade deficit with China, is seeking more sustainable and job creating investments from Beijing. Both leaders agreed to promote balanced trade and boost two-way investments, particularly in renewable energy and infrastructure development. The discussions also touched on expanding cooperation in poverty reduction, rural revitalization, and the digital economy, with China expressing its willingness to share its experiences and technologies.

The visit also saw the signing of multiple cooperation agreements, including those related to the application of the BeiDou Navigation Satellite System, housing and settlement projects, and export requirements for South African dairy products and raw wool to China. Additionally, the two countries plan to co-host a new energy investment conference to explore further opportunities in renewable energy and technology transfer. [VOA] [Reuters]

China pledges stronger ties with Democratic Republic of the Congo

(to) During the 9th Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) Summit held this week in Beijing, Chinese President Xi Jinping met with Congolese President Félix Tshisekedi to discuss deepening cooperation between China and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The meeting, which took place on September 2, focused on enhancing collaboration in agriculture and mineral processing, areas critical to the DRC's economic development. President Xi emphasized the importance of transforming the DRC's resource wealth into sustainable development momentum, highlighting the mutual benefits of their partnership.

The DRC, a major supplier of cobalt, a vital component in electric vehicle batteries and electronics, plays a key role in China's green energy transition. The discussions between the two leaders underscored the strategic importance of their relationship, with Xi vowing to consolidate mutual political trust and strengthen ties as "fellow travelers on the road to modernization."

The FOCAC Summit, which has brought together over 50 African heads of state and government, has been labeled as China's most significant diplomatic event in recent years. During the summit, China and the DRC reaffirmed their commitment to deepening economic ties and exploring new avenues for cooperation. [Southern China Morning Post]

Australia secures Pacific Policing Plan among mild response from China

(to) Australia achieved a significant diplomatic victory in the Pacific region with the endorsement of it's a USD 271 million Pacific Policing Initiative by Pacific Island leaders at a summit held in Tonga. This initiative is seen as a strategic move by Canberra to counter China's growing security presence in the region. The plan, which focuses on strengthening law enforcement capabilities across the Pacific, has been widely regarded as a "diplomatic coup" for Australia.

Despite the significance of this development, China's response has been notably restrained. Beijing's measured reaction highlights its continued efforts to balance its ties with Pacific Island nations while navigating its complex relationship with Australia. Analysts suggest that while China is paying close attention to Australia's increased influence in the region, it is choosing to focus on maintaining its long-term partnerships and investments across the Pacific.

The endorsement of the Pacific Policing Initiative marks a critical step in Australia's broader strategy to enhance regional security and cooperation, particularly in the face of China's expanding footprint. [Southern China Morning Post]

China branded a "complex intelligence concern" by New Zealand spy service

(alk) New Zealand's spy service labeled China a "complex intelligence concern" on September 3, warning that the country is vulnerable to foreign interference.

In its annual threat report, the New Zealand Security Intelligence Service highlighted China's "complex and deceptive" activities, noting that while several countries engage in malicious actions, China's efforts stand out.

The report pointed out that a few authoritarian states use foreign interference as a tool to advance their interests, making it challenging to conclusively link these activities to specific nations. The report, titled "New Zealand's Security Threat Environment," aims to better inform the public about the risks the country faces in an increasingly complex geopolitical landscape. [South China Morning Post]

EU to tighten hydrogen subsidy rules following China concerns

(alk) The European Commission is tightening rules to ensure EU funding for hydrogen projects benefits European companies, following concerns over cheap Chinese imports. On September 2, the EU's climate policy chief announced that new criteria are being developed to favor local firms in the upcoming round of green hydrogen project funding.

European electrolyser manufacturers have warned they cannot compete with cheaper Chinese products and are pushing for protections within the EU's Hydrogen Bank funding scheme. In response, the EU is considering criteria that would prioritize European supply chains, including cybersecurity and safety measures to prevent European data from being accessed by non-EU governments.

The new subsidy criteria, while not final, may require projects to be completed within Europe or limit reliance on non-EU countries.

The EU recently awarded €720 million to seven hydrogen projects, with some potentially using Chinese equipment, though the Commission has not confirmed this.

While the EU is not aiming to sever ties with China, it plans to act against what it sees as unfair competition, including imposing tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles (see AiR No. 35, August/2024, 4). [Reuters]

China, India hold 31st border affairs meeting to resolve standoff in Himalayas

(lm) India and China held the 31st meeting of the Working Mechanism for Consultation & Coordination on India-China Border Affairs (WMCC) in Beijing on August 29. Both countries agreed to strengthen dialogue, adhere to border-related agreements, and de-escalate tensions along the Line of Actual Control

(LAC), a disputed 3,200-kilometer boundary that has not been precisely defined.

This latest diplomatic effort is part of ongoing negotiations that have included several rounds of Corps Commander-level talks and high-level meetings between the foreign ministers of both nations, aimed at de-escalating tensions that have persisted since the deadly clashes in the Galwan Valley in 2020. The latest meeting followed closely on the heels of the 30th WMCC meeting held in July, reflecting an intensified effort to address the situation.

However, despite these efforts, significant challenges remain, particularly in disengaging troops from remaining friction points along the LAC.

India reiterated that the restoration of peace and respect for the LAC are essential for normalizing bilateral relations. The discussions also emphasized the importance of maintaining peace and tranquility in the border areas in accordance with existing bilateral agreements and protocols. [The Hindu] [South China Morning Post 1]

Chinese media interpreted these frequent interactions as a positive signal that China-India relations are beginning to stabilize after a prolonged low point. While acknowledging that the recent WMCC meeting did not completely resolve the border issues, it was seen as a constructive step towards finding a common solution and promoting healthier bilateral relations. [Global Times]

Chinese investments return to India amid concerns over growing economic dependence

Simultaneously, India is seeing a gradual return of Chinese investments, particularly in the electronics manufacturing sector, four years after the Galwan Valley clash. Despite previous stringent scrutiny on Chinese investments, recent approvals by an Indian interministerial panel signal a potential easing of restrictions, allowing companies like Chinese electronics major Luxshare and a joint venture between India's Bhagwati Products and China's Huaqin Technology to invest in India.

This move is driven by the need to boost local manufacturing capabilities and meet the demands of global manufacturers like Apple, which seeks easier linkages with their Chinese bases as they expand in India.

However, this renewed influx of Chinese investments has sparked concerns among critics who warn that

increasing reliance on Chinese investments and components might lead to a situation where India's manufacturing ecosystem becomes heavily dependent on China, thereby hindering India's long-term goals of developing a self-reliant industrial base. [South China Morning Post 2]

India, United States enhance defence cooperation with new agreements

(cr) India and the United States recently signed two key agreements to bolster their defense ties.

The first is the Security of Supply Arrangement (SOSA), under which both countries will provide reciprocal priority support for goods and services critical to national defense. This agreement aims to ensure a steady supply of defense-related materials and resources between the two nations, particularly in times of unexpected supply chain disruptions.

The second agreement is a Memorandum of Agreement on the Assignment of Liaison Officers, which will station Indian military officers at key U.S. strategic commands, starting with the U.S. Special Operations Command in Florida. This is part of an effort to enhance information-sharing and deepen military cooperation.

These agreements are part of a broader push to strengthen U.S.-India defense relations, building on previous agreements such as the 2023 U.S.-India Roadmap for Defense Industrial Cooperation, which focuses on co-production projects, including jet engines and unmanned platforms. These initiatives are set against the backdrop of the ongoing strategic partnership between the two nations, which has seen increased collaboration in areas like military communication, logistics, and technology sharing.

India is also set to manufacture GE F-414 jet engines domestically and procure MQ-9B drones, further deepening its defense ties with the U.S. These developments reflect the growing importance of the U.S.-India defense relationship in the context of regional security and global strategic dynamics. [The Indian Express]

Danish court rejects extradition to India of an arms smuggling suspect

(lm) A Danish court has denied India's request to extradite Niels Holck, a Danish national implicated in a 1995 arms smuggling case. Holck, who was involved in dropping assault rifles, rocket launchers, and missiles from a cargo plane in eastern India, admitted to his participation but has long fought extradition due to fears of inhumane treatment.

The weapons were intended for a revolutionary group in India, and while other participants, including a British citizen and five Latvians, were arrested, Holck managed to escape. Since 2002, India has repeatedly sought his extradition. Although Denmark's government initially agreed to the request, Danish courts have consistently blocked it, citing concerns that Holck could face torture or other inhumane treatment in India.

The latest ruling by the Hilleroed District Court reiterated these concerns, stating that even with "additional diplomatic guarantees" from India, the risk of torture remains. Holck, now 62, has expressed fear for his life if returned to India, stating his willingness to face justice in Denmark but not at the cost of his life.

The case has caused diplomatic tensions between India and Denmark, particularly after earlier refusals to extradite Holck. Denmark reconsidered the extradition request in 2023, with the country's top prosecuting authority initially indicating that the requirements for extradition had been met. [Associated Press] [Deutsche Welle]

India clears procurement of 240 Russian jet engines for IAF's Su-30MKI fighter jets

(lm) India's The Cabinet Committee on Security has approved the procurement of 240 AL-31FP aero-engines for the Indian Air Force's Su-30MKI fighter jets, to be supplied by Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) at a cost of over INR 26 billion (approximately USD 312 million). The engines, which will include over 54 percent indigenous content, will be manufactured at HAL's Koraput division. Deliveries are scheduled to begin in a year and will be completed over eight years.

