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Asia in Review

Grasp the pattern, read the trend

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Dear Readers,

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

Wishing you an informative read, I extend special greetings to everyone who celebrates the Independence Day of Botswana, Cyprus, Guinea, Iraq, Lesotho, Nigeria, Palau, and Tavalu, China's National Day and Germany's Unity 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: Xi Jinping affirms China’s unstoppable progress in 75th anniversary speech

(lb) In a speech marking the 75th anniversary of the People's Republic of China, President Xi Jinping declared that no challenges could halt the country’s progress. He emphasized China's determination to overcome risks and uncertainties, while reiterating Beijing's firm stance on reunification with Taiwan, casting it as a historical inevitability. Xi also stressed the importance of unity under the Chinese Communist Party and called for increased cooperation between Taiwan and the mainland.

Xi's speech avoided mention of ongoing trade tensions with the U.S. and Europe but positioned China as a

supporter of globalization. [CNBC] [South China Morning Post]

In an earlier speech, on September 27 at China's National Conference on Commending Models for Ethnic Unity and Progress took place in Beijing, Xi emphasized the importance of advancing ethnic unity and fostering a strong sense of community among the Chinese nation. Xi called for continued efforts to instill patriotism and socialist values among all ethnic groups, while deepening their understanding of national history and culture. [The State Council PRC]

China: Former national political advisor arrested on suspicion of bribery

(lb) Liu Yuejin, former member of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, has been arrested on suspicion of bribery, according to China's Supreme People's Procuratorate (SPP).

Following an investigation by the National Commission of Supervision, Liu has been expelled from the Communist Party of China (CPC) for serious violations, including accepting bribes, obstructing investigations, and unauthorized handling of classified documents. Liu, a former assistant minister of public security, is now under further investigation as prosecutors review his case. [Global Times]

China: Local urged companies to stay away from Nvidia's chips

(lb) China is increasing pressure on domestic companies to purchase locally produced AI chips instead of Nvidia's H20 chips, as part of its strategy to bolster its semiconductor industry and counter US sanctions. Although not an official ban, regulators have issued informal guidance to promote reliance on domestic vendors like Huawei and Cambricon Technologies. This move aims to help Chinese AI chipmakers gain market share while preparing for potential new US restrictions.

Despite this push, Chinese officials still permit companies to use foreign semiconductors if necessary for building competitive AI systems. Nvidia, the world's top chipmaker, has seen growth in China but faces declining sales due to US export controls. Local Chinese companies, including ByteDance and Tencent, have stockpiled Nvidia chips before sanctions, while

also exploring domestic alternatives amid government support for the semiconductor sector.

Nvidia's AI chips are still highly sought after globally, and Chinese companies are working to catch up. Some firms are rushing to buy Nvidia chips before potential further sanctions are imposed by the US, while also adopting local chips to align with Beijing's policy. [Bloomberg] [CNBC]

China: Economic challenges continue amid industrial profit declines and stimulus measures

(lb/dql) China continues to grapple with significant economic challenges, as highlighted by latest economic data and measures taken by the Chinese government in response to these challenges.

Contraction in industrial profits and sluggish factory activity

In August, industrial profits fell by 17.8 percent, the largest drop of 2023, following a 4.1 percent increase in July. This decline is attributed to weak market demand, natural disasters such as floods and high temperatures, and a high statistical base from the previous year.

Key sectors like automobiles and equipment manufacturing were particularly affected. While there was a modest 0.5 percent growth in industrial profits during the first eight months of the year, it lagged behind the 3.6 percent growth seen from January to July.

Factory activity is expected to remain in contraction for the fifth consecutive month in September, with the official purchasing managers' index (PMI) projected at 49.5, slightly up from August's 49.1 but still below the critical 50-point threshold indicating growth. The manufacturing sector struggles with weak domestic demand and rising global trade barriers, further compounded by the substantial drop in industrial profits. [Reuters 1] [Reuters 2]

Weak domestic demand

Domestic demand remains weak, especially in the struggling property sector and consumer spending. In response, China's central bank has rolled out aggressive stimulus measures, including a 50-basis point cut in bank reserve requirements. The government also plans to issue USD 284 billion in

sovereign debt to support initiatives like child allowances for families with two or more children. State-owned firms reported a 1.3 percent drop in profits, while foreign firms saw a 6.9 percent increase, and private-sector profits rose by 2.6 percent. [Reuters 2]

Government measures

As part of its efforts to stabilize the economy, China plans to lift key restrictions on home purchases in major cities like Shanghai and Shenzhen. These proposed changes include eliminating eligibility vetting for potential buyers and allowing non-residents to purchase homes. This initiative follows a trend among other Chinese cities and aims to revitalize the property market, which has been under immense pressure since mid-2021 due to a debt crisis among developers and declining consumer confidence. [Reuters 3]

In a bid to bolster its banking sector, China is considering injecting up to CNY 1 trillion (approximately USD 142 billion) into its six largest state-owned banks. This capital infusion, which would be the first of its kind since the global financial crisis, aims to enhance the banks' capacity to support the struggling economy. The funding will likely come from the issuance of special sovereign bonds, amid concerns over low profit margins and rising bad debts. [South China Morning Post]

Additionally, the People's Bank of China has implemented further economic stimulus measures to achieve a targeted growth rate of around 5 percent for 2024. Recent actions include reducing the reserve requirement ratio and cutting the benchmark interest rate on reverse repurchase agreements. Policymakers are now pursuing a more aggressive stimulus approach, including plans to issue CNY 2 trillion in special sovereign bonds and implement additional fiscal measures to stimulate consumption. [Reuters 4]

Furthermore, China’s government has also announced a one-time cash allowance for individuals living in extreme poverty, including orphans and those in need. This initiative aligns with President Xi Jinping's focus on "common prosperity" and aims to reduce inequality. While the details of the allowance have not been disclosed, it reflects the government’s commitment to supporting vulnerable populations amid ongoing economic difficulties. [CNBC]

These measures come amid a sense of urgency in delivering economic results among the Chinese leadership as admitted at a September 26 meeting of the Political Bureau of Communist Party of China (CPC)

Central Committee. Chaired by President Xi Jinping, the meeting acknowledged “some new developments and problems in the current economic performance,” and the need to “effectively implement existing policies, intensify the introduction of new policies, make policy measures even more targeted and effective, and strive to fulfill the annual economic and social development goals and tasks.” [State Council, China] [France 24]

China: Commerce ministry investigates Calvin Klein owner over Xinjiang cotton boycott

(lb) China's Commerce Ministry has launched an investigation into PVH Corp, the owner of fashion brands Calvin Klein and Tommy Hilfiger, for allegedly refusing to source cotton from the Xinjiang region, potentially leading to sanctions against the American company.

PVH, which prohibits sourcing from Xinjiang due to U.S. forced labor laws, could be placed on China's "unreliable entities list," banning it from conducting business in the country. This could significantly impact PVH, which views China as a key market for growth. [CNN]

This comes after the Biden administration proposed a possible ban on smart vehicles using certain Chinese or Russian technologies due to national security concerns (see AiR No. 39, September/2024, 4).

China: Top Chinese economist disappears after criticizing President Xi Jinping

(lb) Prominent Chinese economist Zhu Hengpeng, a deputy director at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), has disappeared after reportedly being detained for criticizing President Xi Jinping in a private WeChat group. Zhu, who had worked at CASS for over two decades, allegedly made remarks that questioned Xi’s leadership and economic policies. His disappearance in April 2024, following these comments, coincides with growing efforts by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to stifle dissent, particularly as China faces economic difficulties, including a faltering real estate market and declining consumer confidence.

Zhu was well-known for his critical views on China's economic policies, particularly regarding taxation and social security. He argued that the country's heavy tax burden and flawed social security structure were inhibiting economic growth by limiting consumption. Zhu also highlighted the unequal distribution of benefits between urban and rural workers, calling for reforms to ensure a more equitable distribution of wealth and stimulate demand. His last public appearance at a conference on elder care, where he proposed controversial pension reforms, sparked widespread backlash on social media. [First Post]

Zhu's disappearance is part of a broader crackdown on intellectual dissent under Xi Jinping's increasingly authoritarian rule. His case reflects a rising trend of enforced disappearances in China, with at least 33 cases documented in 2024 alone. Human rights organizations have expressed concern over the Chinese government's use of these tactics to silence critics, particularly as the country faces mounting economic challenges. Zhu's fate remains unknown, underscoring the risks faced by those who challenge the government's narrative. [The Guardian]

China: License of former prominent defense attorney revoked

(lb) Chinese authorities have revoked the legal license of prominent rights attorney Zhang Qingfang, who previously defended jailed dissident Xu Zhiyong, citing his interference in cases and "hyping" them online. The Beijing Municipal Judicial Affairs Bureau issued the revocation, accusing Zhang of damaging the legal profession's image. Zhang, known for challenging government-appointed lawyers and reporting corruption, is believed to be facing political retaliation for his advocacy and defense of clients' legal rights.

His punishment follows a broader crackdown on rights lawyers in China, where hundreds have had their licenses revoked since 2015. [Radio Free Asia]

China: First reusable satellite launched

(lb) China has successfully launched its first reusable satellite Shijian-19 using a Long March-2D rocket from the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Center. This satellite aims to enhance China's space technology capabilities through advancements in reusability, microgravity support, high payload capacity, and re-entry testing services. These innovations are expected to improve

operational efficiency and reduce costs for satellite operations.

Shijian-19 will conduct space breeding experiments, carrying plant seeds from various regions to enhance China's seed development technology and promote technological self-reliance. The satellite is designed for various space experiments and will provide testing opportunities for domestic components and materials, contributing to the fields of microgravity science and space life sciences.

Additionally, Shijian-19 carries payloads from five countries, including Thailand and Pakistan, highlighting China's commitment to international cooperation in space exploration. This launch marks the 537th flight of the Long March series rockets, underscoring the reliability and progress of China's space program. [Interstellar News] [South China Morning Post]

China: Drones and counter-drone systems to dominate at Zhuhai air show

(lb/dql) The China International Aviation & Aerospace Exhibition, commonly known as Airshow China or the Zhuhai air show, will be held from November 12-17 in Zhuhai. This year's event is set to be the largest to date, featuring a significant focus on counter-drone systems and advanced unmanned aerial vehicles in a newly designated demonstration area. The show is co-hosted by the Guangdong provincial government and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Air Force, and it aims to attract international buyers, with a 91 percent increase in overseas exhibitors compared to the previous air show in 2022.

An additional 330,000 square meters of exhibition space will be utilized for drone displays and related activities, simulating combat scenarios with both manned and unmanned aircraft. Major military equipment, including new types of fighter jets, air defense systems, and counter-drone technologies, will also be showcased, some making their public debut.

Prominent defense companies like China Electronics Technology Group and China South Industries Group Corporation will present innovative counter-drone solutions, highlighting the growing demand for such systems. The air show will also feature international participation from countries including France, Italy, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and the United States, and for the first time, overseas ticket purchases will be allowed. Additionally, the Russian Knights aerobatic team will

return to the event after an eight-year absence. [South China Morning Post]

In a related statement, the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) has announced it will showcase its latest warplanes at an exhibition. Although it was not disclosed which aircraft will be showcased, there is speculation that China's next-generation aircraft and aero-engines will be revealed, possibly the H-20 next-generation bomber. The H-20 is considered China's answer to the U.S. B-21 Raider bomber, a stealth intercontinental strategic bomber that can deliver conventional and thermonuclear weapons which is already in production. [The EurAsian Times]

This announcement come on the same day as China successfully launched an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) into the Pacific Ocean on September 25, its first public test of such a missile in more than four decades (see article in this edition).

China-Hong Kong: Two journalists sentenced to prison for sedition

(lb) A Hong Kong court has sentenced two former news editors, Chung Pui-kuen and Patrick Lam, from the now-defunct Stand News to prison for conspiracy to publish seditious material, marking the first sedition convictions of journalists since Hong Kong's 1997 handover to China. Chung received a 21-month sentence, while Lam, due to illness, was given a reduced 11-month term and released.

The case, which accused Stand News of promoting "illegal ideologies" and criticizing Hong Kong's national security law, is part of a broader crackdown on press freedom in the city following the 2019 pro-democracy protests. [Radio Free Asia]

Critics claim the government is stifling dissent, while Hong Kong authorities argue these measures are necessary to maintain stability. [CNN] [Committee to Protect Journalists]

Japan: New prime minister elected

(hs/sw) Veteran politician Shigeru Ishiba has been elected as Japan's new prime minister, securing a majority in both chambers of the Diet on October 1, following his election as leader of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) on September 27. [Kyodo News 1]

Though the prime ministerial election was largely a formality, given the LDP and its junior coalition partner Komeito hold the majority in both chambers, Ishiba faced a closely contested runoff in the party's leadership election, ultimately defeating hardline conservative Sanae Takaichi by 215 votes to 194. Shinjiro Koizumi, popular among younger voters, was eliminated in the first round. [The Independent] [CNN]

Former Prime Minister Fumio Kishida announced in August that he would not seek re-election as LDP leader, effectively stepping down as prime minister (see AiR No. 34, August/2024, 3).

Ishiba, who formerly served as defense minister and LDP secretary general, plans to call a snap election on October 27, citing the need for public approval of the new administration. Despite declining popularity, the LDP is expected to retain power due to weak opposition. [BBC]

Ishiba has pledged to continue Kishida's economic policies, address issues such as Japan's declining birthrate and population, and improve resilience to natural disasters. He also suggested the establishment of an Asian version of NATO, potentially sharing control of U.S. nuclear weapons to deter threats from China, North Korea, and Russia. [AP]

Ishiba's initial cabinet appointments indicate a focus on continuity, with experienced LDP members taking key roles. Katsunobu Kato, former health minister and chief cabinet secretary, is expected to become finance minister, while former environment minister Shinjiro Koizumi will lead the LDP's election campaign. Yoshimasa Hayashi has been retained as chief cabinet secretary and top government spokesperson. However, Takaichi declined Ishiba's offer to become general council chief, signaling challenges in achieving party unity.

Hiroshi Moriyama will serve as secretary general, while former defense minister Itsunori Onodera has been appointed as policy chief. Gen Nakatani will return as defense minister, with Takeshi Iwaya appointed as foreign minister, and Ryosei Akazawa as minister of economic revitalization. [Kyodo News 2] [Reuters]

Japan: Wave of price hikes and policy reforms expected in October

(sw) Japanese consumers are set to encounter a wave of price increases in October, affecting various sectors, including food, beverages, healthcare, and postal

services. Social security and wage shifts will accompany these changes.

For the first time in 30 years, Japan Post will raise mail rates by approximately 30 percent, driven by a continued decline in physical mail volumes, as well as soaring personnel and fuel costs. [Medium]

Around 3,000 food and beverage items are expected to see price hikes, including drinks from major companies such as Kirin Beverage Co., Asahi Soft Drinks Co., Suntory Beverage & Food Ltd., Coca-Cola Bottlers Japan Inc., and Ito En Ltd. Starting with shipments from October 1, these companies will raise retail prices for products in plastic or metal bottles. The key reasons behind the increases include surging costs of raw materials, packaging, logistics, and labor – further exacerbated by the weakened yen. Although the pace of food price hikes has slowed compared to 2022 and 2023, October will witness Japan's first major "price hike rush" in six months.

In the healthcare sector, patients will pay more for certain generic drugs that have been on the market for five years or more, with an additional 25 percent over-the-counter charge on the price difference between brand-name and generic drugs.

On the policy front, child allowances will expand to include high school-aged children, and income caps will be removed. Part-time workers at companies with 51 to 100 employees will also gain access to employee pension plans. Additionally, minimum wages will rise across Japan, with the national average increasing to Yen 1,055 per hour. Many rural prefectures facing population decline and an outflow of labor have opted for larger-than-average increases to address these growing economic concerns. [Mainichi]

Japan: Biggest rice shortage in years recorded

(hs) Japan is currently experiencing its most significant rice shortage in three decades, driven by a combination of restrictive agricultural policies, adverse weather conditions, and increased consumer demand from a surge in tourism. Empty supermarket shelves and rising prices reflect the urgent supply challenges facing the country. The government has long sought to stabilize rice prices by limiting domestic production, which has resulted in a vulnerable food system. [CNBC]

At the same time, rice consumption is rising, due to the influx of tourists. The demand increased from 19,000

tons between July 2022 and June 2023 to 51,000 tons in the following year. Private sector inventories of rice hit a 20-year low in June 2024, with stocks dwindling to 1.56 million tons. Prices have surged, with 60kg of rice selling for JPY 16,133 (USD 104.53) in August, rising 3 percent from the previous month and 5 percent higher since the start of the year.

The aging population of rice farmers and a decline in land dedicated to rice cultivation have contributed to reduced output. Younger generations are not entering the profession at a sufficient rate to sustain production levels.

In response to perceived scarcity, consumers have engaged in panic buying, leading supermarkets to limit purchases to one bag per person and stockpiling rice in anticipation of potential natural disasters, such as typhoons and earthquakes.

Rice is the cornerstone of food security in Japan, with a self-sufficiency rate of nearly 100 percent, compared to only 38 percent for food overall on a calorie basis. The agriculture ministry calls for adaptation measures to protect rice harvests from climate change impacts as "indispensable," while also taking steps to avert short-term disruptions. [CNBC] [Financial Times]

Japan: Special residency permission granted to more than 200 foreign minors

(sw) Japan has granted special residency permission to 212 foreign minors and 183 of their family members who were previously facing deportation. This measure applies to minors born in Japan and attending school, as long as their parents have no criminal history. Among the children, 155 received student visas, 29 were granted designated activities visas, and 23 obtained long-term resident visas.

40 minors were denied permission due to factors like illegal entry by their parents or not reaching school age. The Immigration Services Agency has indicated the possibility of exceptional future recognitions. [Kyodo News]

In related policy changes, Japan will tighten the review process for Myanmar nationals switching from technical intern to designated activities visas. This follows a surge in the number of visa holders from Myanmar disappearing from their workplaces, terminating the training program midway. The number rose to 1,765 in 2023, up roughly 1,100 from the previous year. [The Japan Times]

Japan: Nagasaki appeals ruling in A-bomb survivor case

(hs) On September 24, the prefectural and city governments of Nagasaki filed an appeal against a court ruling that recognised some plaintiffs as atomic bomb survivors. This appeal comes after the Nagasaki District Court ordered on September 9 that 15 of the 44 claimants be certified as survivors of the 1945 U.S. atomic bombing, despite their exposure occurring outside the state-designated area. [Kyodo]

The court determined that these individuals, who experienced the nuclear attack within a 12-kilometer radius of the bomb's hypocenter, reported developing illnesses, including cancer and other radiation-related diseases, which are eligible for government support. Presiding Judge Shinsuke Matsunaga stated there is a "relevant probability" that nuclear fallout affected the east Nagasaki district where these individuals were located during the explosion. [Kyodo]

The plaintiffs, including four who are already deceased, claimed they absorbed radioactive particles from the bomb or consumed contaminated food and drink. In contrast, local governments contended that they were not exposed to damaging radiation levels. Approximately 6,300 individuals have been identified as having experienced the bombing within the 12-kilometer radius but outside the officially designated area. [NHK]

The central government has provided limited support to these individuals compared to state-recognized survivors. This legal challenge follows Prime Minister Fumio Kishida’s instructions to arrange a relief package for those affected after meeting their representative on August 9, coinciding with the 79th anniversary of the Nagasaki bombing.

In a related move, the Hiroshima High Court ruled in 2021 that 84 individuals exposed to radioactive "black rain" after the Hiroshima atomic bombing were eligible for health care benefits, highlighting discrepancies in survivor recognition between the two cities. [The Mainichi]

Japan: Inflation impact on households

(hs) Japan is currently navigating a complex economic landscape characterized by persistent inflation, declining real wages, and significant political shifts.

Recent data show that Tokyo's core consumer price index (CPI) rose 2.0 percent year-on-year in September, matching the Bank of Japan's (BoJ) target for the second consecutive month. This rise, primarily driven by increased service prices and ongoing wage negotiations, reflects a broader trend of sustained inflation that has persisted above the BoJ's target for 28 months.