This procurement is crucial for sustaining the IAF's fleet of Su-30MKIs, which form a significant part of India's fighter strength. The IAF currently operates 259 Su-30MKIs, with a long-term upgrade plan for 84 jets to be executed by HAL, incorporating 78 percent indigenous content.

Russia, as the original equipment manufacturer, will assist in upgrading certain systems, while most enhancements, including radar and avionics, will be indigenous, featuring the DRDO's Uttam AESA radar. The Su-30MKI fleet is expected to remain operational beyond 2055. [The Hindu]

India, Israel reaffirm Strategic Partnership during 17th Foreign Office Consultations in New Delhi

(cr) The 17th India-Israel Foreign Office Consultations were held in New Delhi on August 28. The Indian delegation was led by Foreign Secretary Shri Vikram Misri, while the Israeli side was headed by Yaakov Blitshtein, Director General of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

During the consultations, both nations discussed the strength of their strategic partnership and reviewed various bilateral projects and initiatives. They also exchanged views on regional issues, particularly focusing on the situations in West Asia and the Indo-Pacific.

India reiterated its condemnation of the October 7 terror attacks on Israel, calling for the immediate release of all hostages and emphasizing the importance of a ceasefire, humanitarian assistance, and adherence to international humanitarian law. The discussions also highlighted India's concerns over the escalating tensions in West Asia, stressing the need for restraint, dialogue, and diplomacy to resolve conflicts.

India's longstanding policy supports a negotiated two-state solution for Palestine, advocating for the establishment of a sovereign, independent, and viable Palestinian state with secure and recognized borders, living peacefully alongside Israel. [NDTV] [MEA]

Indonesia and Australia sign defense cooperation agreement

(si) On August 29, Indonesian Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto and Australian Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Richard Marles signed the Indonesia-Australia Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) at the Military Academy in Magelang.

The Agreement will allow for "enhanced practical cooperation and interoperability between our defense

forces in areas such as maritime security, counter terrorism, humanitarian and disaster relief, logistics support, education and training, as well as across defense industry." [Ministry of Defense, Australia]

Prabowo emphasized that the DCA is a significant step in strengthening defense relations between the two nations, focusing on enhancing cooperation in the defense sector rather than forming a military pact. The agreement reflects a binding commitment to deepen strategic partnership through joint training, education, and military exercises, highlighting the growing military collaboration between Indonesia and Australia over the past decade.

Prabowo also noted that the DCA is designed to address various security threats and will solidify the friendly relations between Indonesia and Australia. The agreement's legally binding nature underscores the seriousness of both countries in maintaining and improving their defense ties.

Minister Marles acknowledged Indonesia's non-aligned stance and emphasized that the cooperation aligns with Indonesia's free and active political policy.

The DCA was the result of extensive negotiations and over 30 coordination meetings held since March 2023, with discussions taking place in Jakarta and Canberra throughout the year. [Antara] [Diplomat]

A joint military exercise in East Java is scheduled for November. Involving almost 2,000 military personnel, the exercise will include air, land, sea and cyber exercises, marking "the biggest exercise that Australia will do outside of our nation this year," according to Marles. [VoA]

Indonesia aims to finalize trade deal with EU

(si) On August 29 Trade Minister Zulkifli Hasan expressed his intent to finalize the negotiations for the Indonesia-European Union Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (IEU-CEPA) within this month Highlighting the ongoing challenges over the past nine years, Hasan emphasized that the agreement would help resolve various trade barriers between Indonesia and the EU, particularly by reducing import duties on Indonesian exports, such as footwear, which currently faces a 5-6 percent duty. In contrast, Vietnam enjoys zero import duties on similar exports to the EU.

The Trade Minister's Expert Staff, Bara Krishna Hasibuan, noted that the EU's large market makes it a critical trading partner for Indonesia. The completion of the IEU-CEPA would not only facilitate tax and duty exemptions but also address other concerns, including the European Union's deforestation regulation (EUDR) and the carbon border adjustment mechanism (CBAM), further solidifying trade relations between the two parties. [Antara]

Indonesia eyes export boost to South Korea

(si) During the Team Korea-Indonesia Economic Partnership Forum on August 28 in Jakarta, Indonesia's Deputy Minister of Trade, Jerry Sambuaga, highlighted the government's aim to expand exports to South Korea through the Indonesia-Korea Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (IK-CEPA), which has been in effect for a year.

The IK-CEPA agreement is a bilateral trade pact between Indonesia and South Korea that came into effect in January 2023. The agreement was designed to boost trade between the two countries by significantly reducing tariffs on a wide range of goods. Specifically, South Korea eliminated tariffs on 11,267 Indonesian products, including bicycles, motorbikes, and snake fruits, to enhance market access for Indonesian exports. [Jakarta Globe]

While coal and petroleum gas were the primary exports in 2023, Sambuaga noted that IK-CEPA has increased export potential for other products, including motor vehicles, palm oil, ferronickel, and palm kernels. The agreement also offers benefits like the elimination of import duties on 95 percent of traded goods, encouraging increased trade volume between the two countries.

South Korea is a key trading partner for Indonesia, ranking eighth in exports and sixth in imports in 2023. Despite a robust trade volume of USD 20.8 billion last year, Indonesia faced a trade deficit of USD 224 million with South Korea.

Deputy Ambassador of South Korea to Indonesia, Park Soo-Deok, acknowledged existing challenges such as geopolitical tensions and supply chain instability but emphasized the importance of expanding bilateral cooperation, including Korean investments in Indonesia, to foster economic growth and job creation. [Antara]

Pope Francis arrives in Indonesia for Asia-Pacific tour

(si) Pope Francis arrived on September 3 in Indonesia to begin a 12-day four-nation tour of the Asia-Pacific that will lead him also to Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste and Singapore.

A meeting with Indonesia President Joko Widodo is schedule for September 4 the first big set piece of his visit to the world's most populous Muslim-majority country. [The Guardian]

Ahead of the Pope's arrival, President Joko Widodo expressed his hope to discuss global peace and conflict resolution, adding that his discussions with the Pope would focus on addressing conflicts in regions such as Gaza and Ukraine, as well as other global issues. [Antara]

Japan opposition parties' delegation agrees with China to strengthen party ties

(sw) On August 29, a delegation of the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDP) and China's ruling Communist party signed a memorandum of understanding to enhance cooperation and communication between the two parties. The agreement aims to increase high-level visits and dialogue to promote healthy and stable Sino-Japanese relations.

Katsuya Okada, Secretary-General of the CDP, expressed concern over China's detention of Japanese nationals on espionage charges and urged Beijing to improve transparency in its judicial processes.

The delegation leader also advocated for the early resumption of China's pre-COVID policy of exempting Japanese short-term visitors from visa requirements. Both parties acknowledged that exchanges between lawmakers from the two neighboring countries have decreased and expressed a shared commitment to fostering more interaction, particularly among younger members of their respective parties. [Mainichi]

Japan and Italy deepen defense ties ahead of G7 Summit

(sw) Japanese Defense Minister Minoru Kihara and Italian Defense Minister Guido Crosetto met in Tokyo on August 27, where they reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening defense cooperation between the two nations. This meeting comes ahead of the first-ever G7 Defense Ministers meeting, set to be hosted by Italy in October. [Nippon]

The ministers highlighted the recent advancements in Japan-Italy defense relations, particularly through joint initiatives like the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP), the exchange of aircraft, the increase in joint exercises, and the start of formal negotiations on the Agreement on the Japan-Italy Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA). This agreement aiming to facilitate logistical cooperation between the Japanese Self-Defense Forces and the Italian Armed Forces. [Ministry of Defense, Japan]

As defense exchanges between Japan and Italy have intensified, the Italian aircraft carrier *Cavour* made its inaugural visit to Japan, docking at the Yokosuka naval base (see AiR No. 35, August/2024, 4). Japanese military officials were invited aboard to observe the operations of F-35B fighter jets on naval vessels. As Japan prepares to receive the first of its 42 F-35Bs, which will operate from its two Izumo-class carriers, Italy's *Cavour* —already equipped with these advanced fighters.

The Italian Defense Minister emphasized that the *Cavour*'s visit to the Pacific was not intended as a message to China or North Korea. Instead, it was part of a broader effort to strengthen ties with partners, ensuring freedom of navigation and maritime security to safeguard trade and secure supply chains in the region. [Defense News]

Japan foreign minister urges Iran to avoid escalation in Middle East tensions

(sw) On August 28, during a phone call with her Iranian counterpart, Japanese Foreign Minister Kamikawa Yoko urged Iran to exercise restraint and pursue diplomatic efforts to prevent further tensions in the Middle East. The conversation followed Iran's declaration of intent to retaliate against Israel for the killing of Hamas political leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran in July.

Kamikawa emphasized that escalation would not serve the interests of the region or the international community. The Iranian official affirmed that Iran does not seek to escalate the current situation. Both ministers agreed to maintain communication,

reaffirming the traditional friendly relationship between Japan and Iran. [NHK]

Japan protests second Chinese naval incursion in a week

(sw) Japan lodged a formal protest with China after a Chinese naval survey vessel entered Japanese territorial waters off Kagoshima Prefecture on August 31. This marks the second incursion in less than a week and the tenth in the past year involving Chinese naval survey ships (see AiR No. 35, August/2024, 4).

The Chinese vessel was detected in Japanese waters and left within two hours. Japan's Foreign Ministry expressed "strong concern and protest" to a Chinese embassy official, citing the increased Chinese military activity near Japan and Taiwan as a growing security concern.

Tokyo's protest also referenced an earlier airspace intrusion by a Chinese military plane on August 26. Japan has responded to these actions with a significant defense buildup, intending to deter any potential military aggression from Beijing. [Reuters]

China confirmed the presence of its naval survey vessel near Japan's territory but defended the action as a legal passage under international law. [SCMP]

Nippon Steel's bid for U.S. Steel confronts political resistance

(sw) Nippon Steel plans to invest an additional USD 1.3 billion in United States Steel's Mon Valley Works and Gary Works plants as part of its USD 14.1 billion acquisition bid for United States Steel Corporation. The Japanese company aims to secure support from the United Steelworkers union, which has opposed the takeover.

The deal faces significant political resistance, with both U.S. President Joe Biden and former President Donald Trump raising concerns over a foreign acquisition of this iconic American company. The transaction is under national security review of the transaction, and political pressure from the United Steelworkers has grown, particularly during this election year. [Japan Times]

Laos, Vietnam to introduce cross-border payment system

(ma) Laos and Vietnam are set to launch a new cross-border payment system called Kip-Dong, which aims to facilitate easier and more efficient financial transactions between the two countries. This system will allow for direct payments and transfers in their respective currencies – the Laotian Kip and the Vietnamese Dong – without the need for conversion into a third currency, simplifying transactions for businesses and individuals alike.

The introduction of this system is expected to enhance economic cooperation and strengthen trade ties between Laos and Vietnam. [The Laotian Times]

47 Indians free from scam centers in Laos

(dql) On August 31, Indian officials rescued 47 nationals who were being held captive and forced to operate online scams in Laos. The victims were trapped in cyber scam centers within the Golden Triangle Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in Bokeo province.

Of the 47, 29 were handed over by Laotian authorities following a crackdown on illegal activities in the SEZ, while the remaining 18 sought help directly from the Indian Embassy.

This latest rescue brings the total number of Indians rescued from similar situations in Laos to 635. [NDTV]

Two oil executives convicted by Swiss court for stealing USD 1.8 billion from 1MDB

(oc) On August 28 a Swiss court found two PetroSaudi executives guilty for embezzling money from the 1MDB fund which sentenced them to six and seven years in a Malaysian prison, respectively. The two men were indicted last year for their involvement in stealing from the sovereign wealth fund which was created in 2009 by former Prime Minister Najib Razak. [The Guardian]

Najib Razak was jailed in 2020 for his involvement in embezzling large sums of money from the 1MDB fund.

The PetroSaudi executives Patrick Mahony and Tarek Obaid were named by the lead prosecutor as

“calculative, manipulative and obscenely greedy” during the trial. Mahony was alleged to steal at least USD 37 million while Obaid at least USD 805 million.

The two were said to take money from the fund by using a supposedly legitimate company. This company called PetroSaudi was used to veil the scam when in May 2011 they stole USD 330 million for “a non-existing drilling project in eastern Saudi”, according to the indictment. [Aljazeera] [Financial Times]

Malaysia and Singapore’s SEZ agreement pushed back to November

(oc) Johor’s State Governor Onn Hafiz Ghazi announced that the deal for the Johor and Singapore special economic zone is expected to be signed in November. This means there will be a delay in the agreement because it was initially planned to be signed in September.

This delay marks difficulties in the SEZ agreement. The State Governor himself said that both parties are still ironing out some important details. Earlier this month Singapore’s *Strait Times* reported issues and complications in negotiations between Malaysia and Singapore. However, Onn Hafiz Ghazi remains hopeful that proposals will be finalized by November.

The SEZ was unveiled in October 2023 by Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim with an aim in facilitating economic growth through interaction between Johor and Singapore. The deal will remove certain barriers to trade and aims to increase business confidence throughout Malaysia so that investment increases, alongside providing Singapore with readily access to cheap labor. [Bloomberg] [Malay Mail]

Malaysia and New Zealand seek 50 percent increase in bilateral trade by 2030

(oc) On September 1, Malaysia and New Zealand announced plans to increase bilateral trade by 50 percent by 2030. These plans are amidst wider plans for exploring a free trade agreement which, if passed, would make an influx in trade between the two nations a reality.

For now, New Zealand Prime Minister Chris Luxon said at a conference where Malaysian PM Anwar Ibrahim was present that the two nations will remove non-tariff trade barriers. Their future plans aim to establish new

customs practices in place for easier movement of goods, as well as a form of ‘e-certification’. The two nations’ trade ministers will meet next year to review progress and discuss the free trade agreement.

These talks were amidst wider talks on defense and international security. Luxon said New Zealand had deployed one of its air force’s P-8A Poseidon patrol aircrafts in Penang, a northwestern Malaysian state.

Both prime ministers, although in disagreement over Hamas, called for a ceasefire in Gaza and both believe a two-state solution for Palestine and Israel is the path to peace. [Reuters] [Free Malaysia Today]

Malaysian prime minister to meet Putin at the Eastern Economic Forum

(oc) Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim will take part in the Eastern Economic Forum and plans to meet Russian President Vladimir Putin. The Forum, held each year to encourage foreign investment in Russia’s far East and develop links with Asia, will be held between September 3-6.

Anwar intends to meet Putin to discuss economic cooperation and integration while emphasizing the independent position of Malaysia. [Malay Mail] [Wikipedia] [The Edge Malaysia]

Russian ambassador criticizes Maldivian ex-President Maumoon for comments on Ukraine war

(sa) Russian Ambassador to the Maldives, Levan S. Dzhagaryan, has publicly criticized former Maldivian President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom over a social media post questioning the UN Security Council's silence on Russian air strikes in Ukraine. On August 27, Maumoon expressed concern about the effectiveness of the Security Council, pointing out that while reports of Russian strikes in Ukraine were widely covered, the Council had not addressed the issue.

In his response, Dzhagaryan took to the Russian Embassy's official social media page to defend Russia's actions. He reminded Maumoon of the alleged provocations by the Ukrainian administration, which he claimed had resulted in civilian casualties in Donbass. The ambassador also referenced peace talks that took place in Istanbul in March 2022, suggesting

that the United States and United Kingdom had obstructed these negotiations and instructed Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to continue the conflict.

Dzhagaryan criticized Maumoon for what he described as a Western double standard and urged him to focus on other global issues, specifically highlighting the UN Security Council's failure to address the humanitarian crisis in Gaza due to one country's negative stance. [the edition]

Mongolia urged to arrest Russian President Putin during visit

(dql) Ahead of Russian President Vladimir Putin's visit to Mongolia this week, Ukraine has urged Mongolia to arrest Russian President Vladimir Putin. Mongolia is the first International Criminal Court (ICC) member state Putin is since the court issued a warrant for his arrest. The ICC accuses Putin of war crimes, specifically for failing to prevent the unlawful deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia since the conflict began.

Ukraine's foreign ministry urged Mongolia to recognize Putin as a war criminal and to arrest him for transfer to The Hague, where the ICC is based.

Last year, Putin canceled a visit to South Africa after the ICC warrant was issued, as South Africa, also an ICC member, would have been obligated to detain him, an action President Ramaphosa warned could be seen as a declaration of war. [BBC]

Mongolia, U.S. to deepen cooperation in digital economy

(dql) During a meeting on August 30, Mongolian Minister of Digital Development, Innovation, and Communications Baatarkhuu Tsend and U.S. Ambassador to Mongolia Richard L. Buangan discussed ways to enhance bilateral cooperation in digital development.

Baatarkhuu emphasized his country's focus on advancing technology parks, the digital economy, and promoting Mongolian IT companies on a global scale. He expressed the Ministry's commitment to deepening collaboration with the U.S., particularly in areas such as start-up incubation, payment systems, cybersecurity, and establishing a model IT park to position Mongolia as a regional tech hub.

Buangan reaffirmed the U.S.'s support in sharing expertise and strengthening cooperation, particularly in digital economy development and cybersecurity. [Mongolian News Agency]

Mongolia and Oman commit to strengthening relations

(to) On August 26, Oman's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sayyid Badr bin Hamad bin Hamood Albusaidi, paid a courtesy call on Mongolian President Khurelsukh Ukhnaa during his official visit to Mongolia. This marks the first high-level visit from Oman to Mongolia, reflecting a mutual desire to foster bilateral relations.

The discussions focused on opportunities for collaboration in trade, investment, mining, agriculture, education, and tourism. They also addressed Mongolia's "Food Supply and Security" campaign, aimed at enhancing national food self-sufficiency, and the "One Billion Trees" campaign, which focuses on combating desertification and climate change by planting a billion trees nationwide. [Mongolian News Agency]

China warns Myanmar ethnic rebel groups in Northern Shan to stop fighting Myanmar junta government

(tl) Chinese government's Ruili City Security Commission has threatened the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) to stop fighting the Myanmar military regime in northern Shan State or face further punitive and disciplinary actions. The Commission called the TNLA to cooperate with Chinese authorities in preserving peace and stability in northern Shan State and along the China-Myanmar border, ensuring the safety of the border and people living in the area, as well as Chinese projects and Chinese nationals in Myanmar.