A key indicator of consumer sentiment is the price of curry rice, a staple dish in Japanese households that has recently surged to a near 10-year high of JPY 342 yen (USD 2.29) per serving. This price increase of JPY 44 from the previous year is largely attributed to a shortage of rice and rising vegetable prices. Curry rice, often seen as a budget-friendly meal option, is now becoming less accessible for many families, highlighting the tangible effects of inflation on daily life.

The surge in prices for curry rice exemplifies broader economic trends. As rice prices soared due to low inventories and high demand, households faced rising costs for meat and vegetables, which account for about 60 percent of the dish's total price. The rising costs of essential ingredients raise concerns among consumers about the affordability of everyday meals, impacting household budgets across the nation. [Reuters] [Kyodo]

Japan: Longest-serving death row inmate acquitted

(hs) Iwao Hakamada, the world's longest-serving death row inmate, was acquitted by a Japanese court after spending 46 years on death row. Hakamada, 88, was convicted in 1968 for the murder of his employer, the man's wife, and their two children in Shizuoka.

Hakamada, a former professional boxer, maintained his innocence, claiming that his confession had been coerced after intense interrogations and beatings. [BBC]

Mongolia: Credit rating raised to B+ Stable

(fs) Fitch Ratings, one of the main three credit rating agencies worldwide, has upgraded credit rating of Mongolia from B to B+ for the first time in ten years, highlighting a recent improvement in the economic situation of the country.

According to the report released by Fitch Ratings, Mongolia has steadily increased its foreign currency reserves while implementing sound debt management policies that have reduced its external debt burden, helped by the continued strong performance of the country's mining sector. The upgraded rating is also a result of the economic expansion and cooperative governance, which indicate political stability in Mongolia and the continuation of governmental initiatives.

Real GDP growth is also expected to average around 6 percent in the period between 2024 and 2026, primarily driven by the steady increase in non-mining activity and the expansion of coal and copper mining, which has been benefited by the increasing regional demand from China. [Montsame] [Fitch Ratings]

Mongolia: Continued economic growth projected through 2025

(fs) According to the Asian Development Bank (ADB), robust external demand, growing consumption, and government spending are expected to fuel economic expansion this year and raise Mongolia's GDP growth forecast for 2024. [ADB]

In its September 2024 Asian Development Outlook (ADO), the ADB increased forecast for Mongolia's economic growth to 5.5 percent, an increase of 1.4 percent compared to the 4.1 percent forecasted back in April. It said that expansions in the mining industry and service sectors are anticipated to fuel further growth. In addition, increased government spending and a recovery in agriculture from the sharp decline experienced in the first quarter of 2024 are also expected to boost economic activity next year.

“The continued strong expansion in the first half of 2024 is good news for the Mongolian economy,” ADB Country Director for Mongolia Shannon Cowlin said. “It is important to use this upswing to build buffers against possible future shocks and invest wisely in the future economy to support broad-based, diversified growth.”

Potential risks to the forecast include the possible decline in Chinese demand for Mongolia's commodity exports, the slowdown of the Oyu Tolgoi mine's output expansion, and supply chain and price disruptions brought on by geopolitical unrest and natural disasters. [Montsame]

North Korea: Flood aftereffects worsen harvest in northern areas

(jb) Since the July floods devastated large parts of northern North Korea, the region has seen extensive food scarcity, which has greatly impacted the delivery of food production goals set by the state authorities for the year 2024. Farming has formed a crucial aspect in industrial production in the north, where local raw materials are used for food processing plants such as edible oil, barley malt, soy sauce and fermented soybean paste among other products. The crop yield, which has been lower than usual, has been exacerbated by the floods inundating farming lands through July and August. [Daily NK English]

Women's union groups have pushed to increase production throughout the year in keeping with the 20x10 regional development policy, which was launched by leader Kim Jong Un in January of this year. The 20x10 policy was established against the backdrop of the State Planning Commission's reveal of the Voluntary National Review in 2021, which mapped an average of USD 1400 per capita GDP in North Korea. [Sustainable Development UN]

The policy pushes for the establishment of local industrial modernized factories in 20 cities and counties every year for the next ten years. The objective behind the policy is to improve sustainable production and self-sufficiency for North Koreans, as extensive UN sanctions since Security Council Resolution 2397, which was passed in 2017, have deprived the nation of the chance to earn foreign currency through international trade. [38 North]

The production goals for 2024 are yet to be met as food production, which will form the bulk of raw materials for the industries in North Pyongan province, is lower than the previous year, despite employing large amounts of labor and agricultural inputs. The burden of growing crops, which are mainly corn and soybean, will be pushed to other farms, reports have stated, to even out factory production across the region. [Daily NK English]

South Korea: Demonstration calls for president's resignation

(jb/ac) Central Seoul saw a public demonstration of over 6000 individuals calling for the resignation of South Korea's President Yoon Suk Yeol on the afternoon of September 28.

The agenda of the demonstration was varied, with several calling for his resignation over the allegations against the Presidential Office including the obstruction of justice and acceptance of bribes in exchange for political favors. Others believed that the administration's hostile behavior towards important figures of the public harkened back to pre-democratic South Korea which saw a tamping down on the citizens' freedom of expression. Protestors also cited the president's conservative leadership stifling social rigor and argued that he "failed to protect his people's lives despite the state's duty to do so."

Among those present in the crowd was Kim Sang Geun, former chief of the state-owned Korean Broadcasting System, who alluded to the tragedy in Itaewon in October 2022, where a crowd crush killed 159 citizens, an operational mismanagement that the Yoon administration faced the public's ire for, mere months after coming into power.

Kim also stated that Yoon cozying up with Japan leads citizens to think of the government as being pro-Japan, an accusation which is measured against the history of the Japanese occupation of the Korean peninsula. Kim, along with Lee Hong Jeong, the chairperson of Solidarity for Autonomous Unification and Peace (SPARK), a unification NGO formed in 1994, believe that pro-Japanese policies and the rewriting of history textbooks vis-a-vis Japanese history in the Koreas is leading to a revisionist understanding of the past which they fear would take root among the public, if not deterred early. [The Korea Herald]

The rally, which included civic groups, labor workers, youth and other members of civil society, gathered with the express demand for the President's resignation, holding red sign boards stating the same. The rally was organized by a campaign that has continuously called for Yoon's resignation, with the co-founder who was present at the rally mentioning staggering youth unemployment figures and worsening job conditions as a catalyzing factor for the rally. The co-founder, Park Seok Woon, argued that social service budgets keep getting slashed by the administration, making it difficult for small business owners to survive in the Korean economy as the wealthy have received more and more tax cuts, which has increased the political pull of conglomerates, putting small-scale merchants out of business. [Hankyoreh]

The demonstration comes as Yoon's approval rating has dropped to 25.8 percent, its lowest since he took office in 2022, as reveled by a survey by Realmeter, a South Korean statistics bureau.

The decline is attributed to Yoon's dinner meeting with the ruling People Power Party (PPP), internal frictions between pro-Yoon lawmakers and those supporting PPP leader Han Dong Hoon, and the reform on the increase of the medical students enrollment quota, which has seen walkouts of thousands of trainee doctor since it was introduced in February (see AiR No. 9, February/2024, 4). [Yonhap News] [Realmeter in Korean]

South Korea: Six bills vetoed by president fail in parliamentary revote

(ac) Six bills vetoed by President Yoon Suk Yeol were automatically scrapped after failing to pass a parliamentary revote with the required two-thirds majority. These bills contested between Yoon's ruling People Power Part (PPP) and the main opposition Democratic Party (DP) which holds the majority of seats in the National assembly, included four broadcasting bills aimed at reducing government influence over public broadcasters, a bill on cash handouts, and the "yellow envelope" pro-labor bill, which sought to limit corporate damage claims during legitimate labor disputes.

The broadcasting bills aimed to amend governance structures for KBS, MBC, and EBS and alter rules for the Korea Communications Commission, expanding board membership and allowing media organizations to recommend directors.

During the same session, the National Assembly approved several key bills, including a revision to the Equal Employment Opportunity and Work-Family Balance Assistance Act, which extends parental leave from two years to three, increases fathers' leave from 10 to 20 days, and raises the eligibility age for reduced working hours for parents from 8 to 12 years.

Additionally, revisions to three sexual crime laws were passed to address rising digital sex crimes. Possession or viewing of deepfake sexual content will be punishable by up to three years in prison or a fine of KRW 30 million (USD 22,500). The use of sexually exploitative material to blackmail or coerce children and teenagers will result in harsher penalties, with minimum sentences increased to three and five years. The government will also be responsible for deleting illegally filmed material and supporting victims. [Yonhap News]

The bills were introduced response to public outcry over Telegram group chats where illegal videos were

widely shared, with most victims being underage secondary students (see AiR No. 36, September/2024, 1).

Currently, South Korean police have handled more than 800 deepfake-related videos this year, marking a significant increase compared to 2021, where only 156 related sex crimes were reported. [Reuters]

South Korea: President Yoon seeks to strengthen AI sector

(ac) South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol has pledged to strengthen South Korea's AI capabilities with the goal to position South Korea to be the world's top three AI powerhouses by 2027. He made this pledge in his speech held at the inauguration ceremony of the Presidential Committee on AI (PCAI) in Seoul on September 26.

Under Yoon's plans, the PCAI agency will be the central agency to develop national AI policy, and to present the national AI vision and blueprint to the public. The PCAI chairing committee will be formed by 30 civilian AI experts and ten ministerial level government officials to overlook the development and to ensure the delivery of caliber service. The chairing committee will be under Yoon's direct supervision.

Yoon promised to "establish meticulous strategies and thoroughly implement them in all areas" including research, development, infrastructure and legal systems. In addition, Yoon justified the need to establish PCAI to demonstrate South Korea's global leadership in addressing the challenge of fake news and deepfake technology. [The Korea Times]

South Korea: Labor minister rejects separate minimum wage system for foreign workers

(ac) Labor Minister Kim Moon-soo has affirmed that an introduction of a separate minimum wage system for foreign workers is impractical and unlikely to be implemented in South Korea Korea, as non-Korean laborers would be drawn to higher wages elsewhere.

Kim's remarks come amid criticism of the so-called Filipino nanny program, introduced by Seoul Mayor Oh Se-hoon to address Korea's low birthrate. The program has been deemed too costly after the government

decided to apply the national minimum wage to all participating workers. Critics, including politicians from the ruling People Power Party, have suggested adopting a model similar to Singapore's, which offers such services at lower costs. Kim, however, noted that Korea's situation differs from Singapore's, as managing foreign workers is more challenging in Korea.

Two workers in the program recently went missing, which Kim attributed to dissatisfaction with wages, warning of similar issues if a separate minimum wage is broadly adopted for foreign workers. While acknowledging that the service is too expensive for most households, Kim pledged to continue discussions with relevant stakeholders to find a better solution.

The pilot program is expected to expand after a six-month trial, but growing criticism has cast doubt on this plan. Kim said it is premature to comment on the program's sustainability. [The Korea Times]

South Korea: Presidential committee on medical reform set to estimate nationwide doctor shortage

(jb) The Special Presidential Committee on Healthcare Reform, which consists of citizens, the medical community and government representatives from the Ministry of Health and Welfare, is set to create a permanent body which would gauge the shortage in doctors nationwide and address larger concerns in the medical community of South Korea. The committee was reported to have completed its initial review of the permanent body, which will use the medical community's demographic data to target requirements in medical services across the nation. [Ministry of Health and Welfare]

The committee, which held its first meeting in April earlier this year, has considered the ongoing strike of junior doctors as a key issue, owing to the government's unsatisfactory medical enrollment quota pushed by the government in February.

The permanent body will consist of several sub-committees consisting each of 10 to 15 experts in various medical sectors and the nomination of these members will lie in the hands of private sectors and doctors' groups. The estimate of trainee doctors participating in the walkout since February is 12,000. The gap created in the delivery of medical services resulting from the walkout will be addressed by the permanent body. [Yonhap News Agency]

South Korea: Supreme Court overturns appellate court acquittal of Syrian man with ISIS ties

(jb) The case of a 39-year-old Syrian man, who was based in Pyeongtaek, South Korea, and was charged in 2018 with promoting the terrorist group ISIS through his Facebook account between 2015 and 2018, has been renewed, as the Supreme Court recently overturned an appellate court's acquittal of the man. The videos uploaded by the man on Facebook involved content that was created by the Islamic State and contained links which would allow communication with ISIS and direct enrollment into the terrorist group as members. [The Korea Times]

The case became the first to come under the "Act on Counterterrorism for the Protection of Citizens and Public Security" which was passed in March 2016 and amended in 2018 for enforcement of the act six months after its passing. The Act is a preventative one, which was established with the aim of monitoring activities of those whom the Constitution deems "foreign terrorist fighter", which the suspect in the case clearly fell under. [Korea Law Translation Centre]

The Syrian man's case came immediately before the 2019 case of a 23-year-old South Korean soldier, surnamed Park, who was investigated under the counterterrorism law for downloading an app made by ISIS which would allow him to make homemade ammunition. [South China Morning Post]

While the district court, which initially handled the Syrian suspect's case, convicted the man on charges of inciting participation in the Islamic State, an appellate court overturned it, leading to his acquittal.

The Supreme Court reviewed the acquittal and has now overturned it once more under the argument that his acquittal, if he were not innocent, would violate the Counterterrorism Act which has been maintained robustly in the last eight years. [The Korea Times]

South Korea: New ballistic missile displayed at Armed Forces Day

(jb/dql) South Korea unveiled for the first time its most powerful ballistic missile, the Hyunmoo-5, during a large Armed Forces Day ceremony on October 1. The Hyunmoo-5 is capable of carrying an 8-ton warhead to

destroy underground bunkers, alongside around 340 other military systems.

South Korean President Yoon Yuk Seol stated that any nuclear attempt by North Korea would face a "resolute and overwhelming response" from South Korea and the U.S. During the ceremony, the U.S. flew a B-1B bomber, while South Korea showcased its advanced fighter jets. Later, South Korea paraded its troops and weapons through Seoul to boost morale and demonstrate deterrence against North Korean aggression.

Yoon has strengthened South Korea's alliance with the U.S. and improved trilateral security cooperation with Washington and Tokyo to counter North Korea's growing nuclear program. North Korea, in turn, recently unveiled a secretive uranium-enrichment facility, raising regional concerns.

On the same day, North Korea's vice defense minister, Kim Kang Il, criticized the U.S. for recent military deployments, including a B-1B bomber and a nuclear-powered submarine, and hinted at potential ICBM tests in response. [AP]

The Hyunmoo is a series of cruise and ballistic missiles which were developed as a part of the Korea Massive Punishment and Retaliation (KMPR), the third axis of what the South Korean Ministry of National Defense announced in July 2022 to be the “Three-Axis” system of strategic deterrence against a nuclear North Korea perceived as increasingly belligerent. The series is part of a military system “designed to track, detect and eliminate an adversary’s ballistic missiles and weapons of mass destruction”, where the Hyunmoo-4, which was previously displayed for the 75th founding anniversary, contained enough payload to destroy underground missile defense systems in North Korea. Hyunmoo-1 to 3 were much weaker forms of ground-to-ground missiles which would target only surface-level infrastructure. [Council on Foreign Relations] [Yonhap News Agency]

The Hyunmoo-5 is said to contain much more destructive capabilities than its predecessor. [The Korea Times]

Taiwan: NGO pushes for dual citizenship

(am) Efforts have intensified to amend Taiwan’s citizenship law to allow dual citizenship. Under Taiwan’s Nationality Act, applicants for Taiwanese citizenship must renounce their original nationality,

except for those with "exceptional contributions" to Taiwanese society—primarily long-term missionaries and professional basketball players.

In August, the NGO Crossroads, dedicated to advocating for changes to the current law, and its partners launched the first formal movement for dual nationality in Taiwan. Their initial action was to create a petition on a government website, open to both Taiwanese citizens and foreign residents with valid residency cards. If the petition reaches 5,000 signatures, the government is required to respond and acknowledge the demand for dual nationality. Currently, there are 3,750 signatures.

Crossroads cites several reasons for advocating dual nationality. First, they argue that Taiwan is facing a "talent shortage" due to its declining birthrate. Second, allowing dual citizenship would enable foreigners intending to stay in Taiwan long-term to acquire citizenship, thereby integrating more fully into society.

Opposition to dual citizenship primarily stems from fears that immigrants from the People's Republic of China (PRC) could acquire citizenship and advocate for reunification with the mainland—raising concerns about loyalty. However, Crossroads contends that such fears are misplaced, as PRC citizens are not eligible under the Nationality Act. [Taipei Times]

Taiwan: Kaohsiung City Councilor arrested

(hs) Kaohsiung City Councilor Huang Shao-ting of Taiwan's main opposition party, the Kuomintang (KMT) who left for Xiamen, China, while under investigation for corruption, was arrested upon his return to Taiwan on September 29.

The investigation concerns allegations that he inflated the fees of publicly funded assistants in his office, a manipulation of public funds that could lead to serious criminal charges. [Focus Taiwan]

In a statement posted on the Kuomintang's social media, Huang claimed his trip to China had been planned in advance and denied any prior knowledge of the search. He said he informed investigators of his travel plans and intended to return to Taiwan after completing his business in China.

The investigation has also involved questioning 16 other individuals, including family members of Huang. [Taiwan Times] [Taiwan News]

Taiwan: President Lai convenes first meeting of defense resilience committee

(hs) President Lai Ching-te convened the first meeting of the Whole-of-Society Defence Resilience Committee on 26 September, emphasizing the government's commitment to enhancing Taiwan's overall defense resilience. During the meeting, he presented letters of appointment to committee members and outlined a strategy to bolster national strength and public confidence through comprehensive preparation.

Lai articulated three core principles to guide the committee's efforts. He emphasized the importance of preparation through vigilance and proactive engagement, stressing the need to ensure societal continuity during emergencies, which would allow both the government and citizens to act swiftly. The principle of enhancing response and fearlessness in action called for expanding civilian training and optimizing the distribution of critical supplies, including for medical and evacuation facilities, to strengthen Taiwan's overall response capabilities. He also called for orderly execution and methodical action focused on the necessity for comprehensive validation and coordinated efforts across all levels of government and civil society to identify and address potential issues.

He acknowledged the diverse expertise within the group, noting that 67.7 percent are non-government officials and 32.3 percent are women, which reflects a balanced and inclusive approach. [Office of the President Taiwan]

Taiwan: Leaked military information investigated

(hs) The Taiwanese government announced the start of an investigation looking into a potential confidential information leak by an engineer at Aerospace Industrial Development Corporation (AIDC) about the Brave Eagle jet program. Reports indicate that the engineer, dissatisfied with frequent overtime, posted images on Instagram that inadvertently revealed problems of the No. 1110 Brave Eagle Advanced Jet Trainer, produced in 2022.

The Air Force reported excessive noise and vibrations in the cockpit of the No. 1110, leading to its return to AIDC for inspection and repairs. Although the engineer's posts did not disclose classified information,

AIDC deemed his actions a serious breach of workplace discipline, damaging the company's reputation and raising public concern.

The Air Force has ordered 66 Brave Eagles from AIDC, with 36 already delivered. The No. 1110 was the last of eight delivered in 2022. Defense Minister Wellington Koo confirmed during a Legislative Yuan session that the investigation is ongoing and that any breaches of national security will be addressed under the Classified National Security Information Protection Act.

AIDC noted that all delivered aircraft followed proper acceptance procedures. The issues with the No. 1110 are concerning, as cabin noise and vibrations can hinder crew communication and potentially lead to structural damage, impacting flight safety. This aircraft is expected to be stationed at Zhihang Air Base in Taitung County, alongside other Brave Eagles. [Liberty Times Net] [Taiwan News]

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

Bangladesh: Army chief strongly backs interim government, eyes elections within 18 months

(lm) In an exclusive interview with Reuters, Bangladesh's Army Chief General Waker-uz-Zaman expressed strong support for the interim government led by Muhammad Yunus, following the ousting of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in early August amid mass protests. Zaman confirmed his backing for

the interim administration's reforms and emphasized a 12 to 18-month timeline for a transition to democracy. The general assured that the military would remain professional and avoid political interference, aiming to support Yunus' government in stabilizing the country after the violent uprising that resulted in over 1,000 deaths. [Reuters]

However, this timeline contrasts with the perspective of Shajeeb Wazed Joy, son of deposed leader Sheikh Hasina, who criticized the interim government's reform agenda, arguing it could take decades to complete and accusing the government of power consolidation. He advocated for holding elections as soon as possible, highlighting ongoing violence against his party's members.