Additionally, the commission insisted that the TNLA to immediately resume peace talks with the Myanmar military government, stating that this was the best way to resolve disagreements. The Chinese government is also urging other ethnic armed groups in northern and eastern Shan State to block the TNLA from receiving food, gasoline, and medical supplies. It reaffirmed its continued commitment to playing a constructive role for Myanmar's peace and reconciliation process and promote the de-escalation of conflict Myanmar. [Radio

Free Asia] [The Irrawaddy][Myanmar Now][CNI Myanmar]

TNLA is a member of the Brotherhood Alliance, which launched the so-called "Operation 1027", a major military operation against the Myanmar junta in northern Shan State last year, seizing hundreds of junta bases and command centers, 24 junta military unit headquarters, twenty towns, and crucial trade routes with China.

On January 10, the operation in the northern Shan State was suspended as a result of China mediating a cease-fire between the Myanmar junta and the ethnic coalition. But on June 25, after the collapse of the ceasefire, the TNLA and another ethnic alliance member, the Myanmar Nationalities Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), began their operations in northern Shan State once more.

The resistance group now have taken control of Kyaukme, Nawnghkio, and Mongmit towns, as well as the capital city of northern Shan State, Lashio.

China to support military training for Myanmar

(tl) Chinese Ambassador to Myanmar Ma Jia met with junta Defense Minister Gen. Tin Aung San in Naypyitaw on August 28, to discuss border security and joint military training. She emphasized the importance of military cooperation in bilateral friendship. [Global News Light of Myanmar]

China has been one of the military regime's few allies since the 2021 coup and has also ties with ethnic rebel groups fighting the junta. The Myanmar junta has purchased USD 267 million worth of weapons and military equipment from China since the coup. Chinese intelligence chief Yang Yang met junta deputy head Gen. Soe Win for talks on military cooperation. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi discussed defense cooperation and called for stability with junta head Gen. Min Aung Hlaing.

Wang called on the regime to ensure the safety of Chinese investments and projects in Myanmar and stability along the border. However, many Chinese projects in northern Shan State and Mandalay Region are now in rebel hands. China has recently closed northern Shan State border crossings to restrict the flow of goods to groups fighting the regime. [The Irrawaddy][Development Media Group]

Arakan Army spotlights strategic engagement with foreign investors in Rakhine

(sc) On August 31, General Twan Mrat Naing, Commander-in-Chief of the Arakan Army (AA), articulated a clear stance on foreign investments in Rakhine State during an interview with the editor-in-chief of the Irrawaddy. "If a country invests anywhere, it naturally concerns itself with the security of its investments and personnel," General Naing explained. He emphasized the strategic importance of the AA's role in safeguarding these investments: "If we can serve as a security guarantor for their assets and workers, it enhances our standing and gradually improves our relationships."

He highlighted the lack of transparency under the control of previous governments and current junta regarding foreign dealings and compensation to the local people, suggesting a shift towards a more open and equitable approach under AA's influence. [The Irrawaddy]

General Naing further elaborated on the AA's broader strategy towards foreign investments and regional stability. "We assess the fairness of interests among stakeholders, the environmental impact, and the long-term benefits before formulating policies," he stated, indicating a comprehensive approach to foreign economic relations. He contrasted the AA's method to that of the junta, noting the latter's advantage of state-level diplomatic relationships. "Our advantage lies in being seen as a de facto government, which allows us to penetrate and promote our interests effectively," General Naing added, underscoring the AA's efforts to leverage its position for the benefit of Rakhine's people and its own strategic goals. [The Irrawaddy]

North Korea and Russia deepen cooperations in arms trade, economy

(ac) According to a report from the South Korean Defense Intelligence Agency submitted to lawmaker Kang Dae-Sik of the ruling People Power Party, North Korea has delivered more than 13,000 containers, suspected to be carrying over 6 million 152-millimeter artillery shells, to Russia through its eastern port of Najin since mid-2022.

The agency noted that this latest figure marks a two-fold increase since February when Minister of Defense Shin Won-Sik reported that 6,700 containers had been shipped to Russia. South Korea's agency has been monitoring the arms trade between Russia and North Korea since February 2022 and will continue to track potential transfers of North Korean missiles to Russia. [Yonhap News 1]

In addition to the arms trade, North Korea held talks in Pyongyang with Russia on August 27 to bolster economic cooperation. The meeting was attended by North Korea's Minister of External Economic Relations, Yon Jong-Ho, Vice Minister of Chemical Industry, Kim Hwa-Sik, and Russian Deputy Minister of Industry and Trade, Roman Chekushov.

Details of the discussions have not been disclosed, but observers suggest that the economic roundtable could have focused on potential coal gasification projects and the expansion of the chemical industry. As UN sanctions severely limit its ability to acquire petroleum or other energy sources, North Korea has been compelled to use coal to produce synthetic gas domestically, although South Korea believes that this project has made little progress. [Yonhap News 2] [Rodung Sinmum]

North Korean authorities add Chinese movies and shows to list of impure recordings

(jb) North Korean authorities recently designated several Chinese movies and shows to their list of impure recordings, which previously included South Korean film media and music. In late May and early June, the list was released, which was revealed to also contain videos from India and Russia alongside the above listed media. Citizens have also been instructed via a central directive, which was ratified by North Korean leader Kim Jong Un himself, to not listen to internal lectures on history as depicted by the People's Republic of China. The lecture recordings were not only said to contain distorted Chinese views on history but also had an incorrect understanding of the history of Korea. The recordings are currently only available to military officials and are banned from circulation among the general public. [Radio Free Asia]

The historical distortion was based on the authorities' allegation that the PRC considered several significant parts of Korean history to have Chinese origins, a controversy which had been initially brought up in 2021. In the controversy, the encyclopedia for Baidu,

the largest web browser in China, stated that food such as *samgyetang* and other cultural objects of the Koreas initially originated in China. The claims were extensively denied by cultural history experts and critics at the Dong-ah University of Media and Arts in South Korea who proved the origins of cultural items through assigned codes which are recognized by the Free Trade Agreement. This controversy also went hand in hand with clips of China's President Xi Jinping in 2017 claiming that South Korea used to be a part of China, bringing up a range of arguments around China needing to recognize their neighbor's independence and unique identity. [Radio Free Asia]

In terms of the newly added film media to the list of impure recordings, several citizens reported not finding anything impure or untoward in the media itself and showed surprise that Chinese media is being added to the list, which they previously thought was reserved for mainly tamping down on South Korean media influences. [Radio Free Asia]

North Korea protests China's border telecom installations

(ac) North Korea has objected to China's plan to install telecommunications facilities near their shared border, criticizing China for failing to consult them in advance. This year marks the 75th anniversary of bilateral relations between North Korea and China, making the protest – delivered in a rare email dated July 24 to the Geneva-based International Telecommunication Union (ITU) – particularly noteworthy.

The dispute arose after China's plans to build 191 radio broadcasting stations were circulated by the ITU as part of its initiative to establish terrestrial networks in relevant countries by June 2024.

North Korea expressed concern that the proposed radio stations are located too close to its border, potentially infringing on ITU guidelines and the 1981 Sino-North Korean Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Mutual Assistance, which symbolizes mutual recognition. Additionally, North Korea argued that constructing 17 radio stations in Dandong, a border city in northeastern China, could cause serious interference with its own communications. [South China Morning Post]

Pakistan rejects India's unilateral Kashmir claims as 'dangerously delusional'

(ht) Pakistan has strongly condemned remarks made by Indian External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar concerning the status of the disputed Jammu and Kashmir region. Jaishankar had declared that India's revocation of Article 370, which granted special autonomy to the region, in 2019 marked the end of ongoing dialogue with Islamabad. He suggested that New Delhi's actions had unilaterally settled the status of Kashmir.

In response, Islamabad described Jaishankar's statements as "dangerously delusional." Pakistan emphasized that the Kashmir dispute is internationally recognized and cannot be resolved unilaterally by India. The statement underscored that such claims are misleading and ignore the established realities on the ground.

The revocation of Article 370 in August 2019, along with the annulment of Article 35A—which had restricted property ownership in the region—prompted significant backlash from Pakistan. The move was seen as an infringement on the disputed territory's status and led to heightened tensions between the two nations. [Arab News]

Pakistan expects more jobs, higher exports as Chinese company plans renewable energy investment

(lm) China's Hexing Electrical, a prominent company in the global smart metering and energy management industry, has expressed interest in investing in Pakistan's renewable energy sector. The company plans to establish the first manufacturing unit of its kind in Pakistan to produce inverters and batteries. This initiative is expected to create more jobs, boost exports, and contribute to the country's economic growth.

The discussions took place during a meeting between Hexing Electrical's chairman, Liangzhang Zhou, and Pakistan's Minister for Investment and Privatization, Abdul Aleem Khan, in Islamabad. Khan emphasized the investment potential in Pakistan and assured the Chinese delegation of full cooperation. He noted that such foreign investments in the electrical sector would play a crucial role in Pakistan's economic development.

This development follows Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's visit to China, where he encouraged Chinese companies to invest in Pakistan. Hexing Electrical, which operates in 90 countries with a workforce of 7,000, aims to expand its presence in Pakistan, aligning with ongoing infrastructure and regional connectivity projects under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The focus in the next phase of CPEC is on private sector-led business collaborations and investments in Pakistan's planned industrial zones. [Arab News]

Pakistan says Denmark's FLSmidth keen to invest in mining sector

(lm) A Danish multinational company, FLSmidth, has shown interest in investing in Pakistan's mining industry. The company's interest was expressed during a meeting between a Danish business delegation, led by Denmark's Ambassador Jakob Linulf, and Pakistani ministers responsible for finance, commerce, petroleum, and privatization in Islamabad. FLSmidth, which supplies equipment and services to the global mining and cement industries, plans to move forward with actionable suggestions and profitable projects in Pakistan's mining sector.