The situation has given the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) a stronger position, with BNP's Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir expressing disappointment that Yunus has not provided a specific timeline for elections.

The interim government had previously set up six reform panels tasked with drafting proposals within three months, after which discussions with political parties will shape the election timeline. Some sources, however, speculate that elections could be delayed by two to three years, depending on the implementation of these reforms and the preparation of a new voter list. [The Hindu] [Dhaka Tribune 1]

Meanwhile, at a seminar held at Dhaka University on September 26, experts and civil society members called for an inclusive constitution with a balanced power structure to address the evolving political landscape in Bangladesh. The discussion, organized by BLAST and the Bangla Pathshala Foundation, focused on the need for reforms to ensure the constitution reflects the will of the people. Concerns were raised about the centralization of executive power, with suggestions for deeper reforms rather than mere amendments. [Dhaka Tribune 2]

Bangladesh: Police clash with protesters demanding age limit increase for government jobs

(lm) Police clashed with protesters on September 30 as job seekers gathered outside the residence of Bangladesh's interim leader, Muhammad Yunus, in Dhaka. The protesters were demanding an increase in the maximum age limit for applying to government jobs to 35 years, as well as the conditional removal of

any age restrictions. In response to rising tensions, police fired rubber bullets and tear gas to disperse the crowd, resulting in injuries to several individuals, including journalists. [Dhaka Tribune 1]

Later in the afternoon, a delegation from the group was allowed to enter the Chief Adviser's residence after holding a press conference, during which they reiterated their determination to meet with Yunus. They issued a one-hour ultimatum for the meeting and stated that they would not engage in discussions with anyone else until they had the opportunity to speak with him. [Dhaka Tribune 2]

In response to the protests, the interim government announced the formation of a two-member committee tasked with reviewing the age limit issue and providing recommendations within the next seven days. [Dhaka Tribune 3]

Bangladesh: Jatiya Party played key role in mass uprising, Chairman GM Quader says

(lm) Jatiya Party (JaPa) Chairman GM Quader highlighted the crucial role that his party played during the student uprising that led to the downfall of Sheikh Hasina's government. He stated that JaPa consistently condemned the violent actions of the government against the protesters and supported the Anti-Discrimination Student Movement from the outset. Quader emphasized that JaPa's student wing actively participated in the protests, with many members facing harassment and imprisonment for their involvement.

He also mentioned his personal visit to the grave of Abu Sayed, one of the movement's martyrs, and expressed JaPa's ongoing commitment to the cause. Quader referred to the students who lost their lives as "brave liberation fighters," reaffirming the party's dedication to ensuring their sacrifices are not in vain. [Dhaka Tribune]

During the latest rule of the Awami League, JaPa served as both an opposition party in parliament and a collaborator with the government, making its role complex and sometimes contradictory. JaPa, traditionally seen as a "soft opposition," had members in key parliamentary positions and even held ministerial roles, creating perceptions of it being a government-friendly opposition. This arrangement led to criticisms that the party was not functioning as an

effective opposition, especially regarding its ability to hold the government accountable.

Bangladesh: BNP demands cancellation of Union Parishads

(lm) The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) has demanded the cancellation of Union Parishads (UPs), calling them a product of undemocratic processes under what they describe as a "fascist regime." This demand came after a decision was made during a meeting of the BNP's National Standing Committee, chaired by BNP Acting Chairman Tarique Rahman, who joined virtually from the United Kingdom. [Dhaka Tribune]

UPs are the smallest rural administrative and local government units in Bangladesh, operating at the village level. They were formally established by the Basic Democracies Order of 1959, introduced during the era of Pakistan before Bangladesh's independence. The system was initially designed to engage rural communities in governance and decentralize administrative functions.

One of the primary criticisms of UPs in recent years is their perceived use as political tools. Critics, particularly from opposition parties like the BNP, argue that during Sheikh Hasina's tenure, many UPs became instruments for consolidating power. The claim is that elections for these positions were often manipulated to favor the ruling party, and that UP members could be used to influence outcomes in national elections.

Another criticism focuses on the limited autonomy of UPs. Despite being designed to decentralize governance, many claim that these local bodies remain heavily dependent on the central government for resources and decision-making, which restricts their ability to function effectively and independently. Corruption within UPs is another issue, with accusations that resources meant for development or welfare are often misused or misallocated due to the influence of local political actors.

Bangladesh: Interim government dissolves textbook revision committee amid pressure from Islamist groups

(lm) In a contentious decision, Bangladesh's interim government has dissolved the committee established

for the revision and improvement of textbooks. The committee, formed on September 15 and headed by Dr. KM Kabirul Islam, was intended to ensure that the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) textbooks reflected the curriculum's goals, maintained quality, and addressed sensitive content.

The dissolution follows concerns raised by various groups, including Islamist organizations calling for the inclusion of Islamic scholars. Moreover, the 10-member committee faced backlash for including two university professors, Samina Luthfa and Kamrul Hassan, who some groups labeled as "anti-religion." These allegations prompted concerns about the safety of the professors, leading to calls for their removal from the committee.

Since the new curriculum introduced by the ousted previous government was deemed unfeasible, revisions will continue with a focus on teacher input, curriculum specialists, and other stakeholders. The finalization of the revised curriculum is expected in 2025, with implementation set to begin in 2026. [Dhaka Tribune 1] [The Daily Star 1]

Crucially, the controversy follows a history of similar incidents where textbooks were altered or removed in response to pressures from Islamist groups. In light of this, Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) has expressed serious concerns over the government's decision to dissolve the coordination committee, suggesting that it compromises policy decisions in response to radical threats and undermines the vision of a non-discriminatory and non-communal "New Bangladesh."

Echoing these concerns, a group of 122 eminent citizens, including writers, teachers, and political activists, has called for the reinstatement of the dissolved coordination committee. They expressed concerns over the rising influence of a specific religious group, which they claim is promoting a biased interpretation of religion that threatens the pluralistic fabric of society and undermines democratic values. [Dhaka Tribune 2] [The Daily Star 2]

Bangladesh: Civil admin runs slow as top tier still jittery

(lm) The interim government in Bangladesh is facing challenges in restoring normalcy within the civil administration more than seven weeks after assuming power. A significant factor in this disarray is the turnover of secretaries, with 34 out of 55 ministries still

relying on appointees from the previous Awami League administration. Many of these secretaries are hesitant to take decisive action due to uncertainty about their future roles, leading to ineffective management.

Newly appointed secretaries are also struggling to adapt, further delaying processes. Bureaucratic inefficiencies are evident, such as 200 vehicles intended for deputy commissioners sitting idle for over a month. A key decision-making committee has not convened since the interim government's establishment, leaving several proposals pending.

Discontent among officials over recent appointments has led to protests and physical altercations, resulting in the revocation of some appointments. Observers note a lack of clarity in decision-making, exacerbated by the slow pace of administrative changes and concerns about politicization of appointments. [The Daily Star]

Meanwhile, the interim government has announced that officials who retired between 2009 and August 4, 2024, under the now-ousted Awami League regime and did not receive their rightful entitlements can now apply for redress. A five-member committee, led by former finance secretary Zakir Ahmed Khan, will review the applications and provide recommendations within three months. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: Lawyers demand resignation of 'politically biased, corrupt' High Court judges

(lm) A group of lawyers has demanded the resignation of what they describe as "politically biased and corrupt" High Court judges by October 20. The lawyers expressed their intention to urge the Chief Justice to take action against the judges if they do not resign voluntarily by the deadline. This follows earlier calls for the resignation of 50 High Court judges, made by Syed Mamun Mahbub at a press conference on August 8, where he accused them of violating the constitution by obstructing justice and issuing biased rulings against opposition leaders.[The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Garment workers' protests leave at least one dead

(lm) A violent clash between protesting garment workers and police in Bangladesh resulted in one

death and over 20 injuries on September 30. The unrest occurred when hundreds of workers blocked a major highway in Ashulia, demanding higher wages and better working conditions. In response, police intervened, leading to violent confrontations where workers threw bricks at law enforcement vehicles. [Business of Fashion] [The Daily Star 1]

This incident is part of a larger wave of unrest in Bangladesh, one of the world's largest garment production hubs, where ongoing protests are driven by longstanding labor grievances. The demonstrations have led to factory closures and exacerbated production backlogs, which were already strained by recent violence that resulted in over 700 deaths and the resignation of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Bangladesh's garment industry, accounting for over 80 percent of the country's export earnings, has reportedly lost over USD 100 million due to the unrest. Many factories are facing significant financial challenges, including forced loans, which could have long-term repercussions if not addressed. [The Daily Star 2]

Against this backdrop, garment industry leaders are calling for enhanced security measures to protect factories amid ongoing labor unrest, despite the government forming a committee to address workers' concerns. Labor leaders emphasize the need for factory-specific discussions, as some factory owners are seen as insincere in resolving issues. [Business of Fashion] [The Daily Star 1] [Reuters]

Bangladesh: Police, army protect Hindu youth from mob

(lm) A young Hindu man was arrested in Chattogram for allegedly hurting religious sentiments in a social media post, prompting several hundred locals to attempt to storm a local police station to demand his release. Police quickly informed army personnel, and as an army jeep arrived, some demonstrators vandalized it. The situation was eventually brought under control with assistance from local madrasa teachers and political leaders. The accused was subsequently presented in court and sent to jail, with police indicating plans to seek remand for him. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: CU bans gatherings, protests on campus without permission

(lm) The administration of Chittagong University (CU), one of the largest public universities in Bangladesh, has issued a directive prohibiting all gatherings, protests, human chains, and rallies on campus and its surrounding areas without prior permission from university authorities.

The decision appears to be a response to maintain order on campus amidst ongoing tensions regarding student protests. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: RAB removed from Sagar-Runi murder probe, High Court orders task force formation

(lm) The High Court of Bangladesh has ordered the formation of a high-powered task force to investigate the murder of journalist couple Sagar Sarowar and Meherun Runi, effectively removing the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) from the case. The decision came after a petition from the state, and the court directed the home ministry to implement the order. The task force, consisting of experienced investigators from various agencies, is required to submit its report within six months.

This development follows a long history of delays in the investigation, which has been postponed 113 times. The case was initially opened in 2012 after the couple was murdered in their Dhaka home. It has since been passed through multiple investigative bodies, including the Detective Branch and RAB, with little progress made. The case involves eight accused individuals, including Runi's friend and a security guard from their building, among others. The next hearing is scheduled for October 15. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: Court withdraws conviction warrant against senior journalist Shafik Rehman

(lm) A Dhaka court has withdrawn the conviction warrant against senior journalist Shafik Rehman following his surrender in a case concerning an alleged plot to abduct and kill Sajeeb Wazed Joy, the son of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her ICT adviser. The home ministry had suspended Shafik's punishment for one year on September 22, conditional upon his surrender and the filing of an appeal against his sentence.

The case stems from a complaint filed by the Detective Branch of police on August 3, 2015, which accused several political figures of conspiring to harm Joy. Shafik had previously been sentenced to seven years of rigorous imprisonment in absentia on August 17 last year, prompting the issuance of the conviction warrant.

In comments regarding the case, Shafik accused the government of former Prime Minister Hasina of filing false charges to suppress freedom of speech. He emphasized that both the public and journalists have been silenced, asserting that the case against him was intended to stifle journalism and diminish the voice of the people. [Dhaka Tribune] [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Former college principal reinstated after 16-year legal battle over embezzlement charge

(lm) After a 16-year legal battle, Abdus Sattar, a former principal of a college in Comilla, Bangladesh, has been reinstated following a High Court ruling. Sattar was initially dismissed in 2009 over allegations of embezzling BDT 326 (approximately USD 2.71). His dismissal came after an investigation committee found evidence against him, but Sattar maintained that the charges were politically motivated.

The High Court ordered his reinstatement in 2018, but the college authorities appealed the decision. In April 2024, the Supreme Court upheld the High Court's ruling, confirming his reinstatement and directing the college to pay his outstanding salary and allowances. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: Six in ten low-income households struggle to meet nutritional needs

(lm) A World Food Programme (WFP) report reveals that 38 percent of low-income households in Bangladesh faced food insecurity in August 2024, with six in ten struggling to meet their nutritional needs. Despite a slight drop in essential commodity prices following the interim government's takeover on August 8, high food inflation, floods, and the aftermath of Cyclone Remal worsened food security. Many families resorted to selling assets, relying on credit, or dipping into savings to manage the crisis. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Dengue situation turning alarming; Dhaka sees half of nationwide cases

(lm) The dengue situation in Bangladesh has become alarming, with 50 percent of all hospitalized cases concentrated in Dhaka's two city corporations. Since January, the total number of cases has reached 30,938, and there have been 163 deaths as of September 30. [Dhaka Tribune]

This year's outbreak is particularly concerning as last year, Bangladesh recorded 1,705 dengue-related deaths, marking it the deadliest year on record with 321,179 cases and 318,749 recoveries.

Bangladesh: Severe floods causing health problems in country's south

(lm) Severe flooding in Bangladesh has displaced an estimated 6 million people, with the worst floods the country has seen in over three decades affecting 11 out of 64 districts. The floods have devastated local agriculture and fishing, with crops and fish washed away, leaving many without income.

Although water levels have receded in some areas, lingering conditions pose ongoing health risks. Residents have reported various health issues, including joint pain from navigating through murky waters and complications for those with pre-existing medical conditions.

Oxfam's Bangladesh country director noted that the floods were exacerbated by rapid urbanization, which has increased industrial exposure and negatively impacted the aquatic ecosystem. [NPR]

Bangladesh: Interest payments surpass USD 840 million for the first time

(lm) In the fiscal year 2023-24, Bangladesh's government saw its interest payments exceed BDT 100 billion (USD 840 million) for the first time, reflecting a 24.5 percent increase from the previous year. Total interest payments amounted to BDT 114 billion (USD 957.6 million), which represented more than one-sixth of the national budget. The surge was driven by rising

borrowing costs from both foreign and domestic sources.

Interest on foreign loans rose 60.53 percent, reaching BDT 15.15 billion (USD 127.3 million), while interest on domestic loans increased by 20.48 percent, totaling BDT 99.61 billion (USD 837.7 million). This underscores the growing reliance on loans to cover budget deficits. As of March 2024, Bangladesh's total outstanding debt stood at BDT 1.7 trillion (USD 14.3 billion), equivalent to 33.78 percent of the nation's gross domestic product (GDP).

Further compounding the issue, the depreciation of the Bangladeshi Taka (BDT) against the US Dollar (USD) and higher global interest rates have worsened the debt burden. Despite attempts to reduce subsidies and meet the IMF's targets for revenue, the government fell BDT 25.24 billion (USD 211.6 million) short of its tax collection goal. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Hill tribes blame army for abetting violence

(lm) Tribal groups in Bangladesh's Chattogram Hill Tracts (CHT) have accused the military of abetting violence against them following recent sectarian clashes that resulted in the deaths of four tribal men and significant property damage.

The violence, which occurred on September 19-20 in Khagrachhari and Rangamati, was reportedly sparked by the killing of a Bengali Muslim man, with tribal leaders alleging that they were wrongfully blamed for the incident. In response to the violence, local authorities imposed a curfew in the affected districts, and tribal student groups organized a transport strike to protest the situation. The military, for its part, has claimed that its actions were in response to attacks from armed tribal insurgents.

During a press conference in Dhaka, relatives of the victims expressed their disillusionment with the military, claiming it has sided with Bengali settlers in these conflicts. Tribal activists have issued five demands aimed at ensuring justice and restoring peace in the region. These include a UN-supervised investigation into the attacks, compensation for victims, and the withdrawal of military camps and Bengali settlers from tribal lands. [UCA News]

Bangladesh: 500 police vehicles torched in July-August; more than 4,500 bullets fired at protesters

(lm) During the student-led mass protests against the ousted Awami League government in July and August 2024, approximately 500 police vehicles were set ablaze, according to Bangladesh's Inspector General of Police (IGP) Md Mainul Islam. Despite these challenges, police stations have since replaced the damaged vehicles, and operations have returned to normal across the country. [Dhaka Tribune]

In the course of the protests, law enforcement agencies in Dhaka and Chattogram fired at least 4,634 bullets at protesters. This figure comes from an analysis conducted by Lawyers for Energy, Environment and Development, which examined 100 police cases filed at 12 police stations in Dhaka and 10 in Chattogram. The analysis revealed a troubling pattern of excessive force used by law enforcement, indicating violations of constitutional rights during the protests. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Air Force, Navy officers given magistracy power

(lm) The Bangladeshi government has expanded magistracy powers to commissioned officers of the Air Force and Navy, allowing them to exercise authority similar to that of Army officers. An updated circular from the public administration ministry, issued on September 30, extends these powers for 60 days, starting from September 17.

Initially, the notification granted executive magistrate status solely to Army officers for the same duration. The revised notification now enables all armed forces officers ranked as captain or above to act as executive magistrates nationwide. The specific conditions under which these powers can be exercised remain unchanged, covering various offenses outlined in the Code of Criminal Procedure 1898. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bhutan: Election Commission spent USD 6.34 million on fourth parliamentary elections

(lm) The Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB) spent a total of BTN 528.03 million (USD 6.34 million) on the fourth National Assembly (NA) and National Council

(NC) elections, reflecting a reduction in spending compared to the previous electoral cycle. Specifically, the NA elections cost BTN 358.703 million (USD 4.30 million), down from BTN 439.812 million (USD 5.28 million) in 2018. Similarly, the NC elections cost BTN 169.327 million (USD 2.03 million), reduced from BTN 245.844 million (USD 2.95 million) in 2018.

The reduced spending was achieved through austerity measures, including halting voter ID card printing, using black-and-white printing for electoral rolls, reducing the number of polling stations from 867 to 809, and decreasing the number of polling officials per station. Despite the lower costs, the ECB faced increased expenses due to rising Daily Subsistence Allowances and Consumer Price Index. [Kuensel]

Bhutan: Domestic electricity consumption to outstrip production by 2026

(lm) Bhutan's domestic electricity demand is expected to increase by 232 percent by 2026, surpassing production capacity, driven by the growth of power-intensive industries. Domestic electricity consumption is projected to grow from BTN 8.27 billion (approximately USD 99.24 million) in 2023 to BTN 27.43 billion (approximately USD 329.16 million) by 2026, while export revenue will decrease. Despite an increase in total electricity sales revenue, most of it will be used domestically, with export capacity diminishing.

The finance ministry has highlighted that hydropower exports will no longer be the main source of foreign currency for Bhutan. It is instead urging the country to use domestic demand as a lever for economic growth and to diversify its energy portfolio. Ten hydropower projects are planned under the 13th Plan to boost capacity by 3,119 megawatts, in addition to investments in solar, wind, and other renewable sources.

Bhutan's electricity and energy sector is projected to contribute BTN 56 billion (approximately USD 672 million) to the GDP by 2029, with annual growth of 10.6 percent, up from BTN 30.53 billion (approximately USD 366.36 million) in 2023. However, during lean seasons, Bhutan may need to increase electricity imports, which are expected to rise to BTN 18.06 billion (approximately USD 216.72 million) by 2026. [Kuensel]

Bhutan: New strategies unveiled to tackle NCDs

(lm) The Ministry of Health of Bhutan, in collaboration with the World Health Organization (WHO), held a workshop to develop fiscal measures aimed at reducing the consumption of tobacco, alcohol, and junk food. The workshop also aimed to create the 2025-2030 Multisectoral Action Plan for non-communicable diseases (NCDs). Health Secretary Pema Wangchuk emphasized a shift towards prevention to combat NCDs, while Karchung, from the Ministry of Health, highlighted the need for improved stakeholder engagement based on lessons from the previous plan.

Survey results revealed increasing health concerns, such as a rise in raised blood glucose from 2 percent in 2019 to 5.8 percent in 2024, and hypertension prevalence at 30 percent in 2024. The government has allocated NPR 40.2 million (approximately USD 0.48 million) for NCD prevention in the fiscal year 2024-2025.

The 2025-2030 Action Plan includes various roles for stakeholders: the revenue department will introduce fiscal policies against unhealthy consumption, and the education sector will promote healthy lifestyles. WHO officials suggested strengthening anti-tobacco policies, running awareness campaigns, and raising tobacco taxes. Representatives from 19 stakeholders, including health organizations, trade departments, and civil society, participated in the workshop. [Kuensel]

Bhutan: Teacher attrition continues despite interventions

(lm) Despite interventions such as tightening visa regulations in Australia and pay increases in Bhutan, teacher attrition has continued. From January to September 2024, 247 teachers left the civil service in Bhutan, averaging 27 resignations per month. Although this is fewer than the 371 resignations in 2023, there is uncertainty whether the total for 2024 will surpass that of the previous year, as resignations often spike towards year-end.

The attrition suggests that the root causes of teacher resignations, such as heavy workloads, lack of resources, and better opportunities abroad, have not been effectively addressed. Stricter visa policies have not significantly deterred teachers from seeking opportunities overseas, particularly in Australia, where

they are attracted by better pay and professional development.

Although 797 new teachers were recruited in 2024, the education sector still faces a shortage of 456 teachers. The high turnover of experienced teachers has impacted the quality of education, which could affect student performance. [Kuensel]

India: Jammu & Kashmir union territory votes in final phase of polls to election local government

(lm) Voting for local government elections in India's Jammu & Kashmir union territory began in its final phase on October 1. Over 3.9 million residents are eligible to vote to choose 40 lawmakers from a pool of 415 candidates across seven districts. [Associated Press]

This election marks the first local vote since the Indian government revoked the region's special status in 2019, which had granted it semi-autonomy. After the revocation of special status, Jammu and Kashmir was divided into two union territories—Jammu-Kashmir and Ladakh—directly governed by New Delhi. This change was largely criticized in Kashmir as an assault on its identity and autonomy.

The elections have also opened the door for tens of thousands of Pakistani Hindu refugees to vote in regional elections for the first time since migrating to India in 1947.

Earlier phases of the elections recorded voter turnout rates of approximately 61 percent and 55 percent, with no incidents of violence reported. However, the third phase has been overshadowed by significant protests following the assassination of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, which has particularly resonated with the Shia community, which constitutes approximately 10 percent of the total population of the region.

Prominent political figures, including former Chief Minister Mehbooba Mufti, have suspended their campaigns to show solidarity with the protests, emphasizing the need for justice for those affected in Palestine and Lebanon. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, which is widely viewed as pro-Israel, has criticized the opposition leaders, accusing them of supporting terrorism and being opportunistic in their responses. [MoneyControl]

The counting of votes is scheduled for October 8, with results expected on the same day.

India: West Bengal junior doctors yet to decide on fresh cease-work after Supreme Court hearing

(lm) In the ongoing protests by junior doctors in West Bengal, sparked by the alleged rape and murder of a trainee doctor at R.G. Kar Medical College and Hospital on August 9, the West Bengal Junior Doctors' Front (WBJDF) has not yet determined whether to initiate a new cease-work. Instead, they are focusing on a major protest rally planned for October 2 in Kolkata.

This decision comes in the wake of a Supreme Court hearing that criticized the state government for failing to implement promised safety measures for healthcare workers. After a 42-day strike, junior doctors had resumed their duties on September 21, but the government's lack of action regarding their safety concerns has prompted them to organize the upcoming rally. [The Hindu]

India: Parliament's standing committees constituted

(lm) In India, Parliament's standing committees have been reconstituted, with Prime Minister Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) securing leadership of 11 out of 24 department-related standing committees, while its allies received four positions. The opposition Indian National Congress (INC) will chair four committees, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and Trinamool Congress will each lead two, and the Samajwadi Party will head one.

Key appointments include Bhartruhari Mahtab from the BJP as chair of the Finance Committee and Shashi Tharoor from the INC leading the External Affairs Committee. The Defence Committee will be chaired by former Union Minister Radha Mohan Singh, with Rahul Gandhi, Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha, as a member. Radha Mohan Das Agrawal of the BJP will chair the Home Affairs Committee.

Notable appointments also include Sunil Tatkare of the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) as chair of the Petroleum and Natural Gas Committee, and Shrirang Appa Barne from Shiv Sena heading the Energy Committee. Sanjay Jha of Janata Dal (United) will chair

the Transport, Tourism, and Culture Committee. Additionally, Trinamool Congress members Charanjit Singh Channi and Saptagiri Ulaka will chair the Agriculture, Animal Husbandry and Food Processing Committee, and the Rural Development and Panchayati Raj Committee, respectively. [The Hindu]

India: Karnataka court orders FIR against Finance Minister Sitharaman in case related to electoral bonds

(lm) A Karnataka court ordered a First Information Report (FIR) against Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman and others, including Enforcement Directorate (ED) officials and ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) office-bearers, in connection with allegations of extortion involving the now-scrapped electoral bonds scheme. The complaint claims the accused used the electoral bonds scheme to extort millions of US dollars for the benefit of others. The FIR was registered under sections related to extortion and criminal conspiracy.

The electoral bonds scheme, introduced in 2018 by the Indian government, allowed individuals and entities to anonymously donate to political parties, with the aim of ensuring transparency in political funding while maintaining donor privacy. Only the State Bank of India (SBI) could issue these bonds, and political parties eligible under certain conditions could encash them within a specified period.

In February 2024, the Supreme Court of India struck down the scheme, stating it violated citizens' rights to information and restricted their understanding of how political parties received funds. [Business Standard]

India: AAP moves SC against MCD standing committee's recent election

(lm) The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) has approached the Supreme Court to challenge the recent election of a member to the Municipal Corporation of Delhi's (MCD) standing committee, seeking legal intervention. This move follows strong accusations from Delhi Chief Minister Atishi, who has alleged that the election, held on September 27, was both "illegal and unconstitutional." She further accused Prime Minister Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) of "murdering" democracy through its handling of the election process.

The controversy began when the BJP won the last vacant seat on the 18-member MCD standing committee unopposed. This occurred after the AAP councillors chose to abstain from voting. Atishi, during a press conference on September 28, claimed that the election was conducted in violation of the Delhi Municipal Corporation (DMC) Act of 1957, specifically pointing out that only the Mayor has the authority to decide the date and location of the standing committee election, and only the Mayor can preside over the meeting where the election is held.

In response to Atishi's allegations, Delhi BJP president Virendra Sachdeva dismissed her claims as politically motivated. He argued that under Section 45 of the DMC Act, the formation of a standing committee is a mandatory requirement. Sachdeva further referenced Section 487 of the Act, which grants the Lieutenant Governor (L-G) and the municipal commissioner the authority to convene a meeting of the corporation under special circumstances, including the ability to appoint a presiding officer for such a meeting. He suggested that Atishi's remarks were meant to cause confusion and were driven by political self-interest.

The backdrop to this ongoing dispute is a ruling by the Supreme Court on August 5, which upheld the L-G's power to nominate aldermen to the MCD without requiring the aid or advice of the Council of Ministers. This ruling was significant, as the court rejected the Delhi government's challenge to the L-G's authority, affirming that the law "expressly enables" the L-G to act independently in this matter. [The Hindu]

India: Constitutional doctrine evolves with society, no generation can claim monopoly over it

(lm) During the M.K. Nambyar Memorial Lecture on September 26, 2024, Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud emphasized that constitutional doctrine evolves alongside society, asserting that no generation, including the current one, can claim a monopoly over its interpretation or future foresight. He highlighted the contributions of jurists like M.K. Nambyar, who possessed the unique ability to interpret constitutional principles beyond the original intent of the framers.

Chandrachud noted Nambyar's significant legal achievements, including his role in the A.K. Gopalan case and the Kesavananda Bharati case, which introduced the Basic Structure doctrine. He stressed that the Indian Constitution is a "living document" that adapts to contemporary societal needs rather than

being strictly interpreted based on the intentions at the time of its adoption. The Chief Justice warned that an "originalist" approach could render the Constitution outdated, advocating for a flexible understanding that allows future generations to address current challenges while remaining grounded in the Constitution's enduring values. [The Hindu]

India: Government increases minimum wages for unorganized sector workers

(sct) Starting October 1, India's central government will implement increased minimum wage rates for workers in the unorganized sector. This adjustment, part of the biannual revision of the Variable Dearness Allowance (VDA), takes into account the rising cost of living and aims to ensure fair compensation for workers.

The new wage rates will be categorized by skill level—unskilled, semi-skilled, skilled, and highly skilled—and differentiated based on geographical areas classified as A, B, and C. For Area A, which comprises regions with high living costs, the revised daily and monthly wages are set as follows: unskilled workers will earn INR 783 per day (approximately USD 9.40) (INR 20,358 per month, approximately USD 246.29), semi-skilled workers will earn INR 868 per day (approximately USD 10.50) (INR 22,568 per month, approximately USD 270.89), skilled workers will earn INR 954 per day (approximately USD 11.45) (INR 24,804 per month, approximately USD 297.48), and highly skilled workers will earn INR 1,035 per day (approximately USD 12.42) (INR 26,910 per month, approximately USD 323.68). [Jagran Josh]

India: Supreme Court pauses 'bulldozer justice'

(lm) India's Supreme Court has ordered a halt to the practice known as "bulldozer justice," where authorities demolish private properties of individuals accused of criminal activities. This decision came as the court hears multiple petitions challenging this controversial campaign, which has been associated with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government. The next court hearing is scheduled for October 1.

The Supreme Court condemned the demolitions as a violation of legal principles, stating that mere allegations of criminal involvement do not justify property destruction. Justice Bhushan Ramkrishna

Gavai emphasized that demolitions must follow due legal process and cannot be carried out arbitrarily.

Critics, including rights organizations, have labeled this tactic as collective punishment, disproportionately affecting the Muslim community in India. The practice began in Uttar Pradesh in 2017 and has since spread to other BJP-controlled states, with officials claiming that the demolitions target illegal constructions. However, victims argue that their properties are legal and that they are often not given adequate notice to contest demolition orders. [France24]

On September 27, United Nations Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing, Balakrishnan Rajagopal, informed the Supreme Court that the punitive demolition of homes and commercial properties by the state represents an "aggravated form of human rights violation."

Rajagopal urged that demolitions, especially for minor building code violations, are excessive and violate global human rights agreements, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), to which India is a signatory. [The Hindu]

In related developments, authorities in Gujarat's Gir Somnath district demolished a centuries-old mosque, including a 500-year-old shrine, despite a Supreme Court order requiring prior approval for such demolitions. This action was part of an anti-encroachment drive under the Somnath Development Project, a large-scale initiative to redevelop the area around the prominent Somnath temple. The incident sparked protests, leading to the detention of over 150 people, including members of the Dargah committee. [The Express Tribune]

India: Government cuts target for fast-track sex crime courts as states fall short

(lm) The Indian government has significantly reduced its target for establishing fast-track special courts (FTSCs) to address sex crimes due to insufficient state participation and a shortage of judges. Initially, the government aimed to create 2,600 FTSCs by 2026 but has now cut this target to 790.

The FTSC initiative began in 2019 after criticism from the Supreme Court regarding the slow justice delivery in states like West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh. Although the federal government was prepared to fund 60

percent of the costs to incentivize states, only 752 FTSCs have been established as of August 2024, with some opposition-led states lagging in implementation.

The slow rollout has been attributed to a lack of judges and, in West Bengal's case, only six of the 123 planned FTSCs are operational despite a backlog of approximately 48,600 sexual offense cases. Some states, particularly those governed by opposition parties, have been notably slower to establish these courts. In contrast, states led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party have met their targets.

Experts have noted the importance of FTSCs in expediting the trial of sensitive cases involving vulnerable victims, but they have emphasized the need for the entire judicial process, including appeals, to be expedited. With a substantial backlog of cases in India's courts, the initiative is seen as crucial for improving the judicial system's efficiency. [Reuters]

India: Police detains 600 workers, union members as Samsung protests escalate

(lm) Indian police detained around 600 workers and union members protesting at Samsung Electronics' home appliances plant in Tamil Nadu. The protests, which began on September 9, have disrupted operations at the factory near the state's capital, Chennai. Workers are demanding higher wages and union recognition, which the plant has yet to grant.

The protest, involving over 1,000 workers, has cast a shadow over Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "Make in India" initiative. Workers are currently earning an average monthly salary of INR 25,000 (USD 300) and are demanding a raise to INR 36,000 (USD 432) within three years. Samsung previously stated that their wages are almost double that of similar workers in the region, and warned that striking workers risk losing their jobs. [Reuters]

India: Investigation into EY employee's death reveals office operated without labor welfare permit

(cr) The EY office in Pune, India, is facing scrutiny following the death of a 26-year-old audit executive whose mother claimed excessive work stress contributed to her death. Investigations revealed the

office has been operating without a mandatory labor welfare permit since 2007, which regulates work hours. The Maharashtra labor commissioner noted that EY's application for the necessary registration was only submitted in February 2024 and subsequently rejected.

It is mandatory for businesses to register under the state's Shops and Establishments Act, which limits adult working hours to a maximum of nine per day and 48 per week. Failure to comply with the law, resulting in serious injury or death, could lead to imprisonment for up to six months or a fine of up to INR 500,000 (USD 5,979), or both. [Reuters]

India: 46 people drown during Hindu festival in Bihar state

(cr) At least 46 people, including 37 children, drowned in Bihar, India, while celebrating the Jitiya Parv Hindu festival, which is dedicated to the well-being of children. The tragic incidents occurred between September 24 and 26, as devotees disregarded dangerous water levels in rivers and ponds that had swollen due to recent flooding.

This year's fatalities follow a similar incident in 2023, during which 22 people drowned while observing the same festival. Such deadly occurrences during major religious festivals are not uncommon in India; for example, at least 116 individuals died in a crush during a religious gathering in Uttar Pradesh in July. [CNA] [The Straits Times]

India: Ladakhi protesters detained at Delhi border

(lm) A group of men and women from India's northern Ladakh union territory, which constitutes an eastern portion of the larger Kashmir region, were stopped and detained by police while marching to Delhi to demand constitutional safeguards for the region. The protest, known as the "Delhi Chalo Padayatra," began on September 1 in Leh and aimed to culminate at Rajghat on October 2.

The protesters' demands include statehood for Ladakh, inclusion under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution for the protection of tribal areas, job reservations for locals, and representation in Parliament. This movement follows the revocation of

Jammu and Kashmir's special status in August 2019, which divided the region into two union territories—Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh—without an assembly for Ladakh.

Prior to the march, the Delhi Police imposed restrictions on gatherings in response to the "sensitive atmosphere" in the capital, citing various political issues and events, including the upcoming birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi. [The Hindu]

India: 7-year-old boy killed in alleged ritual sacrifice

(cr) In India, five individuals have been arrested in connection with the ritual killing of a seven-year-old boy, who was allegedly sacrificed to bring good fortune to a public school. The boy was found dead in his bed on the night of September 22 at a hostel near the Taj Mahal.

Ritual killings in India are often linked to beliefs in witchcraft, particularly in tribal and remote areas, where such practices are more prevalent. According to India's National Crime Records Bureau, there were 103 reported cases of human sacrifice in the country between 2014 and 2021. [The Straits Times]

India: Factory growth cooled to eight-month low in September

(lm) India's manufacturing sector growth slowed to an eight-month low in September, as indicated by the HSBC India Manufacturing Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI), which dropped to 56.5 from 57.5 in August. Despite remaining above the 50-mark, signifying growth, the pace has weakened since June, impacting the overall economic expansion rate.

New orders grew at the slowest pace since December, and export growth hit its lowest in 18 months, affecting business optimism and reducing employment generation to a six-month low. Although input costs rose, inflation in prices charged eased, suggesting manufacturers were unable to pass on all rising costs to customers.

The Reserve Bank of India is expected to keep interest rates on hold in October before potentially cutting rates in December. [Reuters]

India: Prime Minister Modi holds semiconductor talks, launches supercomputers

(cr) On September 26, Prime Minister Narendra Modi met with the leadership team of Tata Sons and PSMC to discuss semiconductor manufacturing projects in India. PSMC expressed interest in expanding its footprint in the country.

During the meeting, Modi also dedicated three PARAM Rudra Supercomputers, developed under the National Supercomputing Mission, to the nation. These supercomputers, located in Pune, Delhi, and Kolkata, are intended to bolster advanced scientific research in areas such as physics, cosmology, and earth sciences. Additionally, he inaugurated a High-Performance Computing (HPC) system tailored for weather and climate research. [India.com]

These developments are part of India's broader strategy to achieve technological self-reliance and advance scientific capabilities. In his address, Modi emphasized the significance of the semiconductor industry in enhancing India's global supply chain positioning and reiterated the nation's ambition to lead in cutting-edge technologies like quantum computing, AI, and space exploration. [PM India]

India: Cloudflare denies hosting websites linked to Star Health data breach

(cr) US software firm Cloudflare has denied hosting websites linked to a hacker who was selling stolen personal data and medical records of customers from Indian insurer Star Health. Cloudflare clarified that it only provides a pass-through service between a website host and users, and is not responsible for hosting the domains in question. The denial follows a lawsuit filed by Star Health, which also targets the hacker (xenZen) and Telegram.

The breach involved sensitive customer data being exposed via Telegram chatbots, which have since been taken down along with the related websites. Star Health obtained a court injunction to block these platforms from making the data accessible in India. Telegram responded by removing any bots that were sharing the stolen information. Despite these concerns, Star Health stated that there was "no widespread compromise" of sensitive customer data. [Business Standard]

India: Investigation launched into fire at Tata Electronics plant supplying *Apple*

(cr) Indian authorities are initiating a forensic investigation into a fire that erupted at a Tata Electronics factory in Hosur, Tamil Nadu, which manufactures components for Apple iPhones. The fire, which occurred in a chemical storage area on September 28, has been extinguished, and the affected factory, which was closed for a weekly holiday, is unlikely to resume production immediately. [Reuters]

India: Long-range rockets, futuristic ammunition on Army wish list

(lm) The Indian Army is focusing on extending the range of its indigenous Pinaka Multi-Barrel Rocket Launch (MRLS) system, alongside the development of advanced artillery and ammunition, taking lessons from the ongoing Ukraine war and Israel's operations in Gaza. Lt. Gen. Adosh Kumar, Director General of the Regiment of Artillery, highlighted that efforts are underway to double and eventually quadruple the range of Pinaka rockets. The Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) is confident in achieving this, and trials for guided extended-range rockets, which enhance both precision and range, are ongoing.

In addition to Pinaka, India is working on integrating other long-range strike options such as the Pralay tactical ballistic missile (400 km range) and the Nirbhay sub-sonic cruise missile (1000 km range). The Army is also developing new ammunition types, including High Explosive Pre-Fragmented rockets and Area Denial Munition systems, which serve anti-tank and anti-personnel functions.

Recognizing the importance of resilient supply chains, especially in light of shell shortages in Ukraine, the Army is expanding its vendor base for 155mm artillery shells, inviting both private and public sector participation. The Army has four Pinaka regiments, with six more on order, and aims to rely increasingly on indigenous systems like Pinaka, while also operating other Russian-origin MRLS, such as Grad and Smerch. The Army's long-range strike capabilities include the BrahMos supersonic cruise missile, with an extended range of over 400 km. [The Hindu]

India: BrahMos Aerospace notifies reservation for Agniveers

(lm) BrahMos Aerospace Private Limited has announced a reservation policy for Agniveers, individuals trained under the contentious Agnipath scheme, marking one of the few confirmed notifications by a company to absorb them. The company committed to reserving at least 15 percent of technical and general administration vacancies for Agniveers across its work centers, as well as 50 percent of vacancies in outsourced security and administrative functions.