Commerce Minister Jam Kamal Khan emphasized that Danish cooperation in Pakistan's mining industry and broader business activities would strengthen the South Asian country's economy. Since narrowly avoiding a financial default last year, Pakistan has been working to boost trade and foreign investment to stabilize its fragile USD 350 billion economy. [Arab News]

Pakistan explores date industry collaboration with Saudi-based council

(lm) Pakistan is exploring collaboration with the Saudi-based International Dates Council to enhance its date industry. Ambassador Ahmad Farooq met with the Council's CEO, Abdulrahman Suliman Alhabib, to discuss cooperation in palm cultivation, date processing, and marketing.

Pakistan, which produces significant quantities of dates in regions like Sindh and Balochistan, aims to boost its export of dates to generate substantial revenue. Additionally, Pakistan plans to host an international date festival in October in collaboration with the UAE Embassy in Islamabad to further promote

its date exports and contribute to the national economy. [Arab News]

Pakistan Commerce and Industry Chamber, Zimbabwean embassy collaborate to strengthen bilateral ties

(ht) The Federation of Pakistan Chamber of Commerce and Industry (FPCCI) and the Zimbabwean Embassy in Islamabad have agreed to collaborate on strengthening economic and trade relations between Pakistan and Zimbabwe. During a dinner reception attended by Zimbabwean Ambassador Titus M.J. Abu Basutu and FPCCI President Atif Ikram Sheikh, both sides emphasized the potential for increasing bilateral trade, which currently stands at USD 30 million. They aim to raise this figure to USD 100 million in the coming years. [APP News]

Philippines, Australia to strengthen cybersecurity collaboration

(rr) The Philippines and Australia are working to enhance their cooperation in cybersecurity, as discussed during a meeting between officials from the Philippine Department of National Defense (DND) and a visiting Australian delegation. The discussions, held on August 27, focused on deepening collaboration in areas such as information sharing, cybersecurity policies, and best practices. Both countries also explored opportunities for joint cyber drills, tabletop exercises, and defense technology cooperation.

The meeting highlighted the need for a skilled cyber defense workforce and an adaptive cyber defense posture, with Australia offering to support the Philippines in building cyber resilience and strengthening technology security. [Philippine News Agency]

Former Scottish First Minister visits Philippines, launches UK-funded program

(ga) Former First Minister of Scotland, Lord Jack McConnell, recently visited the Philippines, focusing on supporting the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). His visit, alongside UK Ambassador Laure Beaufils, included meetings with key political figures, Moro Islamic Liberation Front

(MILF) leadership, and regional police in Cotabato. A significant aspect of his visit was the launch of a UK-funded program aimed at increasing birth registrations among former combatants and communities in MILF camps, enabling access to essential social services.

The visit underscored the UK's ongoing support for the Bangsamoro peace process, with Lord McConnell emphasizing the importance of normalizing legal identity and amnesty for conflict-affected communities. The program also symbolically handed over birth certificates, which will help these communities access vital services such as healthcare and education. Lord McConnell's visit also aimed to explore further avenues for UK assistance in ensuring peace and stability in the BARMM as the region approaches its first elections in 2025. [Government of United Kingdom]

Bahrain to inaugurate embassy in the Philippines by end of 2024

(rr) Bahrain is expected to formally open its embassy in the Philippines by the end of 2024, a development that follows initial discussions in 2023. Bahrain's Foreign Ministry Undersecretary, Isa Nasser Al Noaimi, visited Manila on August 21 to oversee the progress of the embassy's establishment and met with his Filipino counterpart Antonio Morales.

Currently, the Bahrain Embassy in Bangkok, Thailand, has jurisdiction over the Philippines. [Philippine News Agency]

Brunei, Singapore sign MoU to enhance collaboration on alternative dispute resolution

(ga/lm) During Singapore Convention Week 2024, the Brunei Darussalam Arbitration Centre (BDAC) and Singapore Mediation Centre (SMC) signed a memorandum of understanding to establish a cooperative framework focusing on promoting mediation and improving alternative dispute resolution (ADR) processes.

BDAC representatives further participated in a symposium on the role of courts in arbitration and held bilateral meetings with various Singaporean ADR institutions to strengthen partnerships and enhance

BDAC's arbitration capabilities in Brunei. [Borneo Bulletin]

Singapore to play bigger role in Belt and Road project mediation

(ga/lm) Singapore is set to play a more significant role in mediating disputes related to China's Belt and Road Initiative following a recent agreement between the Singapore International Mediation Centre (SIMC) and the China International Contractors Association (CHINCA).

This agreement is expected to bring more Chinese companies involved in Belt and Road projects to Singapore for mediation, mainly when disputes arise due to unforeseen circumstances like cost overruns or delays.

The demand for international mediation services is expected to grow as Chinese companies, many of which are state-owned enterprises, continue to seek partnerships with foreign firms. [The Straits Times]

Singapore Navy visits China to conduct joint maritime exercise amid South China Sea tensions

(ga) The Republic of Singapore Navy (RSN) and the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) have commenced a joint maritime exercise from September 1 to 5 in Zhanjiang. Approximately 200 personnel from both the RSN and PLAN participated in the exercise.

Key drills include joint anti-surface strike operations, replenishment-at-sea, search-and-rescue, helicopter cross-deck landing, gunnery firing, and maneuvering exercises.

Singapore's Ministry of Defence emphasized this exercise as the longstanding and friendly defense relationship between Singapore and China [Ministry of Defence Singapore] [South China Morning Post]

India approves Singapore Airlines' FDI in major airline merger

(ga) India has granted final approval for Singapore Airlines (SIA) foreign direct investment (FDI) in the

merger of Air India and Vistara, opening the way for the consolidation of the two carriers. SIA will acquire a 25.1% stake in the combined entity by investing INR 20.585 billion (USD 320 million), with an additional investment of up to USD 880 million post-merger. [The Straits Times]

The deal provides SIA with significant exposure to India's rapidly expanding travel market, making it the only foreign airline with a substantial stake in an Indian carrier. The merger has already received several regulatory clearances, including approvals from the National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT) and competition regulators in both India and Singapore. [The Hindu]

Singapore courts jails Malaysian 14 months for bribing zoo official in corrupt contractor scheme

(lm) A Singapore court has sentenced a Malaysian national to 14 months in prison after he pleaded guilty to five counts of bribery, involving a total of SGD 142,000 (USD 109,340). The defendant, a Singapore permanent resident, was accused of paying more than SGD 235,000 (USD 180,950) in bribes to the then-director of facilities management at the Singapore Zoo to secure contracts for his company, Katana Engineering. These bribes, which took place between 2014 and 2015, helped Katana Engineering win contracts worth nearly SGD 1.93 million (USD 1.49 million).

The court has yet to hear the case against the Singapore Zoo official involved in orchestrating the corrupt scheme. Another participant in the scheme, a foreman at Shin Yong Construction, was previously sentenced to over two years in jail in October last year for his role in the corruption. [Malay Mail]

Malaysia, Singapore advance economic zone deal; signing expected in November

(ga) Officials from Singapore and Malaysia met from August 28 to 30 to advance discussions on establishing a special economic zone in Johor, Malaysia. The meeting covered key topics such as economic sectors, the movement of people and goods, ease of doing business, and talent development. Singapore's Trade Ministry emphasized its commitment to working closely with Malaysia to achieve mutual benefits

through a comprehensive agreement on the economic zone.

The agreement is expected to be signed during the 11th Malaysia-Singapore Leaders' Retreat, anticipated to occur later this year. Johor's Chief Minister, Onn Hafiz Ghazi, mentioned that the deal is likely to be finalized in November, which represents a delay from the initial plan to unveil the zone in September, as earlier mentioned by Malaysia's Economy Minister, Rafizi Ramli. [Bangkok Post]

The SEZ is expected to encompass Iskandar Malaysia and Pengerang, covering 3,505 square kilometers in southern Johor. Malaysian officials emphasized that the economic agreement aims to enhance economic cooperation, potentially creating 100,000 jobs in Johor and boosting the Malaysian economy by USD 26 billion annually by 2030. [BNN Bloomberg] [Malay Mail]

South Korea to expand civic group's radio broadcasts campaign to North Korean residents

(ac) On August 29, the South Korean Ministry of Unification announced that under President Yoon Suk Yeol's unification initiative, South Korea plans to expand the support for civic groups' radio broadcasting projects aiding North Korean to access external information. The broadcasting project will include enhancing the content production and providing training to related broadcasting personnel in the private sector.