The Agnipath scheme, launched by the Indian government in 2022, is a military recruitment initiative aimed at inducting young individuals, called Agniveers, into the armed forces for a short-term service period of four years. This program is designed to bring down the average age of the military and create a leaner, more agile force. After completing their tenure, 25 percent of Agniveers may be offered a permanent role, while the rest will be discharged with a financial package and certain benefits to help them transition into civilian life.

BrahMos Aerospace, anticipating expansion due to new defense orders and growing international business, sees the Agnipath scheme as a step to meet increasing manpower needs. The policy also extends to third-party contract staffing and encourages industry partners to hire Agniveers for relevant roles in their establishments. [The Hindu]

Maldives: PNC postpones internal elections to November

(lm) The People's National Congress (PNC), the ruling party in the Maldives, has postponed its internal elections to November 9, having originally scheduled them for October 19. The party announced that the deadline for submitting applications has been extended to October 25 to encourage greater participation. The elections will determine the Presidents and Vice Presidents of constituencies, Presidents of the Youth Movement and Women's Movement on the islands, and Steering Committee members. [the edition]

Maldives: Anti-Corruption Commission begins probe into PSM fund

misappropriation case

(lm) The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) has launched an investigation into the misappropriation of MVR 9 million (approximately USD 585,000) from Public Service Media (PSM). This investigation was prompted by a request from PSM regarding suspicious dollar exchange transactions that occurred last July.

A preliminary investigation revealed concerning issues, leading to further inquiries. An audit report from the Auditor General's Office indicated that MVR 190,000 (approximately USD 12,000) was missing from PSM's safe, along with MVR 4.9 million (approximately USD 317,000) that had gone missing between 2017 and April 2024. The report also noted that these funds had been deposited into the accounts of Ahmed Haneef, the then Finance Director at PSM, and his child.

Haneef was suspended in April and dismissed in May. The audit detailed that between 2020 and April 2024, MVR 5.8 million (approximately USD 375,000) was withdrawn from PSM's bank account to purchase USD 373,988, but only USD 76,731 was actually received. There are no records showing that the remaining USD 297,257 was ever obtained by PSM.

Additionally, the report highlighted an online transaction for purchasing dollars where MVR 1.3 million (approximately USD 84,000) was needed to buy USD 75,491. However, MVR 1.2 million (approximately USD 77,000) was deposited into the account of Haneef's child through multiple transactions. Haneef was the sole signatory on payment vouchers totaling MVR 405,122 (approximately USD 26,000) for these dollar transactions, and one transaction of MVR 30,000 (approximately USD 1,950) was found to lack any signatures.[the edition 1] [the edition 2]

Maldives: Deputy Minister Jaleel accused of forgery

(lm) Deputy Minister of Islamic Affairs Abdul Jaleel Ismail is under investigation for allegedly forging the businesses of Hashim Mohamed, who passed away in January 2022. Reports suggest that Jaleel has become the sole shareholder of Hashim's extensive ventures, which he has been managing since Hashim's death. Hashim's family accuses Jaleel of collaborating with a Bangladeshi individual to transfer the businesses to his name, reportedly forging the signature of Hashim's son in the process. [the edition]

Maldives: USD 18.3 million worth of illicit drugs seized this year

(lm) Between January and August 2024, police in the Maldives seized 150 kg of illicit drugs worth MVR 282 million (approximately USD 18.3 million) in various operations. A total of 8,554 locations were inspected during 113 drug-related operations, resulting in the arrest of 712 individuals. In addition to the drugs, 5,252 bottles of alcohol were confiscated, contributing to a combined street value of MVR 282.3 million (approximately USD 18.3 million).

The Gang Crime Enforcement unit reported that 12,253 individuals were questioned in connection with drug-related cases, including 2,583 adults and 2,014 instances involving minors, with some minors questioned multiple times, totaling 331 instances. Additionally, 173 vehicles were inspected and 87,775 searches were conducted at various locations, leading to 67 arrests. Furthermore, 22 cases related to gang crimes have been submitted, with 8 of those forwarded to the Prosecutor General's Office.

Currently, 22 of the 67 arrested individuals are in police custody, with 15 in remand jail and 30 released. [the edition]

Maldives: Fisheries Ministry team obstructed by Dhevvadhoo fishermen

(lm) Fishermen on Dhevvadhoo island obstructed a team from the Fisheries Ministry that visited to provide information about loans for installing reverse osmosis (RO) plants on fishing vessels to keep fish fresh. The local fishermen expressed their dissatisfaction, particularly regarding delays in payments owed to them, forcing the ministry team to leave the island.

The team, which included members from the Islamic Development Fund Bank, is traveling to various islands to share information about the loan. They faced similar obstruction during a prior visit to Dhaandhoo island. While Shafiu noted that the loan would not resolve all financial issues, it would allow around 100 boat owners to store their catch economically.

Despite President Muizzu's pledge to pay fishermen within 48 hours of their catch, the new administration has encountered challenges due to substantial outstanding payments. However, the government has issued a significant portion of these payments, with MIFCO depositing over MVR 862 million (approximately

USD 55.9 million) to fishermen since November 2023. [the edition]

Maldives: Government secures USD 200 million in loans for development projects this year

(sa) As of September 2024, the Maldives government has taken out loans totaling USD 200 million (MVR 3 billion) this year. According to statistics from the Ministry of Finance, the loans include USD 150 million from the Saudi Fund for Development to expedite the Velana International Airport project, as well as two loans from the Islamic Development Bank amounting to USD 10.25 million and USD 30 million for the SME Impact Fund. Additionally, a USD 10 million loan was secured from the Kuwait Fund for the development of hospitals on the islands.

The government has also provided guarantees for two loans of USD 15 million (MVR 230 million) issued by the Bank of Ceylon to the Maldives Fund Management Corporation (MFMC) for the submarine cable project. All loans taken this year are intended for development projects, with disbursements made in parts based on project progress.

The previous government had taken loans and guarantees amounting to USD 3.5 billion (MVR 54 billion), with USD 1.4 billion (MVR 22 billion) sourced from India's EXIM Bank. This year's state budget forecasts the national debt to reach MVR 129 billion (approximately USD 8.4 billion). [the edition]

Maldives: Tourism Minister unveils plans to attract 4 million tourists, revise diving rules

(sa/lm) The Maldives' Tourism Minister Ibrahim Faisal has announced ambitious plans to boost the country's tourism sector and amend outdated diving regulations. Speaking at the Fuvahmulah Tourism Awards 2024, he revealed that the current diving regulations, in place since 1991, pose significant challenges for local divers, particularly the requirement for a 24-hour waiting period for air travel after diving. In contrast, other countries allow air travel after just 18 hours.

In addition to revising diving regulations, Faisal emphasized the government's commitment to attracting between 3.5 and 4 million tourists annually

by the end of the current presidential term under President Muizzu. To support this goal, he highlighted the importance of making the new terminal at Velana International Airport (VIA) operational, scheduled to open in December. This new facility will enhance the airport's capacity to serve seven million tourists, positively impacting visitor numbers in the coming year.

Faisal also outlined efforts to establish a special department to enhance local tourism services and increase focus on the islands. He acknowledged ongoing challenges in expanding tourism, particularly difficulties in securing low-interest loans from banks, and is currently in discussions with Bank of Maldives, Maldives Islamic Bank, and foreign partners to facilitate this funding, expected to be available by early next year.

The Minister indicated plans to ramp up marketing efforts following the new terminal's opening to increase hotel occupancy and boost tourist spending. Currently, tourism generates approximately USD 4.5 billion annually for the Maldives, with the government aiming to raise this figure to USD 6 billion. However, a recent World Bank report noted a slowdown in tourism growth in 2023 due to shorter stays and lower spending by visitors. [the edition 1] [the edition 2]

Maldives: Fenaka Corporation reports significant cost reductions under new administration

(sa) Fenaka Corporation's Managing Director, Mohamed Muaz Rasheed, announced a remarkable 60% decrease in expenditures over the past eight months since the new administration took office. During a recent press conference, he highlighted substantial cuts in CSR and transportation costs.

This year, MVR 174,000 (approximately USD 11,260) has been allocated for CSR, a dramatic drop from MVR 9.4 million (about USD 610,000) last year—reflecting a 98% reduction. Transportation expenses have also fallen by 84% due to the acquisition of a dedicated boat, which replaced the previous practice of renting multiple vessels for each trip.

Historically, Fenaka has averaged MVR 85 million (around USD 5.5 million) in annual expenses; however, costs have declined to MVR 74 million (approximately USD 4.8 million) in 2023. Despite ongoing high transport costs associated with servicing 150 islands, the new leasing strategy has resulted in substantial

savings. Additionally, international travel costs have been reduced by 70%, with allowances and overtime decreased by 22%, totaling MVR 42 million (about USD 2.7 million) this year compared to MVR 54 million (around USD 3.5 million) last year. Petty cash spending for the Managing Director's trips has seen a remarkable 96% reduction. [the edition]

Maldives: Defence Minister announces satellite monitoring for ocean territory

(sa) Minister of Defence Mohamed Ghassan Maumoon has announced ongoing efforts to monitor the Maldives' ocean territory using satellites. Speaking on state TV, he highlighted that significant international crimes occur in the Maldives' seas, which are critical to global trade routes. To address this, the President aims to independently uphold the security of the Maldives' oceans.

Ghassan explained that a system for satellite monitoring will be established in collaboration with the Maldives Space Research Organization (MSRO), which has ties to NASA. Previously, the Maldives relied on a helicopter gifted by India for monitoring, and more recently, three military drones acquired from Turkey have enhanced surveillance capabilities.

The Minister emphasized that these initiatives are part of a broader strategy to ensure that the Maldives fulfills its international responsibilities regarding ocean security. [the edition]

Nepal: More than 200 dead as floods leave parts of Kathmandu submerged

(rs/lm) Over the weekend, Nepal experienced devastating flash floods caused by the heaviest monsoon rains in two decades, claiming over 200 lives and submerging parts of Kathmandu and surrounding valleys. As of September 30, authorities reported 204 deaths, with at least 30 people still missing and hundreds injured. The Nepalese army rescued over 4,000 individuals using helicopters, motorboats, and rafts, while search teams continue to dig through mud and rubble for the missing.

Pokhara, a popular tourist destination, was severely affected as well, leaving thousands displaced without access to power or drinking water. Major routes out of

Kathmandu remain blocked, and schools are closed for three days due to extensive damage.

Floods and landslides damaged 11 operational hydropower projects with a combined capacity of 625.96 megawatts (MW), resulting in an estimated loss of NPR 2.45 billion (USD 18.5 million), according to the Ministry of Energy. Energy Minister Deepak Khadka also reported the shutdown of power plants with a total capacity of 1,100 MW. In addition, 15 under-construction hydropower projects with a capacity of 1,010.29 MW have been affected. Damages to river control and irrigation systems are estimated at NPR 1.35 billion (USD 10.2 million). [The Kathmandu Post 1]

The floods have raised concerns about outbreaks of water-borne, vector-borne, and air-borne diseases. Health experts warned of an increased risk of infections such as cholera, diarrhea, dengue, and viral fevers due to contaminated water sources and displaced populations living in temporary shelters. Over 95 cholera cases and thousands of diarrheal infections have already been reported since June, while dengue has affected nearly all districts, with 12,644 people hospitalized and six deaths recorded. [The Kathmandu Post 2]

Experts attribute this disaster to the ongoing climate crisis, which has increased the intensity and unpredictability of rainfall in South Asia. Despite the monsoon season coming to an end, unusual weather patterns led to this record rainfall. Over 300 people have died in Nepal this year due to rain-related incidents, and experts predict that severe flooding events will become more frequent in the coming years. [The Guardian]

Nepal: Confusion surrounds constitutional amendments

(rs) The Nepali government, led by the Nepali Congress and the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) (Unified Marxist–Leninist) (CPN-UML), has identified constitutional amendment as a key priority within their seven-point agreement. However, both ruling parties struggle with how to move forward, including deciding which constitutional provisions to amend.

Notably, this indecision has also left the opposition uncertain. Pushpa Kamal Dahal, chair of the main opposition CPN (Maoist Centre), noted that the constitution hasn't been fully implemented yet and that a review should only come after analyzing its current successes and failures. He expressed concerns

that amendments could open up instability or even conflict, describing it as a "Pandora's Box" if not approached carefully. Nonetheless, Dahal did not oppose amendments entirely, suggesting the need for a thorough review of government structure, electoral systems, and proportional representation.

Other opposition leaders, such as Santosh Pariyar from the Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP), criticized the ruling coalition for allegedly attempting to remove the proportional election system from the constitution, which he argued would be detrimental to marginalized groups. He also objected to proposed changes to make the House of Representatives directly elected while keeping the National Assembly under proportional representation, suggesting such an approach would exclude women and marginalized communities from representation.

Meanwhile, Rabindra Mishra, vice chair of the Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP), expressed skepticism regarding the effectiveness of amendments, suggesting that addressing the constitution piece by piece without a holistic approach would not lead to meaningful change. He compared it to trying to fix a completely torn coat with superficial patches. [Khabarhub]

Nepal: Nepali Congress launches 100-day campaign to rejuvenate party

(lm) The Nepali Congress, the single-largest party in Parliament's lower house and a key-member of the ruling coalition, has launched a "100-day campaign" aimed at rejuvenating its party committees, fostering connections between central and local leaders, and addressing internal dissent. Running from September 23 to December 31, the campaign involves central leaders visiting districts to engage with party members.

The campaign's goals include renewing party membership and informing members about a recent power-sharing agreement with the party's main coalition partner, the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist) (CPN-UML), under which CPN-UML leader KP Sharma Oli will hand over government leadership to Nepali Congress President Sher Bahadur Deuba after two years. Additionally, the campaign aims to prepare for the next general convention, slated for late 2025. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Opposition Maoist Centre aims to redefine vision, strengthen socialist agenda

(lm) The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre), having lost its hold on the government for the first time in nine years, is attempting to redefine its agenda and vision of socialism. After a series of consultative meetings across Nepal's provinces and its foreign branches, party leaders emphasized the need for a clearer ideological direction. The discussions centered on updating the party's organizational structure, changing leadership behavior, and reaffirming commitment to its ideology, currently described as the "people's democracy of the 21st century." However, leaders admit that the party lacks a distinct ideology compared to other major political groups in Nepal.

Internal tensions were evident during an August standing committee meeting, where some leaders, including Janardan Sharma, called for Pushpa Kamal Dahal to pass leadership to a new generation. Nevertheless, no formal leadership change has been proposed.

The party is also exploring collaboration with other socialist parties but ruled out an alliance with the Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP), although cooperation in Parliament on certain issues remains possible. The consultative meetings concluded that the party should consider unification with other left-leaning groups to strengthen the communist movement in Nepal. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Judicial Council picks two justices ignoring lawyers' protest

(lm) The Judicial Council of Nepal has recommended two high court chief judges, Nripa Dhwaj Niraula and Nityananda Pandey, as Supreme Court justices, despite ongoing protests by the Nepal Bar Association (NBA). The NBA claims the appointments involve corruption and has criticized the council for making the recommendations in exchange for financial gain. The appointments must undergo parliamentary hearings before finalization.

The council, led by Chief Justice Bishowambhar Prasad Shrestha, made the decision just before Shrestha's retirement, although the Supreme Court needs six justices to fill vacant positions. The NBA has been protesting since the council amended regulations last year that revised the rankings of judges, arguing the

changes are unconstitutional and discriminatory. Despite a committee being formed to resolve the dispute, no agreement was reached, and the protests resumed. [The Kathmandu Post 1] [The Kathmandu Post 2]

Nepal: Rastriya Swatantra Party resists arrest of leader Rabi Lamichhane amid embezzlement allegations

(lm) The Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP), Nepal's fourth-largest party, is resisting government attempts to arrest its chair, Rabi Lamichhane, over allegations of embezzling cooperative funds. While the RSP claims Lamichhane has received a "clean chit" from a parliamentary special probe, the six other national parties in Parliament support his prosecution, citing the findings of the probe committee. These parties include the ruling coalition members—Nepali Congress, the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) (Unified Marxist–Leninist) (CPN-UML), and Janata Samajbadi Party (JSP), as well as opposition parties like CPN (Maoist Centre), Rastriya Prajatantra Party, and JSP-Nepal.

The parliamentary probe found Lamichhane used funds from cooperatives to finance the Gorkha Media Network, which operated the now-defunct Galaxy 4k Television channel. The committee recommended prosecuting Lamichhane along with his business partner GB Rai and others linked to the cooperative fraud. Despite the findings, RSP leaders maintain their party chief was not directly implicated in misusing cooperative funds. [The Kathmandu Post 1]

Meanwhile, the attorney's office has directed further investigation into funds transferred to the Gorkha Media Network, with transactions totaling NPR 470 million (approximately USD 3.52 million).

In a related case, Gitendra Babu (GB) Rai, along with 16 others, is facing charges for allegedly embezzling savings from Sahara Chitwan Multipurpose Cooperative, cooperative linked to the now-defunct media company. The District Attorney's Office in Chitwan has filed a case following complaints from 446 depositors who claim that their savings totaling NPR 376.58 million (USD 2.82 million) were not returned by the cooperative. [The Kathmandu Post 2]

In another development, Dev Kumar Nepali, mayor of Dhorpatan Municipality, has been arrested in New Delhi, India, on charges of embezzling NPR 1.5 billion (USD 11.25 million) from the Image Cooperative, which

he founded. The cooperative had over 1,500 depositors, whose savings were allegedly misused. Although other officials involved in the scam have faced legal action, Nepali managed to evade arrest until recently. Following an Interpol red notice issued in January, he was apprehended by Nepal Police and is currently being repatriated to Nepal. [The Kathmandu Post 3]

Nepal: Parliamentary hearing committee rejects ambassador nominee Bhattarai

(lm) The Parliamentary Hearing Committee of Nepal's Parliament rejected Ram Krishna Bhattarai's nomination as ambassador to Sri Lanka by a two-thirds majority. Bhattarai, one of 17 nominees, failed to provide the required undergraduate degree certificate and had requested to withdraw from the nomination process.

The committee endorsed 16 other nominees but raised concerns about the lack of proportional and inclusive representation among the nominees, particularly from marginalized communities like Dalits, Madhesis, and Tharus. The committee called on the government to ensure nominations adhere to constitutional guidelines on representation and to submit all necessary qualifications during the nomination process. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Continued refusal to issue verdict on Agni Sapkota case raises eyebrows

(lm) The Supreme Court of Nepal has repeatedly postponed a verdict on a writ petition demanding an investigation into a murder case involving opposition Maoist Centre leader Agni Sapkota, raising concerns among legal experts. The petition, filed by the wife of the victim, Arjun Bahadur Lama, alleges that Lama was abducted and killed by Maoist combatants in 2005, during Nepal's civil war, with Sapkota implicated in the crime.

Despite numerous hearing dates being scheduled, the court has yet to deliver a final verdict, citing the need for additional documents from a District Police Office. This delay has persisted through the tenure of multiple chief justices, with seven retiring since the case began. With upcoming retirements of key justices, the hearing process will have to restart, further delaying justice.

Critics claim that the verdict has been deliberately deferred due to Sapkota's political influence. Sapkota has held significant political positions, including ministerial roles and Speaker of Parliament, since the case was filed. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Probe panels find irregularities in Bhairahawa, Pokhara airports

(lm) Two sub-committees under Nepal's Public Accounts Committee (PAC) have identified financial irregularities in the construction of the Gautam Buddha International Airport in Bhairahawa and the Pokhara Regional International Airport. Both projects, built as initiatives of national pride, failed to attract regular international flights.

The investigations revealed inflated land acquisition costs and the absence of a feasibility study for Gautam Buddha Airport. Despite initial project deadlines, construction was significantly delayed for both airports, and costs increased substantially, with Gautam Buddha Airport costing USD 76.1 million (NPR 10.15 billion) and Pokhara Airport rising from NPR 22 billion (USD 165 million) to NPR 25.34 billion (USD 190 million). The Chinese-funded Pokhara project faced scrutiny, with documents seized by the Commission for the Investigation of Abuse of Authority (CIAA).

PAC plans to authenticate and forward the reports for action, with the anti-graft watchdog already investigating the matter. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Thirty percent of prisoners in Birgunj jailed for drug-related offences

(lm) In Birgunj prison, 30 percent of inmates—512 out of 1,412—are serving sentences for drug-related offences. This is the highest category of crime among the prison population, followed by homicide, rape, and theft.

The Birgunj region, near the India-Nepal border, is a major hub for drug smuggling due to its status as a transit route and the proximity to Raxaul, India, where many drugs that are illegal in Nepal are openly sold. Despite strict measures by security agencies, drug smuggling and addiction remain prevalent, especially among young adults aged 18 to 24.

Drug offenders from neighboring Bara district are also imprisoned in Birgunj, contributing to the high number

of inmates. The ongoing availability of controlled substances in nearby Raxaul and cannabis smuggling from neighboring areas further exacerbate the problem. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: 22 years and 33 panels later, Shuklaphanta displaced families still in limbo

(lm) The rehabilitation of hundreds of families displaced during the expansion of the Shuklaphanta Wildlife Reserve in Nepal, now a national park, remains uncertain even after 22 years and the formation of 33 different commissions and committees. The latest attempt, a judicial commission formed on September 18, has done little to raise the hopes of the displaced people, who have faced prolonged neglect from the government.

Many of the displaced families have been living in temporary camps in Kanchanpur district, enduring unsafe conditions and struggling with human-wildlife conflicts. The close proximity between human settlements and the national park has led to increased human-wildlife conflicts, adversely affecting both the displaced communities and wildlife conservation efforts in the region. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: BOP surplus at USD 305.1 million in first month of FY 24/25

(lm) In the first month of the fiscal year 2024/2025, Nepal's balance of payments (BOP) showed a surplus of NPR 40.90 billion (approximately USD 305.1 million), compared to NPR 36.43 billion (USD 276.3 million) in the same period last year, according to the Nepal Rastra Bank (NRB). The current account also recorded a surplus of NPR 30.89 billion (USD 230.2 million), up from NPR 13.37 billion (USD 99.7 million) during the same period last year. Foreign direct investment (FDI) inflow amounted to NPR 799.8 million (USD 5.96 million).

Merchandise exports decreased by 9.6 percent to NPR 12.23 billion (USD 91.2 million), while imports slightly decreased by 0.6 percent to NPR 128.38 billion (USD 957.8 million). The country's trade deficit increased by 0.4 percent to NPR 116.15 billion (USD 866.6 million), and the export-import ratio dropped to 9.5 percent from 10.5 percent in the previous year. [Nepal News]

Nepal: Experts warn 5 percent growth target ambitious amid declining capital formation, weak investment

(iz) Nepal's economic growth target of even 5 percent appears overly ambitious due to several challenges, including declining capital formation and inadequate government measures.

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) have projected modest growth, citing improved agricultural yields, tourism, and energy exports, but Nara Bahadur Thapa, former executive director of Nepal Rastra Bank, remains skeptical. Capital formation has consistently declined since 2018, dropping from 33.8 percent to 24.5 percent of GDP, hindering growth prospects.

Additionally, government revenue collection has fallen, affecting its ability to fund essential projects, while private sector investment remains sluggish despite ample liquidity. Without significant reforms, achieving even moderate growth will be challenging. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Cholera resurfaces in districts declared open defecation-free years ago

(iz) Cholera outbreaks have re-emerged in several districts of Nepal that were declared open defecation-free (ODF) in 2019. Despite the ODF declaration, contaminated drinking water remains a major issue, contributing to over 100 cases of diarrheal infections in Rautahat's Rajpur Municipality and other districts, including Kathmandu and Lalitpur.

Public health experts attribute these outbreaks to inadequate improvements in water quality and sanitation infrastructure. Though many households have toilets, open defecation persists, and water contamination with fecal coliform remains prevalent. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Construction of bridge in Rukum West completes after 8 years

(rs) The construction of the Garaghat Bridge, spanning 80 meters over the Sani Bheri River in Rukum West, has been completed after an eight-year delay, despite

an initial three-year timeline. The project, worth NPR 96 million (approximately USD 720,000), faced delays due to design changes and logistical challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic. [Nepal News]

Pakistan: JUI-F to draft constitutional amendments on behalf of opposition

(ja/lm) In what is increasingly becoming a political crisis for Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's coalition, the key coalition partner Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI-F) has maintained its opposition to the government's constitutional amendment package and announced that it would draft its own version of constitutional amendments, alongside the main opposition party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), led by jailed Prime Minister Imran Khan. [The Express Tribune 1] [Business Recorder]

The proposed amendment package, introduced by the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N)-led ruling coalition, contains 52 unpublished amendments, including significant changes such as establishing a federal constitutional court, increasing the number of Supreme Court judges, setting a fixed term for the Chief Justice, and raising the retirement age for superior judges. These amendments failed to pass earlier in September as the ruling coalition fell eight votes short of the necessary two-thirds majority

The JUI-F's endorsement is crucial for the government to proceed with these reforms, given its position as a key coalition partner. Despite multiple meetings between Maulana Fazlur Rehman and other political figures, including Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) Chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari, Rehman remained reluctant to support the amendments. While he expressed support for the idea of a constitutional court, he demanded that certain terms and conditions be set for the appointment of judges. [DAWN 1] [The Express Tribune 2]

On September 30, after his re-election as JUI-F chief, Fazlur Rehman reiterated that his party would not support amendments that could be perceived as favoring the incumbent Chief Justice Qazi Faez Isa. This stance is partly due to a previous controversy involving Justice Isa's ruling in the Mubarak Sani case, which Rehman criticized as having "deliberately" hurt religious sentiments. Though the decision was reversed following public backlash, it left a lasting negative impression on Rehman and his party regarding Justice Isa's impartiality. [DAWN 2]

In addition to JUI-F's resistance, a group of Pakistani lawyers, including members of the Pakistan Bar Council (PBC), has opposed the constitutional amendment package, particularly the establishment of a federal constitutional court. The lawyers argue that the proposed changes threaten judicial independence by shifting constitutional interpretation away from the Supreme Court to a new federal court, and they criticized the lack of transparency in the legislative process. They are concerned that the government could gain undue influence over judicial matters through these amendments. [JURIST]

The ruling coalition, undeterred by previous setbacks, is planning to reconvene the National Assembly and Senate on October 7 to make another attempt at passing the proposed amendments. They are working to persuade JUI-F to change its stance, though the outcome of a review petition on Article 63-A of the Constitution before the Supreme Court could impact their strategy. Article 63-A relates to the voting process for dissenting members and played a significant role in the dismissal of the Hamza Shehbaz-led government in Punjab in 2022. The government is now seeking modifications to this article to address issues regarding dissenting votes, but their efforts have so far been stymied by JUI-F's refusal to support the package. [The Express Tribune 2]

Pakistan: Election Commission files Supreme Court review petition on reserved seats verdict

(ja) The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) has filed a review petition in the Supreme Court, seeking clarification on implementing the top court's ruling regarding the allocation of reserved seats for the main opposition party, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), led by jailed ex-Prime Minister Imran Khan. Despite the Supreme Court's detailed verdict on September 23 affirming PTI’s eligibility for over 20 reserved seats, the ECP remains uncertain about its implementation due to recent amendments to the Elections Act of 2017—an action that some legal experts see as a delaying tactic. [Dawn] [Arab News]

This uncertainty follows a long-standing legal battle after PTI lost its election symbol, leading the ECP to prevent PTI candidates from running as a political party in the February 8 national elections, forcing them to contest as independents instead. As a result, the ECP refused to allocate reserved seats, stating they were intended only for candidates from political parties, not independents. On July 12, the Supreme

Court overturned the ECP's decision, clarifying that the loss of an election symbol did not affect PTI's right to reserved seats.

However, the Sharif government subsequently amended election laws, further complicating PTI's claim to these seats. The amendment bars independent lawmakers from joining a political party after a stipulated period, making it harder for PTI candidates to reclaim their party affiliation.

The National Assembly Speaker and Punjab Assembly have also urged the ECP to follow the amended parliamentary law rather than the Supreme Court's ruling regarding the allocation of reserved seats.

Pakistan: Supreme Court sets aside Lahore High Court order on election tribunals

(lm) The Supreme Court of Pakistan set aside the Lahore High Court (LHC) order and a subsequent notification concerning the appointment of election tribunals to hear election-related disputes. The issue arose from a conflict over whether the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) or the LHC had authority in appointing these tribunals. This disagreement led the ECP to appeal to the Supreme Court after the LHC issued a June 2024 notification regarding tribunal appointments, which the ECP sought to overturn.

The Supreme Court emphasized the need for a cautious approach in disputes involving constitutional bodies, stressing that litigation should be a last resort. It noted that the matter had been resolved amicably after consultations between the Chief Justice of the LHC, Aalia Neelum, and the ECP. As such, the Supreme Court found that further legal action was unnecessary.

Justice Jamal Khan Mandokhail clarified that the ECP, as a constitutional body, cannot select judges from a panel for the tribunals; instead, it can only request one judge per tribunal. The final decision on tribunal appointments rests with the chief justice of the high court, who is in the best position to assess the suitability and availability of judges. [DAWN]

Pakistan: Court denies bail to Imran Khan, wife in Toshakhana case

(lm) A Pakistani court has denied bail to former Prime Minister Imran Khan and his wife, Bushra Bibi, in the Toshakhana 2.0 case. Filed by the National Accountability Bureau (NAB), this case alleges that the couple improperly acquired a jewelry set valued at PKR 70 million (USD 252,000) without reporting it to Toshakhana, the government repository for gifts received by officials. The decision was announced during a hearing at Adiala Jail, where Khan is currently incarcerated, on September 30.

Khan has been jailed since August 2023 following a conviction in a previous Toshakhana corruption case initiated by the Election Commission of Pakistan. The couple is set to be indicted on October 2. [Geo News] [The Express Tribune]

Pakistan: Court reserves verdict on future of Toshakhana vehicles case against Asif Zardari, Nawaz Sharif

(lm) The accountability court in Islamabad has reserved its verdict on whether to refer the Toshakhana case against President Asif Ali Zardari, former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, and Senate Chairman Yusuf Raza Gilani back to the National Accountability Bureau (NAB). The decision is expected to be announced on October 14.

The Toshakhana, meaning "treasure house," is a government department responsible for keeping gifts received by high-ranking government officials, including the president, prime minister, and ministers, during their official tenures. According to rules, such gifts are either kept in the Toshakhana or can be bought by the recipient after paying a specific percentage of the assessed value.

In this case, filed by the NAB in 2020, it is alleged that President Zardari received luxury cars from the governments of Libya and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and used them instead of submitting them to the Toshakhana as required. Similarly, Nawaz Sharif is accused of acquiring a luxury car in 2008 with assistance from then-Prime Minister Yusuf Raza Gilani, despite not holding any official position in the government at that time.

During the court hearing, President Zardari's lawyer argued that the accountability court lacks the authority to hear the case due to recent amendments in NAB laws, suggesting that it should be referred back to NAB. The NAB prosecutor concurred, noting that the case against Zardari could not proceed in the

accountability court because of the presidential immunity Zardari enjoys. The prosecutor also suggested referring Zardari's case to the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA).

For Nawaz Sharif, the NAB has taken a different stance. The anti-corruption body previously requested Nawaz's exoneration in this case, asserting that the vehicle in question was not part of the Toshakhana when it was acquired. [Geo News]

Pakistan: PTI announces new protest dates as Rawalpindi rallies end after clashes with police

(lm/mra) The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party, led by former Prime Minister Imran Khan, has announced new protest dates for October 2 in Multan, Mianwali, and Faisalabad following the end of demonstrations in Rawalpindi on September 28. The protests, which had been announced to call for Khan's release from prison, came to a halt after clashes with police, who had blocked key routes to prevent PTI supporters from gathering. [Arab News 1] [Geo News]

The PTI previously held rallies in Islamabad and Lahore to advocate for Khan's release, though these gatherings faced challenges such as delays, arrests of PTI members, and disruptions by authorities. Ahead of the planned rally in Rawalpindi, the Punjab government imposed Section 144 in the city, banning gatherings of more than four people for two days and prohibiting political assemblies and the carrying of weapons in Rawalpindi, Jhelum, Chakwal, and Attock. [Arab News 2] [DAWN]

The party claims that these difficulties are part of a larger crackdown following attacks on government and military installations by protesters allegedly linked to PTI after Khan's arrest in May 2023. Many PTI followers remain in jail, and some face trials in military courts.

Following the protest on September 28, Rawalpindi police registered three new terrorism cases against Imran Khan and PTI leader Barrister Gohar Khan, accusing them of inciting violence during the demonstrations in Rawalpindi. The cases also named Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Chief Minister Ali Amin Gandapur, a close aid of Khan's, for his active participation in the protests. [The Express Tribune]

Pakistan: Opposition PTI moves court against ordinance seen as curtailing senior judiciary's powers

(lm) The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) opposition party has moved the Supreme Court to challenge a new ordinance that it sees as an attempt by the government to curtail the powers of the senior judiciary. The ordinance, known as the Supreme Court (Practice and Procedure) Amendment Ordinance 2024, modifies the procedure for hearing Supreme Court cases, requiring that each case be decided by a bench comprising the Chief Justice of Pakistan, the next most senior judge, and a judge nominated by the Chief Justice.

PTI's petition, filed by its chairman Gohar Khan, seeks to have the ordinance declared "unconstitutional" and any decisions made by the newly formed Practice and Procedure Committee, which assigns judges to cases, declared "illegal" and "annulled." The party argues that the new ordinance violates the fundamental principles of judicial independence and separation of powers. The plea also calls for the suspension of the reconstituted Practice and Procedure Committee while the constitutional challenge remains pending.

Under the new ordinance, the structure of benches for Supreme Court cases is fixed, limiting the Chief Justice's authority to form benches independently. It also includes provisions affecting the court's power to initiate suo motu proceedings, which allow the judiciary to take up cases of public interest without a formal petition. Specifically, the ordinance requires that any bench exercising jurisdiction under Article 184(3) of the Constitution, which provides for public interest litigation, must issue a detailed order explaining the matter of public importance and the fundamental rights at stake.

The PTI petition asserts that this ordinance infringes on judicial independence, as it allows the executive branch to influence the composition of benches and the scheduling of cases. It argues that the ordinance could enable the government to manipulate the judicial process whenever it has a vested interest in a particular case. This interference, PTI says, is a "gross violation" of the separation of powers and undermines the judiciary's role as a check on government authority.

The new ordinance also stipulates that cases are to be heard in the order they were filed, unless there is a reasoned justification for prioritizing a particular case, and mandates that all hearings be recorded, with transcripts made publicly available. PTI views these

changes as a direct encroachment on the Supreme Court's operational autonomy, ultimately challenging the ability of the judiciary to function independently and deliver fair trials. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Islamabad court questions ‘legal standing’ of military’s media wing

(lm) The Islamabad High Court (IHC) has raised questions about the legal authority of the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), the media wing of Pakistan's military, regarding its control over who can appear on television as a defense analyst. This comes in response to a controversial 2019 notification by the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA), which instructed TV channels to obtain clearance from ISPR before inviting retired military officers to speak on national security matters. The ISPR subsequently released a list of 26 approved retired officers allowed to appear on TV as defense analysts.

Justice Babar Sattar, hearing the case, questioned why ISPR has assumed the "exclusive right" to determine who can be a defense analyst, and also why PEMRA issued such a notification in the first place, asking if there was a request from the army or ISPR. Justice Sattar asked PEMRA to present the original documents that led to the issuance of this directive. He also questioned whether PEMRA had the authority to regulate content in this manner, including pre-clearance by ISPR, and how such measures relate to the sovereignty or security of Pakistan. The PEMRA counsel requested more time to respond.

Justice Sattar's criticism is part of his ongoing concerns regarding military influence over the judiciary. Earlier this year, Justice Sattar and five other IHC judges accused the ISI of coercion and intimidation in politically significant cases, citing incidents such as abduction and harassment of their relatives and secret surveillance of their homes. This letter to the Supreme Judicial Council alleged that such actions were intended to influence judicial decisions.

The judiciary's concerns are not isolated; there is a history of allegations against the military for interference in political and judicial matters. In 2019, the Supreme Court criticized the military and intelligence agencies for exceeding their mandate, particularly in handling protests by a religious-political party in 2017. Both former Prime Ministers Imran Khan and Nawaz Sharif have alleged that they were removed from office due to falling out with the military. Despite the recurring allegations, the military has denied

interference in political and judicial affairs and has so far not commented on the latest accusations of intimidation. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Karachi police clash with protesters over Hezbollah leader's killing outside U.S. consulate

(lm) Pakistani Shiite protesters clashed with police in Karachi on September 29 during demonstrations against the killing of Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah in an Israeli airstrike in Beirut. Around 3,000 people, organized by the pro-Iran Shiite political party Majlis Wahadatul Muslimeen, gathered for the protest.

The demonstrators tried to breach police cordons to reach the U.S. consulate, leading to stone-throwing and a police response involving baton charges and tear gas. Seven police officers were injured. The protestors chanted anti-American slogans and carried posters of Nasrallah, whose death has been met with calls for revenge by Iran. Authorities said criminal cases would be registered against protesters who acted violently. [Reuters] [Associated Press]

Pakistan: Hundreds gather in Sindh province for rare protest against killing of doctor over ‘blasphemy’

(lm) The Sindh provincial government has accused police of staging a "fake encounter" to kill a doctor who was in custody after being accused of blasphemy. The provincial interior minister confirmed that the doctor's family could file murder charges against the responsible police officers, marking the first time the government has openly accused security forces of an extrajudicial killing of a blasphemy suspect.

The doctor had surrendered to authorities under assurances of a fair investigation but was killed shortly afterward, contradicting police claims of a shootout. Following his death, a mob took his body and burned it.

The government's statement follows a rare protest by hundreds of people in Sindh, who demanded a transparent judicial inquiry and the arrest of those responsible for the doctor's death. The Sindh government had previously suspended ten officers and filed a case against 34 suspects, though concerns about the impartiality of the investigation persisted.

This incident comes after another extrajudicial killing of a blasphemy suspect by police earlier this month in Quetta. Pakistan's controversial blasphemy laws have often incited mob violence, though police killings of suspects remain rare. [Arab News 1] [Arab News 2]

Pakistan: Finance minister announces plan to abolish ‘non-filer’ status with punitive actions

(lm) Pakistan's Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb announced plans to abolish the "non-filer" status, taking punitive actions against individuals who previously paid nominal taxes to avoid filing tax returns. This move is part of broader efforts to improve tax compliance and enforcement. The government aims to expand the tax net by including sectors such as agriculture, retail, and wholesale.

These reforms are aligned with the conditions of a USD 7 billion loan recently approved by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), intended to stabilize Pakistan's economy. Aurangzeb emphasized the need for structural reforms to avoid future IMF programs, acknowledging the strict conditions due to a trust deficit with the IMF. The IMF and World Bank have praised Pakistan's recent reforms but stress the importance of continuing these measures to ensure long-term economic stability. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Government delays PIA auction for third time as bidders seek more time

(lm) The Pakistan government has postponed the auction of Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) for the third time, without providing a new date, as potential bidders request more time and additional information. The auction, initially set for October 1, has faced repeated delays, partly due to the complexity of PIA's financial records and the need for clarity on the airline's assets and liabilities.

The privatization is part of the economic reforms tied to a USD 7 billion IMF bailout agreement, which requires Pakistan to make structural adjustments. PIA's cumulative losses have exceeded PKR 800 billion (USD 2.86 billion). The government plans to sell more than 51 percent of its stake in the airline, but challenges such as unresolved commercial bank loans and a lack of transparency in financial records have slowed progress. Experts suggest breaking PIA into smaller

parts for privatization to increase investor confidence. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Industry to spend USD 2 billion on cotton imports amid low production

(lm) Pakistan will spend over USD 2 billion on cotton imports this fiscal year due to an expected shortfall of around four million bales, largely caused by heatwaves and excessive rains.