The Ministry of Unification added that, as outlined by Yoon on the National Liberation Day, the private organization will be under significant support by the government next year. However, the ministry did not clarify the amount of funding (see AiR No.34, August/2024, 3). [Yonhap News]

Trump hints at continued friendship with Kim Jong Un

(jb) Former U.S. President Donald Trump, Republican candidate for the upcoming 2024 presidential elections, mentioned that maintaining friendship with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un would be "a good thing". Trump, during a campaign rally in Pennsylvania, reminisced about his meetings with Kim, stating that he gets along with Kim, appreciating his nuclear

weapons capability and deeming it substantial. [Korea Herald]

On June 30, 2019, Trump became the first sitting U.S. president to cross over from the South Korean border into the North in Panmunjeom village, through the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) that separates the two countries. The incident occurred during the 2019 Koreas-United States summit which was held in the DMZ. Trump, who had previously met Kim in Hanoi in early 2019, crossed over the border holding hands with Kim, who then later crossed back into the South, making it the second time a North Korean leader stepped foot on South Korean soil post the end of the Korean War in 1953. [New York Magazine]

Trump's warming comments about Kim came at a time when Democratic Party presidential candidate Kamala Harris called Kim a "tyrant and a dictator", to which the North Korean Foreign Ministry responded strongly, warning of security consequences (see AiR No. 35, August/2024, 4).

The divergence in both parties' policy stances towards North Korea during the campaigns leading up to the elections is stark, leaving future foreign relations between both states uncertain for the moment. [Korea Herald]

Czech officials to visit South Korea to improve industrial ties

(jb) Since the selection of a South Korean consortium led by Korea Hydro and Nuclear Power (KNHP) as the bidder for a Czech nuclear power plant project in July (see AiR No. 30, July/2024, 4), the Czech government has begun discussions on potential bilateral industrial cooperation between both nations.

A Czech special envoy is set to visit South Korea in September to discuss industrial cooperation beyond the nuclear power plant into other strategic sectors as well. The power plant project is estimated to be worth USD 18 billion. The visit will precede the signing of a deal between two nations in March 2025 which will kickstart the construction of the power plant. [Yonhap News Agency]

Previously, South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol sent a delegate to Czechia with a proposal for industrial cooperation. Both nations hold robust foreign relations with each other, with an underlying acknowledgement of their democratic values and their belief in a free

market economy. [Embassy of the Czech Republic in Seoul]

South Korea, Washington to hold talks on North Korean deterrence

(jb) The Extended Deterrence Strategy and Consultation Group (EDSCG) is set to hold its fifth meeting to check on progress in deterrence efforts between South Korea (ROK) and the United States. The meeting, which will take place in Washington, D.C. on September 4 will be led by South Korean Vice Foreign Minister Kim Hong Kyun, Deputy Defense Minister for Policy Cho Chang Rae, US Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Bonnie Jenkins and Acting Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Cara Abercrombie. [KBS World]

The talks, which were suspended in 2018 during former South Korean President Moon Jae In's final year in power owing to growing threats from North Korea, were resumed last year in Seoul under the aegis of current President Yoon Suk Yeol and US President Joe Biden. [KBS World]

The major concern for the parties involved in the talks is the nuclear threat posed by North Korea (PRK), which last year's joint statement deemed to be "threatening and irresponsible rhetoric and behavior". The EDSCG also referred to the Nuclear Consultative Group's progress in fostering dialogue and emphasized that they would use "all available levers – including diplomatic, informational, military and economic tools – to strengthen deterrence and reinforce the US security commitment to the ROK." [US Department of Defense]

This year, Seoul's foreign ministry said that the talks will heighten coordination between South Korea and the US, aiming at "extended deterrence" against the nuclear threats and repeated news of missile tests issued by North Korea. [Yonhap News Agency]

South Korea, US hold seventh round of defense cost sharing meeting

(ac) On August 28, South Korea and the U.S. concluded the seventh round of negotiations on defense cost sharing. The three-day meeting focused on renewing the Special Measures Agreement (SMA), which

determines Seoul's financial contribution towards the U.S. Forces Korea (USFK).

Observers suggest that South Korea aims to finalize the cost-sharing agreement before a potential return of Donald Trump to the White House to avoid difficult negotiations. [Yonhap News]

Unification Ministry approves civic group contact with North Korea for flood relief

(jb) Amidst flood recovery efforts which have been underway in the northern border areas of North Korea for over a month, the Unification Ministry of South Korea has approved civic groups' requests to approach North Koreans to aid them with flood relief.

As North Korean authorities have yet to respond to South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol's official helping hand which involved emergency aid for the floods that laid waste to large sections of agrarian land in the North, civic groups in the South are set to reach out to state authorities through which they aim to move flood relief and provide civilian humanitarian assistance to victims. However, the ministry has predicted a waiting period before North Korea's response to the civic groups. [The Korea Times]

Azerbaijan seeks new cooperations with South Korea

(ac) In an interview with *The Korea Times*, Azerbaijani President's special envoy Elchin Amirbayov revealed that Azerbaijan is seeking potential support from South Korea to rebuild the post-war society after the ceasefire with Armenia.

Amirbayov explained that Azerbaijan would seek financial support to rebuild society, and humanitarian aids to clear landmines and relocate internally displaced people. He expressed regrets that South Korea was aloof and had not yet taken initiative to aid Azerbaijian, as South Korea has previously added countries such as Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia.

He explained that Azerbaijan was left with 1.5 million landmines, with only 13 percent of lands being cleared and the rest of 87 percent posed a danger to human security. He also added that 8000,000 were internally displaced and were waiting to return to their homes.

Thus, Amirbayov expressed regional security cooperations with South Korea, as South Korea currently sitting s a non-permeant member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). Hoping that South Korea would bring the disputes between Armenia and Azerbaijan to international ground as a key international figure in international affairs.

In addition to the peace-building and humanitarian cooperations, Amirbayov also sought economic cooperation. He suggested that South Korean transport operators and logistics companies could take advantages of Azerbaijan's geographic locations to expand its economic partnership with Central Asia countries, as Azerbaijan, the so-called 'Middle Corridor', has been serving as a trade route between Europe and Asia.

Similar discussions on economic partnerships in clean energy, such as solar and hydropower, were mentioned in the interview. Amirbayov welcomed the potential energy cooperations in oil productions, fossil fuels and highlighted Azerbaijian's rich resources. [The Korea Times] [Arirang News]

South Korean President meets Chief of International Energy Agency to discuss clean energy initiatives

(ac) On September 2, President Yoon Suk Yeol met with the chief of the International Energy Agency (IEA) in Seoul to discuss Seoul's Carbon-Free Energy (CFE) initiative. The meeting was held under Yoon's initiative to introduce carbon neutrality, which was announced during the UN General Assembly in September.

Both leaders agreed to collaborate on developing clean energies technologies and setting a precedent for other developing countries. [Yonhap News]

South Korea and Norway to launch security defense dialogue

(ac) On September 2, South Korea Minister of Defense Shin Won-Sik met with Norway Ministry of Defense Bjorn Arild Gram in Seoul to reach the consensus of launching a security defense dialogue channel.

During the meeting, Shin shared concerns over the growing alliance of North Korea and Russia and stressed the growing security connectivity between

Asia and Europe. He reaffirmed South Korea's commitment to bolster their bilateral defense cooperation based on share values.

Gram, during his visit to South Korea, visited the Demilitarized Zone, and inspected the border that separates two Koreas. Gram reaffirmed Norway would commit in defense exercises with the United Nations Command in 2025.

Norway has signed arms trade agreements with South Korea in 2017 and 2022 respectively, purchasing 28 K-9 self-propelled howitzers and 14 K-10 ammunition resupply vehicles from Hanwha Aerospace. [Yonhap News] [Forsvrets Forum in Norwegian]

India's NSA meets with Sri Lankan presidential candidates ahead of polls

(sa) As Sri Lanka's presidential race intensifies, India's National Security Advisor, Ajit Doval, visited Sri Lanka to ensure that Indo-Lanka bilateral cooperation on national security remains strong under a future government. During his visit, Doval met with the four main presidential candidates: President Ranil Wickremesinghe, Sajith Premadasa, Anura Kumara Dissanayake, and Namal Rajapaksa.

His visit coincided with the Colombo Security Conclave (CSC), which focuses on maritime security, counterterrorism, and cybersecurity, and includes India, Sri Lanka, Mauritius, Maldives, and Bangladesh. [Daily Mirror] [Daily Mirror 2]

US-based couple admits to immigration fraud in falsified asylum applications for Sri Lankan clients

(sa) A couple from New Jersey, United States, has admitted to submitting falsified asylum applications for clients from Sri Lanka. Operating an immigration business from their home since at least 2007, the couple either exaggerated the stories of asylum seekers or failed to sign the required immigration forms, both of which are illegal. The woman managed the business, while the man met with clients and drafted the fraudulent applications, charging at least USD 1,000 per case.

The couple was arrested in March 2023 and now faces up to five years in prison and a USD 250,000 fine, with

sentencing scheduled for February 25, 2025. [Colombo Gazette]

Taiwan's foreign minister receives Swedish parliamentarians

(dql) On August 28, Taiwanese Foreign Minister Lin Chia-lung met with a cross-party delegation from the Swedish-Taiwanese Parliamentarian Association (STPA), led by MP Lotta Johnsson Fornarve of Sweden's Left Party. The meeting was part of the delegation's seven-day visit to Taiwan last week.

Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister Wu Chih-chung urged the Swedish government to focus on peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and discussed issues such as Taiwan's exclusion from the Paris Olympics, gender equality, combating disinformation, and countering China's cyber-attacks.

On Facebook, Lin thanked Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson for his strong stance against China's military threats to Taiwan. He expressed hope for deeper democratic cooperation between Taiwan and Sweden, particularly in national and digital security.