Cotton is crucial for Pakistan's economy, contributing 60 percent to the country's exports and employing 15 million people, but this year's production is estimated to be only seven million bales, down from the target of eleven million. The country relies on imports from the United States, Afghanistan, and Uzbekistan to meet its needs.

Erratic weather, high temperatures, and pests have severely impacted the cotton crop, and many farmers are switching to other cash crops, like sesame and paddy, due to higher profitability. The government-run Central Cotton Research Institute is working on a new seed variety, CYTO547, that can withstand temperatures above 48 degrees Celsius, though it is still in the trial phase. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Government to set up central body to promote tourism

(lm) The Pakistan government plans to establish a "central body" to promote tourism and enhance coordination among provinces, as announced by Planning Minister Ahsan Iqbal Chaudhary during the inaugural National Tourism Awards of Excellence in Islamabad on World Tourism Day.

The tourism sector contributes 5.8 percent to Pakistan's GDP and employs over 4.7 million people. [Arab News]

Pakistan: USD 50 million project launched to upgrade weather system with 300 new stations

(lm) Pakistan has launched a USD 50 million project in partnership with the World Bank to upgrade its weather forecasting system by installing 300 new

automated weather stations and five advanced radars. The three-year project aims to improve weather prediction accuracy and integrate radar, satellite, and observational data using high-performance computing.

Currently, Pakistan relies on 100 manual weather stations, which limits forecast accuracy. The new weather stations will be distributed across various provinces, including Balochistan, Punjab, Sindh, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Fresh polio case from Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, reported, taking 2024 tally to 23

(lm) Pakistan has reported new polio cases in its Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces, bringing the total number of cases in 2024 to 23.

Pakistan, along with Afghanistan, remains one of the last polio-endemic countries globally. The country has seen a resurgence of polio cases since late 2018, highlighting ongoing challenges. The national polio eradication program plans two large-scale vaccination campaigns later this year to close immunity gaps. The program, started in 1994, has faced disruptions due to militancy, attacks on polio workers, and climate-related challenges. [Arab News 1]

Against the backdrop of the latest two cases, Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif met with Bill Gates, the co-founder of Microsoft Corporation and a major philanthropist, to discuss polio eradication efforts. During their meeting, Gates praised Pakistan's efforts and stressed the importance of eradicating polio to protect future generations. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) has been supporting Pakistan in polio eradication, health system strengthening, and maternal and child health. [Arab News 2]

Pakistan: Governmenyt warns of dengue outbreak in October in 10 major cities

(lm) The Pakistan Meteorological Department (PMD) has warned that at least 10 major cities in Pakistan could face a dengue outbreak in October, advising all stakeholders to take preemptive measures. The cities at risk include Karachi, Lahore, Peshawar, Rawalpindi, Islamabad, Hyderabad, Faisalabad, Sialkot, Larkana, and Multan.

Dengue fever, spread by mosquitoes, causes flu-like symptoms and can be fatal in severe cases. The PMD noted that dengue is most active in the post-monsoon period, with peak transmission occurring shortly after sunrise and before sunset. Pakistan has faced recurring dengue outbreaks, with significant cases reported in recent years, including 79,007 confirmed cases and 149 deaths in 2022. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Government to announce new policy promoting electric vehicles ‘soon’

(lm) Pakistan's government plans to introduce a new policy soon to promote electric vehicles, especially two-wheelers and three-wheelers, as part of efforts to reduce the expensive fuel import bill and boost foreign exchange reserves. The initiative follows Pakistan's 2019 National Electric Vehicles Policy, which aims for electric vehicles to comprise 30 percent of all passenger vehicles and heavy-duty truck sales by 2030 and 90 percent by 2040.

The move is expected to address Pakistan's high air pollution levels, as road transport is a major contributor to the country's greenhouse gas emissions. The policy is intended to boost electricity demand, reduce household transport expenses, and cut fuel import costs.

The government has already seen investment interest, including a USD 250 million commitment from ADM Group to manufacture electric vehicles locally. Moreover, Chinese EV giant BYD plans to electrify up to 50 percent of vehicles in Pakistan by 2030.

Power Minister Sardar Awais Ahmed Khan Laghari also mentioned broader energy reforms aimed at improving governance, enhancing transmission efficiency, and stimulating industrial growth. He emphasized that Pakistan has a clean energy mix, with over 55 percent of its electricity coming from hydel, nuclear, and renewable sources, which is expected to rise to over 70 percent in the coming years. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Rising militant violence in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province

(mra/lm) Recent weeks have seen a surge in militant violence and security incidents in Khyber

Pakhtunkhwa, highlighting ongoing challenges in Pakistan's northwestern region.

Security forces killed eight militants during an intelligence-based operation in North Waziristan, a district near the Afghan border that has seen a resurgence of militant activity. The operation targeted individuals involved in attacks against security forces and civilians, though officials did not identify the specific group involved. However, the banned Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), often referred to by the government as "Fitna al Khawarij"—a term denoting discord and extremist factions—has been a key player in recent militant violence in the region. Attacks targeting security personnel have escalated since the TTP ended its ceasefire with the government in 2022, further destabilizing the region. [DAWN] [Business Recorder] [The News International]

In a separate development, a two-member fact-finding committee was formed by the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government to investigate a bomb attack on a convoy of foreign diplomats earlier this month in Swat's Malam Jabba tourist resort. The roadside bombing claimed the life of one policeman and injured three others, although the foreign diplomats remained unharmed.

Most of the diplomats were from Central Asian and European countries, and the attack, suspected to have been carried out by militants linked to the Pakistani Taliban, has prompted the foreign office to develop new travel guidelines to ensure their safety. The incident has raised concerns about the rising militant activities in the region, particularly in Swat, which had been previously controlled by the Taliban in 2007 before being cleared by military operations. [Arab News 1] [Arab News 2]

Meanwhile, on September 26, a powerful explosion at the Swabi City police station resulted in the death of one person and injured 16 others, including several police officers. The blast, which caused a partial collapse of the police station, occurred in a storage room where seized explosives were kept. Initial investigations suggested that the explosion was triggered by a short circuit, leading to multiple detonations of stored materials. [The Express Tribune] [Deccan Herald]

Pakistan: Ongoing tribal clash between Shiite, Sunni factions in Kurram claims leaves at least 46 dead

(mra) Tribal clashes between rival Shia and Sunni factions in Pakistan's northwestern Kurram district, part of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, have left at least 46 people dead and 109 injured. The violence erupted earlier this month when two tribes claimed ownership of the same piece of land, escalating into a confrontation involving heavy and small weaponry.

Kurram district, formerly a semi-autonomous tribal area, has a history of sectarian violence, tribal conflicts, and militant activity. These recent clashes follow a pattern of violence that has plagued the region for years. A major conflict that started in 2007 was only resolved in 2011 with the help of a *jirga*, a traditional council of tribal elders. Earlier in July this year, another round of violence in the district over a property dispute left 38 dead and 158 injured.

KP Chief Minister Ali Amin Gandapur has directed the police and district administration to take action and facilitate a ceasefire through a *jirga*. He emphasized the need for a permanent resolution, suggesting the formation of a committee comprising members of the national and provincial assemblies, local elders, and law enforcement agencies to bring the warring tribes together and achieve a lasting solution to the ongoing law and order issues. [Anadolu Ajansı]

Pakistan: Militants kill 7 workers, kidnap 20 in Balochistan province

(mra/ja) In Pakistan's southwestern Balochistan province, suspected militants killed at least seven workers and kidnapped 20 others in two separate attacks. The first incident occurred around midnight in Panjgur, where gunmen attacked a home, killing several laborers from Punjab province. The second attack took place early on September 29 at a gas and oil exploration company's site in Musakhail, where armed men opened fire, vandalized equipment, and took 20 workers hostage. [PTV News] [Voice of America]

Earlier last week, a bomb blast targeting a police van near Quetta's Eastern Bypass on September 25 injured 12 individuals, including two policemen. The attack, carried out with an IED fitted on a motorbike, was the third targeting police in the last ten days. [Dawn News] [Arab News]

No group has claimed responsibility for the attacks. However, Balochistan has long been a hotspot for militant activities, with the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) intensifying its operations recently. This includes

an attack earlier this month that killed two policemen and an ambush that left three Anti-Terrorist Force officials dead.

The BLA and other ethnic Baloch groups accuse the central government of exploiting the region's natural resources, while Pakistani authorities argue that such militant activities are meant to disrupt economic development. Balochistan is rich in natural resources and hosts major China-funded infrastructure projects, making it a target for insurgent attacks, including those against Chinese nationals.

Meanwhile, Pakistan Railways aims to restore a key bridge in Balochistan, destroyed by militants on August 26, by October 10. The bridge, built in 1887 at Bolan Pass, was targeted during coordinated attacks by Baloch separatists, which killed over 50 people and disrupted vital infrastructure, including railway lines.

The destruction has led to an estimated USD 144,000 loss in revenue and disrupted two major train services —Jaffar Khan Jamali Express and Bolan Mail—that connect Quetta to other parts of Pakistan. The suspension of train services has affected residents, forcing them to use less secure road transport. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Helicopter crash in North Waziristan leaves at least six dead

(ja) A helicopter crash in northwestern Pakistan on September 28 killed at least six people and injured eight others. The incident involved a chartered Mi-8 helicopter operated by Mari Petroleum Company, which crashed in North Waziristan, near the Afghan border. According to reports, engine failure occurred as the helicopter was attempting to land. Some foreign nationals were reportedly on board, though local authorities have not yet provided further details regarding the passengers or the circumstances of the crash. [DAWN.COM] [Anadolu Ajansı]

Seychelles: Central bank maintains accommodative monetary policy

(sa) The Central Bank of Seychelles (CBS) will keep its monetary policy rate at 1.75 percent for the last quarter of 2024, as announced by Governor Caroline Abel. This decision follows an evaluation of international economic developments, including recent

rate cuts by major central banks due to declining inflation.

Rising commodity prices and potential adverse weather could impact food costs, complicating the economic landscape for Seychelles. Despite a slight decline in tourist arrivals this year, improved air connectivity may boost visitor numbers in the fourth quarter. [Seychelles News Agency]

Seychelles: Parliament approves sign language as official national language

(sa) The National Assembly of Seychelles has unanimously adopted a motion to designate Seychelles Sign Language as an official national language, marking a significant milestone for the country's hearing-impaired population.

The motion, introduced by Regina Esparon of the Linyon Demokratik Seselwa (LDS) during Deaf Week 2024, emphasizes the need for effective communication and the rights of over 1,000 deaf individuals in Seychelles. Support for the motion was voiced by members of both the LDS and the United Seychelles (US) party, acknowledging the rights of people with hearing impairments. [Seychelles News Agency]

Seychelles: Two Ugandans, one Seychellois sentenced for drug trafficking

(sa) The Supreme Court of Seychelles has sentenced two Ugandan nationals to seven and five years in prison, respectively, for importing illegal substances. A Seychellois was also sentenced to seven and five years imprisonment for trafficking the same drugs, with all sentences to be served concurrently. [Seychelles News Agency]

Sri Lanka: President Dissanayake dissolves Parliament for snap general election on November 14

(sa) Sri Lanka's newly elected President Anura Kumara Dissanayake has officially dissolved Parliament to facilitate a snap general election, which will be held on November 14. The next parliament is set to convene on November 21. [Reuters 1] [Daily Mirror 1]

Dissanayake's coalition, the National People's Party, holds only three of the 225 seats in the current parliament, prompting the dissolution to seek a fresh mandate for his policies. For the time leading up to the parliamentary elections, Dissanayake has appointed Harini Amarasuriya as the new prime minister, making her the third woman to hold this position in the country's history. Amarasuriya, a college professor and first-time lawmaker, will also oversee the education and media portfolios.

Meanwhile, Dissanayake, has taken on the crucial finance portfolio himself as Sri Lanka grapples with its most severe economic crisis in 70 years, marked by its first debt default. He also holds positions in economic development and tourism. Veteran legislator Vijitha Herath was appointed to lead the foreign affairs and public security portfolios. [Reuters 2] [Anadolu Ajansı]

In a significant development, Sajith Premadasa, leader of the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), has announced his candidacy for Prime Minister in the upcoming elections. He stated that his party has chosen him to lead their coalition and ruled out any collaboration with Ranil Wickremesinghe of the United National Party, highlighting his commitment to unify the SJB after their recent presidential election defeat. [Colombo Gazette 1]

In recent updates, the Election Commission has announced the number of Members of Parliament (MPs) to be elected from each of the 22 districts in the upcoming General Elections scheduled for November 14. According to the Commission's statement, Gampaha district will have the highest representation with 19 MPs, while Trincomalee district will have the fewest, with just four MPs. [Daily Mirror 3]

Sri Lanka: President Dissanayake prioritizes economic stability, IMF negotiations

(aa/sa) Sri Lanka's newly elected President Anura Kumara Dissanayake has emphasized his commitment to economic stability and public confidence in the nation's recovery efforts. In his inaugural address, he pledged to initiate discussions with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to advance the country's USD 2.9 billion bailout program and negotiate with creditors to expedite debt restructuring.

Specifically, these discussions are expected to take place during the IMF's annual meetings in Washington later this month. A delegation led by the central bank

governor, treasury secretary, and financial advisers to new President Dissanayake will attend the meetings. The talks will focus on the framework of the bailout and the third review of the program, which could lead to the disbursement of a fourth tranche worth USD 337 million.

Moreover, an IMF team will visit Colombo for three days starting October 2 to meet with Dissanayake and discuss the latest economic developments and reforms. However, the IMF delegation's visit this week will be a "courtesy call" rather than an in-depth evaluation. [Reuters]

This comes at a time when Dissanayake's election has introduced uncertainty regarding the country's policy direction, according to Fitch Ratings. The agency affirmed Sri Lanka's Long-Term Foreign-Currency Issuer Default Rating (IDR) at 'RD' (Restricted Default) and its Long-Term Local-Currency IDR at 'CCC'. Fitch highlighted concerns that this uncertainty may delay the completion of foreign-currency debt restructuring and the renegotiation of the IMF program. The upcoming 2025 budget, expected to be adopted by November 2024, will serve as a crucial indicator of the new government's policies.

Despite recent major tax reforms aimed at improving revenue collection—such as raising the corporate income tax rate and increasing value-added and fuel excise taxes—Fitch noted that weak implementation of the IMF program remains a significant risk to achieving long-term debt sustainability. Although revenue collection improved by 42 percent year-on-year in the first half of 2024, potential policy shifts under the new administration could impact ongoing debt restructuring and IMF negotiations.

Moody's, another global rating agency, has indicated that while it does not foresee significant shifts in Sri Lanka's reform trajectory, some reprioritization is likely under the new administration. The agency highlighted that former president Ranil Wickremesinghe had established an economic transformation act obligating future governments to adhere to fiscal and debt targets set under the IMF program.

Notably, in August 2024, outstanding credit to the private sector in Sri Lanka surged by LKR 135.2 billion (approximately USD 460 million), indicating a significant increase in economic activity. This growth marked a continuation of a trend in expanding credit to the real economy, with August's expansion more than doubling the LKR 60.2 billion (approximately USD 205 million) increase recorded in July. Over the first eight months of the year, total credit growth reached

LKR 341 billion (approximately USD 1.18 billion), representing a robust year-on-year increase of 8.7 percent, surpassing many forecasts of mid-single-digit growth.

Despite the robust credit growth and improving economic conditions, the central bank has decided to maintain its benchmark interest rates during its first meeting following the presidential election, keeping the standing lending facility rate at 9.25 percent and the deposit facility rate at 8.25 percent. This decision aligns with forecasts from most economists surveyed by Bloomberg and reflects ongoing uncertainty regarding the IMF loan program. [Daily Mirror]

The central bank reported that inflation remains below its target of 5 percent, allowing for stable rates. The bank expects inflation to stay low in the upcoming quarters and even potentially record deflation due to changes in administratively determined prices and improved supply conditions. Furthermore, robust economic growth in the first half of 2024 is anticipated to continue, with growth projections for the year being revised upwards. [yahoo!news] [Tamil Guardian]

Sri Lanka: SLPP presidential candidate expresses support for abolition of executive presidency

(sa/lm) The Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) has pledged full support if the National People's Power (NPP) takes steps to abolish the Executive Presidency and reform the electoral system, according to SLPP National Organiser Namal Rajapaksa. Rajapaksa, the SLPP's presidential candidate and part of the influential Rajapaksa family, which has held considerable power in Sri Lankan politics for decades. [Daily Mirror]

The significance of Namal Rajapaksa's statement lies in the fact that the Rajapaksa family has historically benefited immensely from the powers granted by the Executive Presidency. Mahinda Rajapaksa, Namal's uncle, served as Executive President from 2005 to 2015, and during his tenure, he used these powers to consolidate political authority, extend presidential terms, and expand the influence of the Rajapaksa family throughout the government and military. His successor, Gotabaya Rajapaksa, Namal's uncle as well, also used the Executive Presidency to centralize decision-making, especially during his presidency from 2019 to 2022, when he played a key role in handling (or mishandling) the country's economic policies, leading to widespread protests.

Sri Lanka: President Dissanayake to reinstate subsidy schemes paused by Election Commission

(lm) Sri Lanka's new president, Anura Dissanayake, has announced plans to reinstate subsidy schemes that were previously halted by the Election Commission. Effective October 1, paddy farmers will receive an allowance of LKR 25,000 (approximately USD 85) per hectare for the Maha season, one of the two main rice-growing seasons in Sri Lanka, with payments deposited directly into their bank accounts.

Additionally, a fuel subsidy will be introduced for the fishing community, benefiting both multi-day and one-day fishing vessels, with funds also deposited into fishermen's bank accounts. Former minister Kanchana Wijesekera expressed support for the continuation of these schemes, which were initially approved and funded by the treasury under the previous administration in August 2024 but were paused during the presidential election period.

The Election Commission has now allowed these subsidy programs to proceed ahead of Sri Lanka's General Election scheduled for November 14. [Economy Next]

Sri Lanka: Review of cutting former presidents' benefits underway

(sa) The Sri Lankan government is planning to reduce the benefits provided to former presidents, as pledged by President Anura Kumara Dissanayake during his election campaign. However, some of these cuts face legal hurdles as they require amendments to the Presidents Entitlements Act No. 4 of 1986, which can only be enacted by the next Parliament. Currently, former presidents are entitled to various benefits, including free housing or a monthly allowance, a secretarial allowance, official transport, and a pension. The government intends to review these benefits and establish a criterion for their reduction, with discussions scheduled for the next Cabinet meeting. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Former MPs lose diplomatic privileges and security as Parliament dissolves

(sa) Secretary General of Parliament Kushani Rohanadeera announced that following the dissolution of Parliament, members are no longer eligible to use diplomatic passports and must obtain standard passports for international travel. Other privileges, such as allowances and insurance schemes, have also been revoked for MPs. However, former MPs are allowed to continue residing in designated housing at the Madiwela Housing Complex until the upcoming general elections.

Furthermore, all MPs, except those serving on the Constitutional Council, must return government-issued firearms as required by the Anti-Corruption Act. In a related move, police have recalled security personnel assigned to former parliamentarians and ministers. However, Senior Deputy Inspector General Lalith Pathinayake clarified that security arrangements for specific high-profile individuals—such as the former Speaker, the former Deputy Speaker, and the Leader of the Opposition—will remain in place. [Daily Mirror 1] [Daily Mirror 2]

Sri Lanka: Free Media Movement urges President Dissanayake to repeal repressive laws

(aa/sa) The Free Media Movement (FMM), a Sri Lankan organization dedicated to promoting and protecting media freedom and freedom of expression, has urged newly elected President Anura Kumara Dissanayake to abolish repressive laws to prioritize the protection of fundamental rights and strengthen democracy

In a statement, the FMM emphasized that civil liberties and freedoms are vital for a thriving democracy, which have been undermined by recent oppressive legislation. They highlighted several concerning laws, including the Online Safety Act, the Anti-Terrorism Bill, and various labor law reforms, all of which threaten freedom of speech and expression—essential components of a democratic society.