The Foreign Ministry noted that this visit marks the first time the Swedish delegation has traveled to Taiwan, aiming to better understand Taiwan's democratic development and strengthen economic and trade relations. [Radio Taiwan International] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Taiwan, in Chinese]

Thai prime minister accepts Vietnamese counterpart's invitation

(lm) Thai Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra has accepted an invitation to visit Vietnam from the country's Prime Minister, Pham Minh Chinh, as both leaders seek to enhance bilateral trade and investment cooperation. The two prime ministers are eager to further develop their countries' strategic partnership, with plans to explore additional areas of cooperation. Details of Paetongtarn's upcoming visit to Vietnam have yet to be disclosed. [Bangkok Post]

Laos, Vietnam reaffirm strong bilateral ties in Deputy Prime Minister's phone talks

(wn) Vietnamese Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Bui Thanh Son held phone talks with his Lao counterpart, Saleumxay Kommasith, on August 27. Both leaders reaffirmed their commitment to closely cooperate in implementing agreements and outcomes from high-level visits, including the recent state visit by Vietnamese President To Lam to Laos in July 2024.

They expressed satisfaction with the deepening bilateral relationship, particularly in political, defense, and security cooperation. The two nations also saw significant growth in trade, with a 16.7 percent increase in import-export turnover, reaching USD 1.1 billion in the first seven months of 2024. Additionally, they discussed enhancing cooperation in education, health, culture, and people-to-people exchanges.

The Deputy Prime Ministers emphasized the importance of collaboration at regional and international forums, such as ASEAN and Mekong sub-regional mechanisms. Bui Thanh Son affirmed Vietnam's continued support for Laos, especially as it assumes the role of ASEAN/AIPA Chair in 2024. [Asian News Network]

Investment from Taiwan driving growth of Vietnam's high-tech industry

(wn) Taiwan is playing an increasingly pivotal role in fueling Vietnam's high-tech industry, with a significant influx of advanced manufacturing expected over the coming decades.

Historically cautious, Taiwanese companies such as Foxconn and Compal initially made modest investments in Vietnam, but the geopolitical shifts, particularly the US-China trade war that began in 2017, have accelerated their expansion in the country. These companies, along with others like Pegatron and Wistron, have now turned Vietnam's northern regions into major technology production hubs, contributing to the diversification and resilience of their global supply chains.

The impact of these investments has been profound, with Taiwan quadrupling its investment in Vietnam in 2023, reaching USD 2.2 billion. Taiwan is now the fourth-largest investor in Vietnam, with nearly 3,200 projects and a total registered capital exceeding USD 39.5 billion. Vietnam has become Taiwan's second-largest investment destination in ASEAN, after Singapore.

Taiwanese companies are not only scaling up their operations but also helping Vietnam transition from labor-intensive industries to skill-intensive and high-tech sectors. This shift is supported by the Vietnamese government, which is offering preferential policies to attract more quality investments in high-tech industries. As a result, Vietnam's workforce is upskilling, and the country is moving up the manufacturing value chain, which is expected to attract even more suppliers and investors. [Vietnam News]

Vietnamese Montagnard activist tells Thai court he has no terrorist links

(lm) Vietnamese activist Y Quynh Bdap, who faces potential deportation from Thailand at the request of the Vietnamese government, testified in a Bangkok court that he has no connections to a 2023 attack in Dak Lak province, Vietnam, which resulted in nine deaths. Bdap, the founder of the Montagnards Stand For Justice group, denied any involvement in the attack, emphasizing that he has been living in Thailand since 2018.

Bdap, who faces a 10-year prison sentence for terrorism if deported, argued that the Montagnards group he leads had no ties to the incident. He expressed fears for his life if returned to Vietnam, claiming that the Vietnamese authorities would likely torture and persecute him due to his activism.

His defense team urged the Thai court to deny the extradition request based on the Prevention and Suppression of Torture and Enforced Disappearance Act, as well as international human rights principles, including non-refoulement. This principle prohibits the return of individuals to countries where they would face significant harm.

The was set to continue on September 2, with the court considering whether Bdap's deportation would violate Thailand's obligations under both domestic and international laws. [Radio Free Asia]

Thailand arrests, deports 144,000 Myanmar workers for illegal entry

(lm) Thailand has detained and deported over 144,000 Myanmar nationals in the past three months as part of a crackdown on illegal workers. This effort, which began in June, targeted "job seekers" who are using

the ongoing turmoil in Myanmar as a pretext to enter Thailand. The crackdown involved inspections of nearly 15,000 businesses and economic zones and has also led to the detention of workers from other countries, including Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam.

Myanmar workers are crucial to Thailand's economy, with about two million legally employed in sectors like agriculture and fishing, but many more enter illegally seeking work. The influx of young Myanmar citizens is also linked to a military conscription law that was enforced by Myanmar's junta in April, following the 2021 coup.

Deported individuals face a two-year ban from re-entering Thailand and risk being conscripted into the Myanmar military upon their return. Despite Thailand's need for migrant workers, it has tightened its procedures, granting more control to the Myanmar junta over its migrant population in Thailand.

The crackdown has caused concerns among employers in Thailand who rely on Myanmar workers, citing the reliability of these workers compared to Thai nationals. [Radio Free Asia]

Vietnam, Australia support each other in addressing modern challenges

(wn) Australia's Senate President Sue Lines expressed pride in the mutual support between Australia and Vietnam as they tackle modern challenges in an interconnected future. She made these remarks on Wednesday morning at the Vietnam -Australia Forum 2024. This year's event focused on strengthening economic engagement and a shared vision for prosperity between the two countries. The Vietnam-Australia Centre, established in 2022 at the campus of Hồ Chí Minh National Academy of Politics (HCMA) in Hà Nội, serves as a platform for meaningful knowledge exchange and expertise sharing between the two countries to address common challenges. The forum, jointly organised by the HCMA and the Embassy of Australia in Vietnam, signified an important milestone following the elevation of bilateral relations to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in March.

The Vietnam-Australia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership has created new opportunities for the private sector to succeed between the two countries. The Australian Chamber of Commerce in Vietnam (AusCham) Vice President Natalie Fairlie highlighted Vietnam's commitment to streamlining its regulatory framework. Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and

Industry (VCCI) Vice President Nguyễn Quang Vinh acknowledged Vietnam's efforts to reform administrative procedures. However, achieving high-income status by 2045 remains an ambitious target for Vietnam, as noted by Andrea Coppola, the World Bank's lead economist.

The World Bank predicts that Vietnam's economy will grow by 6.1% in 2024 and 6.5% in 2025, positioning it as one of the fastest-growing economies in East Asia and globally. However, with significant reforms, growth is expected to grow to an average of 5.2% between 2025-2030 and further decline in the following decades. Vietnam needs to accelerate productivity growth and increase private and public investment. Additionally, Vietnam and Australia are strengthening economic engagement through their Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. Australia is launching investment hubs in Singapore, Jakarta, and HCM City, opening new trade opportunities. [Asian News Network]

Announcements

Upcoming online events

4-5 September 2024 @ 12:00 p.m. (GMT+2), Bruegel, Belgium

Bruegel Annual Meetings

The event will focus on the launch of the Bruegel Memos, which address the European Union's challenges and provide policy recommendations for the new leadership.

For more information, visit [Bruegel].

5 September 2024 @ 12:00-4:30 p.m. (GMT+3), Institute for National Security Studies, Israel

US-Israel Relations in the Context of the War and the Upcoming Presidential Elections

This online conference will delve into the dynamics of US-Israel relations amid ongoing conflict in Israel and the upcoming U.S. presidential elections. It will feature discussions with the U.S. Ambassador to Israel, Knesset members, media personnel, and experts from the Institute for National Security Studies.

For more information, visit [Institute for National Security Studies].

5 September, 2024 @ 9:30-10:30 a.m. (GMT-4), Asia Society, USA

Countering Economic Coercion: U.S. Strategy and Business Resilience in the Indo-Pacific

The Asia Society Policy Institute will host U.S. Under Secretary of State for Economic Growth, Energy, and the Environment Jose W. Fernandez for a discussion on economic coercion, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. The conversation will cover the Biden administration's strategies to counter economic coercion and the role of both the public and private sectors in building economic resilience.

For more information, visit [Asia Society].

5 September 2024 @ 4:00-5:00 p.m. (GMT -4), Center for Strategic and International Studies, USA

How to Read Polls and Why We Should: A Conversation with John Zogby

Join John Zogby, one of America's most prominent pollsters, for a master class on understanding public opinion polls. Zogby will discuss his new book and argue against focusing solely on "horse race" numbers, instead revealing the deeper insights polls can offer about the electorate. He will share stories of both effective and ineffective uses of polling over the past four decades.

For more information, visit [Center for Strategic and International Studies].

5 September 2024, Danish Institute for International Studies, Denmark

Expert Dialogue: Governing System-Level Transformations in the Age of Climate Change

This seminar will explore how to facilitate environmentally sustainable and socially inclusive system-level changes to address environmental challenges and development needs. Leading scholars will discuss the role of governance in managing these transformative processes and their outcomes.

For more information, visit [DIIS].

5 September 2024 @ 9:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. (GMT-4), CAF Development Bank of Latin America and the Caribbean, USA

27th Annual CAF Conference

This online conference will address the critical intersection of development and security. Topics include regional stability, transnational organized crime, community safety, gender-based violence, and US relations with Latin America and the Caribbean. The event aims to propose new solutions to enhance citizen security and influence future policy and debate.

For more information, visit [CAF Conference].

9 September 2024 @ 5:00-6:00 p.m. (GMT+1), Chatham House, UK

How to Manage the Unthinkable

Join Pascal Lamy, The Rt Hon Kim Campbell, and other experts to discuss the geopolitical and security implications of climate change. This panel will cover the challenges of a warming planet, the role of adaptation and resilience, and strategies for managing climate risks and experimental technologies.

For more information, visit [Chatham House].

9 September 2024 @ 10:00 - 11:15 a.m. (GMT-4), Woodrow Wilson Center, USA

The Role of China in Africa's Just Energy Transition

Join a panel of experts, including environmental lawyer Jingjing Zhang, for a discussion on China's involvement in Africa's energy transition. The event will focus on environmental justice, legal advocacy, and the role of Chinese investments in African countries like South Africa, Ghana, Uganda, and Malawi.

For more information, visit [Wilson Center].

9 September 2024 @ 4:00 p.m. (GMT-4) Atlantic Council, USA

Climate Change as a Threat Multiplier: Implications for US Defense and Global Security

This public fireside chat, hosted by the Atlantic Council's Global Energy Center and Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security, will examine how climate change acts as a "threat multiplier" for US defense and global security. The discussion will take place at the Atlantic Council's headquarters.

For more information, visit [Atlantic Council].

9 September 2024 @ 11:00-11:45 a.m. (GMT-4), Heritage Foundation, USA

Exposing China's Complicity in America's Fentanyl Crisis

The event will address China's role in the fentanyl crisis, highlighting its impact on the U.S. drug epidemic and the estimated 108,000 overdose deaths in 2023, with 75,000 attributed to synthetic opioids like fentanyl.

For more information, visit [Heritage Foundation].

9 September 2024 @ 10:00-11:00 a.m. (GMT -5), Stimson Center, USA

Voices for Peace and Human Rights in Israel/Palestine

This panel will bring attention to marginalized voices advocating for peace and human rights for both Israelis and Palestinians, examining their reasons for marginalization and the future trajectory of the region.

For more information, visit [Stimson Center].

9 - 13 September 2024 @ 9:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. (GMT+8), Asian Development Bank, Indonesia

Regional Forum on Adapting to Aging in Asia and the Pacific: "Accelerating Implementation in Long-Term Care: From Policy to Implementation"

This forum, organized by the Asian Development Bank, will be held in Bali, Indonesia. It will focus on the challenges and solutions related to aging populations in the region, including strategies for effective long-term care implementation.

For more information, visit [Asian Development Bank].

10 September 2024 @ 11:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. (GMT-4), United States Institute of Peace, USA

PeaceCon 2024: Status Quo No More

Join USIP and the Alliance for Peacebuilding (AfP) for the 12th annual PeaceCon, a premier global gathering addressing contemporary challenges in peacebuilding and conflict resolution. This year's conference will focus on "Status Quo No More: Building Peace in a Time of Rising Violent Conflict" and will bring together senior officials, thought leaders, policymakers, and practitioners from around the world.

For more information, visit [USIP]

10 September 2024 @ 3:00 p.m. - 4:00 p.m. (GMT-4), Foreign Policy Research Institute, USA

To The Success of Our Hopeless Cause: The Many Lives of the Soviet Dissident Movement

Hosted by the Foreign Policy Research Institute, this event features Benjamin Nathans discussing the Soviet dissident movement. Nathans's narrative explores the lives of well-known figures like Andrei Sakharov and Alexander Solzhenitsyn, alongside lesser-known dissidents. Using personal and official documents, he reveals how these individuals used Soviet law to challenge state power.

For more information, visit [Foreign Policy Research Institute].

Recent book releases

Peter Trubowitz and Brian Burgoon, *Geopolitics and Democracy: The Western Liberal Order from Foundation to Fracture*, Oxford University Press, 264 pages, published April 14, 2023. For a review, see [LSE].

Larbi Sadiki and Layla Saleh, *Revolution and Democracy in Tunisia: A Century of Protestscapes*, Oxford University Press, 368 pages, published April 8, 2024. For a review, see [LSE].

David A. Lake, *Indirect Rule: The Making of U.S. International Hierarchy*, Cornell University Press, 282 pages, published February 15, 2024. For a review, see [Foreign Affairs].

Saleha Mohsin, *Paper Soldiers: How the Weaponization of the Dollar Changed the World Order*, Portfolio, 304 pages, published March 19, 2024. For a review, see [Foreign Affairs].

Anthony Seldon, *Truss at 10: How Not to Be Prime Minister*, Atlantic Books, 384 pages, published August 29, 2024. For a review, see [The Guardian].

Calls

The **European Society of International Law** invites paper proposals for its ***2025 Research Forum "International Law in the Era of Permacrisis"***, to be held at the University of Catania from March 20-21, 2025. The deadline for abstract submission is September 30, 2024. For more information, see [Calling All Papers].

The Centre for History of the University of Lisbon invites paper proposals for its ***International Congress "'And The People, Where are They?' The Collective Subject in Times of Revolutions"*** to be held on April 7-

9, 2025, in Lisbon. The deadline for abstract submission is October 25, 2024. For more information, see [University of Lisbon].

The 19th Annual Minerva Conference on International Humanitarian Law, titled ***"The Gaza War and International Law: Norms and Institutions Jerusalem"*** and scheduled for December 17-18, 2024, invites paper proposals to be submitted by August 20, 2024. For more information, see [Calling All Papers].

Jobs and Positions

European Data Protection Supervisor (EDPS) is looking for a **Policy and Legal Officer** to be based in Brussels, Beligium. Applications are accepted until September 16, 2024. More information is provided at [EDPS].

The **International Organization for Migration (IOM)** is looking for a **Consultant – Climate, Peace and Security Officer** to be based in Erbil, Iraq. Applications are accepted until September 9, 2024. More information is provided at [IOM].

The **International Organization for Migration (IOM)** is looking for a **Director, Department of Data, Insight and Policy Coordination** to be based in Geneva, Switzerland. Applications are accepted until September 16, 2024. More information is provided at [IOM].

The **Danish Refugee Council (DRC)** is looking for a **Regional Supply Chain Specialist** to be based in Dakar, Senegal. Applications are accepted until September 9, 2024. More information is provided at [DRC].

The **Wrld Bank** is looking for an **Investment Analyst** to be based in Washington, DC, United States. Applications are accepted until September 8, 2024. More information is provided at [World Bank].

The **United Nations Secretariat (UN)** seeks a **Public Information Intern: assist with research, content writing and event organization.** Applications are accepted until September 12, 2024. More information is provided at [UN Secretariat].

The **Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)** is looking for a **Communications Officer (Public Affairs)** to be based in Chile-Santiago. Applications are

accepted until September 10, 2024. More information is provided at [FAO].

The **World Health Organization (WHO)** is looking for an **Advisor, Resource Mobilization, and Advocacy** to be based in United States-Washington, D.C. Applications are accepted until September 5, 2024. More information is provided at [WHO].

The **World Health Organization (WHO)** is looking for a **Strategic Advisor to the Regional Director** to be based in Philippines-Manila. Applications are accepted until September 4, 2024. More information is provided at [WHO].

The **Asian Development Bank (ADB)** is looking for a **Macroeconomist/Development Economist-Tajikistan Diagnostic Study.** Applications are accepted until September 5, 2024. More information is provided at [ADB].

The **Action contre la Faim** is looking for a **Country Director – Afghanistan.** Applications are accepted until September 13, 2024. More information is provided at [Action contre].

The **UN Women** is looking for a **UN Women: Policy Specialist (Peace, and Security – Participation)** to be based in Abu Dhabi, UAE. Applications are accepted until September 7, 2024. More information is provided at [UN Women].

The **UN Women** is looking for a **UN Women: Head of Office, Japan Liaison Office.** Applications are accepted until September 6, 2024. More information is provided at [UN Women].

The **International Rescue Committee (IRC)** is looking for a **Policy Advocacy and Communication Director** to be based in Amman, Jordan. Applications are accepted until September 15, 2024. More information is provided at [IRC].

The **United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS)** is looking for a **Project Management Support Officer (Roster)** to be based in Kabul, Afghanistan. Applications are accepted until October 14, 2024. More information is provided at [UNOPS].

The **King Fahd University of Petroleum & Minerals** is looking for an **Assistant / Associate / Full Professor in Global Studies**. More information is provided at [King Fahd University of Petroleum & Minerals].

The **De Montfort University Kazakhstan** is looking for an **EAP Lecturer**. More information is provided at

[De Montfort University Kazakhstan].

The **Leiden University Institute for History** is looking for a **Research Assistant**. Applications are accepted until September 15, 2024. More information is provided at [Leiden University].

The School of Law and Society at **St Mary's University, Twickenham** is looking for a **Senior Lecturer in Law.** Applications are accepted until September 8, 2024. More information is provided at [St Mary's].

The Department of Sociology and the Jackson School of Global Affairs at **Yale University** is looking for an **Assistant Professor, in Sociology and Global Affairs.** Applications are accepted until September 9, 2024. More information is provided at [Yale].

The **University of Reading** School of Law is looking for a **Lecturer in Law.** Applications are accepted until September 20, 2024. More information is provided at [Reading].

The School of Law at the **University of Leeds** is looking for a **Professor of Legal Professions**. Applications are accepted until September 5, 2024. More information is provided at [Leeds].

Team:

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