The FMM, along with other civil society organizations, media groups, and trade unions, has strongly opposed these repressive measures, viewing them as direct attacks on constitutional democracy. They see Dissanayake's presidency as a crucial opportunity to repeal these laws and demonstrate a commitment to democratic principles.

Additionally, the FMM called for accountability regarding crimes against journalists and media institutions under previous regimes, including killings,

disappearances, and violent attacks. They demand the establishment of a fully empowered Presidential Commission for Truth and Justice to investigate these crimes and provide overdue justice.

Furthermore, the FMM advocates for transforming state-owned media into independent public service media and creating an independent oversight mechanism for media activities. [Daily Mirror] [Daily News]

Sri Lanka: Former MP defends vehicle usage amid allegations of public asset mismanagement by NPP

(sa) Former MP Dilum Amunugama has denied allegations of misuse of government vehicles, specifically responding to comments made by National People's Power (NPP) member Wasantha Samarasinghe regarding vehicles abandoned at a prominent public space in Colombo. Amunugama clarified that these vehicles were used by coordinating committee chairmen and emphasized that MPs and ministers have not misused their official vehicles.

Meanwhile, Samarasinghe asserted that the current NPP government is committed to ending public fund wastage and restoring accountability, indicating that further details regarding previous administrations' actions would be unveiled before the general election. [Daily Mirror 1] [Daily Mirror 2]

Sri Lanka: NPP government scraps SriLankan Airlines privatization plan

(aa) The National People's Power (NPP) government, under President Anura Kumara Dissanayake, has decided to abandon plans to privatize SriLankan Airlines, reversing the previous government's move to divest the debt-ridden national carrier.

According to Anil Jayantha, Chairman of the NPP Economic Council, the airline will remain state-owned due to its crucial role in developing the country's tourism industry. Instead of selling off or divesting the airline, the government plans to explore new management models for its improvement.

The prior government had considered selling at least 51 percent of the airline and absorbing USD 510

million of its debt to attract private investors. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: International Chamber of Commerce Inks MOU with Port City Colombo

(aa) The International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) Sri Lanka has signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Port City Colombo, a mixed-use development project built on reclaimed land adjacent to the existing Colombo waterfront, to enhance collaboration in promoting the area as a prime investment destination for both local and international investors.

The project is primarily developed by China Harbour Engineering Company (CHEC), a subsidiary of China Communications Construction Company (CCCC). The total investment from China is substantial, with estimates suggesting that around USD 1.4 billion has been committed to the project by Chinese firms. [Daily Mirror]

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

Brunei: Sultan announces diverse committee for civil service reform

(ga) King Haji Hassanal Bolkiah has announced the formation of a civil service transformation committee aimed at driving continuous improvements in

government operations. The committee will be led by the Prime Minister's Office and include members from the private sector and NGOs to ensure a comprehensive approach to reforms through a "Whole of Nation" and "Whole of Government" perspective.

Speaking at the 31st Civil Service Day, the King affirmed that public servants remain the backbone of national programs and urged them to continuously seek new opportunities, embrace innovation, and use modern technologies such as big data systems and mobile applications to enhance public services. He further emphasized the importance of not only implementing new systems but also shifting work practices and mindsets to meet emerging challenges in a rapidly evolving world. [Borneo Bulletin]

Brunei: Personal data privacy law is set to be implemented by year's end

(ga) The Brunei government plans to implement the Personal Data Protection Order (PDPO) by the end of the year, according to the Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Transport and Info-communications (MTIC). The PDPO will regulate the collection, use, and disclosure of personal data by the private sector. The Authority for Info-communications Technology Industry of Brunei Darussalam (AITI) has conducted multiple public consultations on the matter, and the order is in its final stages.

The National Information Hub has been instrumental in facilitating secure data sharing across various government agencies. Currently, ten agencies provide data, while fifteen agencies utilize the platform. The hub improves data accuracy, security, and decision-making while reducing duplication and improving governance. This initiative is part of the government's broader effort to become a more data-driven policymaking entity. [Borneo Bulletin]

Brunei: Central bank adds three entities to financial alert list

(ga) Brunei Darussalam Central Bank (BDCB) has added three entities—BTC Brunei Darussalam, Fusion Market, and Royal Be Invested / Prestige Be Invested Ent—to its alert list. These companies are not licensed or approved by BDCB and are suspected of engaging in illegal financial activities.

The alert list includes entities whose actions raise suspicion. BDCB urges the public to only engage with licensed financial institutions and warns against dealing with unlicensed entities, particularly those resembling get-rich-quick or pyramid schemes. [Brunei Darussalam Central Bank]

Brunei: Logistic company manager sentenced to prison for corruption

(ga) A 55-year-old former general manager of Sivli Logistics Sdn Bhd, Chin Chee Vun, has been sentenced to 24 months in prison by the High Court on September 24, following the reversal of his earlier acquittal on corruption charges. Chin was convicted of instructing his subordinate to bribe a Customs inspection officer at the Royal Customs and Excise Department, Ministry of Finance and Economy, in October 2021, in an attempt to bypass violations in Customs declarations.

The High Court ruling came after the Public Prosecutor's successful appeal of the initial Senior Magistrate's Court decision. Judicial Commissioner Haji Abdullah Soefri ruled that the Senior Magistrate had misinterpreted the law and failed to adequately consider the evidence presented. Chin's subordinate had previously pleaded guilty in July 2022 to offering a BND 20 bribe at Muara Port Customs Guardhouse and was sentenced to eight months in prison. [Borneo Bulletin]

Brunei: Two foreigners fined for immigration and employment agency offences

(ga) Two Bangladeshi nationals have been charged with violations of Brunei's immigration and employment laws. They were found guilty of not working in their designated roles and conducting employment agency activities without a license, in breach of Regulation 15(3) of the Immigration Regulations and Section 6(1) of the Employment Agencies Order 2004.

Each man was fined BND 1,000 per offense, with a default sentence of one month of imprisonment if the fine was not paid. The violations were uncovered during a joint operation by the Immigration and National Registration Department and the Labour Department on August 20th at rental houses in Mukim

Pengkalan Batu and a company in Mukim Gadong 'B'. [RTB News] [Borneo Bulletin 1]

In another case, a 35-year-old Bangladeshi national is scheduled to face trial in December after pleading not guilty to charges of abetting prostitution. Prosecutors allege the man assisted Oranee Suila, a 53-year-old Thai national, in procuring clients for three Thai women involved in prostitution in Brunei.

Suila has already been sentenced to two years in prison after admitting to living off the earnings of prostitution. She facilitated services for the women and took a portion of their payments. One of the women reportedly served around 120 clients over several months. [Media Permata] [Borneo Bulletin 2]

Cambodia: Mekong canal sparks concern over environmental impact and regional tensions

(ma) Cambodia's plan to build the USD 1.7 billion Funan Techo canal, connecting the Mekong River to the Gulf of Thailand, is causing alarm among environmental experts. The project, supported by China, may disrupt the natural flood systems of the Mekong, depriving Vietnam's Mekong Delta of vital silt for agriculture. The canal could exacerbate droughts and affect Vietnam's status as a major rice exporter.

Vietnam, reliant on the Mekong for food security, has quietly raised concerns over the canal's impact on its agricultural economy. Meanwhile, Cambodia insists the project will have no significant impact on the river's flow. Environmentalists fear Cambodia's justification overlooks the potential damage, threatening both Vietnam's agricultural productivity and Cambodia's floodplains.

The project has heightened political tensions, as Vietnam seeks cooperation on environmental assessments, while Cambodia frames the canal as a matter of national pride. The canal's construction, involving Chinese companies, is also seen as a move by Cambodia to reduce its economic dependence on Vietnam, adding to the complexity of regional dynamics. [AP] [Radio Free Asia]

Cambodia: USD 2 billion allocated for climate change adaptation

(ma) Cambodia has allocated USD 2 billion to combat the effects of climate change and adapt its infrastructure by 2030. Announced by the Ministry of Environment on September 26 during an event attended by journalists and representatives of the private sector, the investment will focus on water resources, agriculture, and infrastructure as the top priorities.

In addition, Cambodia plans to invest nearly USD 6 billion to reduce greenhouse gas emissions during the same period. Key initiatives include canceling a 700 MW coal-fired power plant in favor of an LPG plant, developing a new dam to generate 1,000 MW of clean energy by 2028, increasing renewable energy to 70 percent, and planting at least 1 million trees annually. [Khmer Times]

Indonesia: Removal of Soeharto's name in decree concerning corruption sparks criticisms

(mu) The People's Consultative Assembly (MPR), the bi-cameral legislative branch in Indonesia's political system, has decided to remove Soeharto, the Second President of Indonesia who served for almost 32 years, from Article 4 of the MPR Decree (TAP MPR) No. 11 of 1998 which addresses the eradication of Corruption, Collusion, and Nepotism in state governance.

The decision was made in response to a letter from Golkar Party faction on September 18. Golkar, the second largest party in the House of Representatives, the MPR's lower house, was formerly Soekarno's political party during his presidency, which many has referred to be an authoritarian regime full of corruption. [Antara]

Critics, such as constitutional law expert Bivitri Susanti assessed that the MPR is forming a model that is not willing to politically punish former Indonesian presidents. She voiced her concern that this is an attempt to reverse legal accountability during the dictatorship which has not been realized until today, hurting Indonesia's democratic reform process.

While there are criticisms from rights activists, some parliamentarians welcomed the decision to restore the good name of the president. [Kompas] [Tempo.co] [Antara]

Indonesia: Trials for three tuberculosis vaccines launched

(ft) Indonesia is currently conducting trials for three tuberculosis (TB) vaccines as part of its efforts to eradicate the disease by 2030. Health Minister Budi Gunadi Sadikin emphasized the need for aggressive actions and international collaboration in vaccine development.

Indonesia is now actively participating in global TB research after overcoming legal barriers. The country is trialing the M72/AS01E vaccine by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and GlaxoSmithKline, a phase 2 trial of BioNTech's BNT164a1 vaccine, and phase 1 trials of CanSinoBio's AdHu5Ag85A vaccine. The goal is to have one of these vaccines ready by 2028. [Antara]

Indonesia: Village funds to climate change mitigation efforts in focus 2025

(ft) In 2025, Indonesia will focus on village funds on climate change mitigation, according to the finance ministry. This decision is driven by Indonesia's vulnerability as the world's second-most disaster-prone country, losing IDR 50 trillion (USD 3.2 billion) annually to disasters.

The ministry has mapped over 75,000 villages based on their disaster vulnerability, which will guide the allocation of funds. Village governments, with local support, are expected to use these funds to address their specific needs and enhance self-reliance. [Antara]

Indonesia: Corruption eradication agency confirms three suspected in mining license corruption

(mu) The Corruption Eradication Agency (KPK) has announced that three individuals are suspected of corruption in the East Kalimantan mining business license case, without revealing their identity, citing ongoing investigation.

New portal *Tempo.co* has indicated that one of the suspects might be the former Governor of East Kalimantan, Awang Faroek Ishak. [CNN Indonesia] [Tempo.co]

Indonesia: IDR 18.9 trillion spent on IKN development to date

(ft/mu) Indonesia's Ministry of Finance has announced that IDR 18.9 trillion (USD 1,24 billion) or 43.1 percent of the IDR 44 trillion (USD 2.88 billion) allocated in the 2024 State Budget for the development of the new capital city of Nusantara (IKN), has been spent. This budget covers both infrastructure and non-infrastructure projects, including construction in the State Palace area, roads, bridges, flats for civil servants, and flood control. The non-infrastructure funds have been used for planning, coordination, and relocation preparations.

The total budget allocated for Nusantara's development from 2022 to 2024 is IDR 76.5 trillion (USD 5 billion). [Antara]

In a separate move, President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo led a groundbreaking for several projects in Indonesia's new capital city on September 25. Jokowi inaugurated the construction of a 24,200-meter square land, funded by Chinese investor Delonix Bravo, which will be used to develop several facilities such as a hotel, apartment, shopping center, fitness center, green area, and office complex.

The President hailed the investment as the first foreign investment in IKN following accusations of the lack of foreign investment in the new capital city. [Tempo.co] [Kompas]

In addition, Jokowi also conducted a groundbreaking for a USD 19 million luxury resort, funded by a Russian investor and launched development of an Australian Independent School (AIS). [Tempo.co]

Indonesia: Police arrest 'thugs' for disrupting diaspora discussion

(mu) The police have arrested individuals involved in the forced disruption of a diaspora discussion titled the "National Diaspora Solidarity Meeting with National Figures and Activists," held in Jakarta on September 28. The arrested individuals face charges of assault and vandalism. [Tempo.co]

A video that circulated publicly shows several people disrupting the event, destroying the stage, and evicting approximately 50 participants. Security and police officers have been criticized for merely watching the disruption unfold without intervening. Human rights

groups have accused the police of committing a "violation by omission," while the police defended their actions, stating that the event lacked proper authorization. [Tempo.co] [Kompas]

Laos: More than 2.6 million tourists recorded in first eight months

(cc) Laos' tourism industry is experiencing a positive year, welcoming over 2.6 million international tourists in the first eight months of 2024. This figure, according to the Tourism Development Department, reflects an 18.8 percent increase compared to the same period last year.

Thailand remains the top source of visitors, followed by Vietnam and China. Notably, domestic travel also saw a significant surge, with over 2.3 million Lao travelers exploring different parts of the country, marking an 84.22 percent increase.

This trend is attributed to relaxed visa requirements and a growing focus on sustainable tourism practices. [The Laotian Times]

Laos: Red Cross bolsters blood services

(cc) The Lao Red Cross is making a life-saving push by significantly improving its blood collection and distribution systems. This initiative aims to ensure a more readily available and safe blood supply nationwide.

Limited resources and public awareness about blood donation have hampered national reserves. The Red Cross is tackling this through infrastructure investments, public awareness campaigns and enhanced collaboration.

This initiative has the potential to save countless lives by ensuring a sufficient blood supply for emergencies, surgeries, and chronic illnesses.

The Lao Red Cross's commitment to strengthening blood services represents a major leap forward for Lao healthcare, paving the way for a healthier future. [The Laotian Times]

Laos: Floods to be tackled through public-private collaboration

(cc) Laos is uniting government and private sectors to address recent floods. Prime Minister Sonexay Siphandone's September 23 directive prioritizes immediate relief - search and rescue, supply delivery - in flood zones. He recognizes the crucial role of private businesses, appealing for their financial and logistical support, and assistance in rebuilding infrastructure.

This collaboration extends beyond immediate recovery. Investments in early warning systems, better evacuation plans, and public awareness campaigns aim to build long-term resilience. [The Laotian Times]

Laos: Trade deficit continues amid growth prediction

(cc) Laos faces a troubling trend – eight straight months of trade deficits. August 2024 data shows imports surpassing exports by USD 129 million. This presents a challenge for the ASEAN chair, aiming for regional economic integration.

Experts cite underdeveloped infrastructure and limited export diversification as potential causes. Dependence on raw materials makes Laos vulnerable to price fluctuations. The deficit threatens to weaken the Lao Kip and hinder investments. [The Laotian Times]

Meanwhile, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) has offered a cautiously optimistic outlook for the Lao economy in 2024, forecasting growth of 4 percent by year-end. This projection is buoyed by investments in services and clean energy sectors.

However, the report, released on September 26, acknowledges ongoing macroeconomic challenges that could hinder this growth. Public debt remains a major concern, potentially limiting both investment prospects and domestic consumption.

The ADB revised its 2025 growth forecast down to 3.7 percent from the earlier 4.0 percent projection due to potential limitations on public sector access to foreign currency. This could be caused by refinancing difficulties and significant external debt maturities in 2025.

Despite these challenges, the ADB's outlook is more positive for developing Asia as a whole, forecasting a growth rate of 5.0 percent in 2024. This is attributed to

factors like strong domestic demand, robust exports, and falling food prices.

While Laos faces some headwinds, the ADB report suggests signs of progress backed by investments in key areas like clean energy. Continued focus on addressing public debt and fostering a conducive economic environment will be crucial for sustained growth in the years to come. [The Laotian Times]

Laos: Bokeo province authorities crack down on shops not following currency and signage rules

(cc) Authorities in northern Bokeo province are taking action against shops that are not complying with regulations on signage and currency usage. This includes inspecting shops to make sure signs and billboards are in the correct language and that the Lao kip is being used as the official currency for transactions.

The inspections revealed that some shops still have signage that is not compliant, and many products lack clear price tags in Lao kip. Shopkeepers who were found to be in violation of the regulations received verbal warnings. For future infractions, there will be a system of fines in place. A first offense will result in a warning, but a second offense will incur a fine ranging from LAK 10 (USD 460) to 20 million. [The Laotian Times]

Malaysia: Prime minister calls for new laws to fight against extremism

(oc/ga) Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim said new laws are required to tackle violent extremism and address issues of national security. Effective legal measures need to be put in place, he regarded, as global terrorist groups possess sophistication.

In attempt to incite this change, on September 30, Anwar announced the Malaysia Action Plan on Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism (MyPCVE). He said this is necessary to protect the nation. He did not go into the specific details of what the law entails but commented that it would strengthen Malaysia's protection and democratic values. [The Star]

The MyPCVE plan is based on four key pillars—prevention, enforcement, rehabilitation, and reinforcement—and holistically addresses extremist threats, including political, racial, social, and religious extremism and external influences. Prime Minister Anwar emphasized the importance of implementing and publicizing the plan, warning that racial tensions, particularly near elections, have reached dangerous levels. He stressed the need to understand the root causes behind extremist ideologies, beyond just countering acts of terrorism.

Home Minister Datuk Seri Saifuddin Nasution Ismail affirmed that MyPCVE takes a unique approach, incorporating strict enforcement alongside a 'soft approach' to address extremism, aiming for long-term peace and order in Malaysia from 2024 to 2028. [Bernama]

Malaysia: Prime minister promises continued support for Indian community

(oc) Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim has promised that the Indian community will be represented and prioritized under the 2025 budget.

Anwar, who doubles as finance minister, reaffirmed that government has never neglected the community. In his view government work has improved central parts of Indian lives in the country, including education and employment.

He pledged USD 360,000 to Deepavali (Hindu Festival of Lights) food baskets and USD 4.8 million for the creation of new crematoriums. He commented on government achievements in investment, stating funds for the Malaysian Indian Transformation UNIT (MITRA).

The budget for 2025 is expected to be put to Parliament on October 18. [Bernama]

Malaysia: Khairuddin removed as Community Communications Department chief

(oc) The director-general of the Community Communications Department (J-Kom), Khairuddin Othman, has been removed from his post. A source has claimed that the reason for removal is due to funds being wasted alongside other misuses of power.

Khairuddin took the post only six months ago. An anonymous source told *Free Malaysia Today* that Khairuddin performed gross misconduct by sacking officers who were contracted, without consulting the communications ministry. The source also claimed that the overseas trips the director-general used were of little use and therefore a waste of public funds. [Free Malaysia Today]

Malaysia: New smoking restrictions set for October

(oc) On October 1 smoking products will be restricted under to the Public Health Act 2024 (Act 852). Health Minister Dzulkerfly Ahmad stated that the law will ban the sale and purchase of tobacco products, including conventional cigarettes and substitutes like electronic vapes to minors. The law also puts restrictions on smoking in public places.

Selling smoking products to minors will lead to fines or jail time. Added to this those minors who buy these products will commit a crime according to the new law. They can be fined and serve community service.

For the wider population, smoking in public places can result in a fine. Sellers must also formally register smoking products from October 1. [Malay Mail] [New Strait Times]

Malaysia: Special task force proposed to suppress corruption

(oc) The Malaysian government has decided to set up a special task force tasked with improving Malaysia's ranking on the Global Corruption Perception Index (CPI) and place the country in the top 25 ranking on the CPI index by 2030.

In 2023 Malaysia ranked 57th on the global scale, an improvement in 2022 at 61st. [The Star]

Malaysia: Barisan Nasional's candidate wins Mahkota by-election

(ga) The opposition Barisan Nasional's (BN) candidate Syed Hussien Syed Abdullah secured a landslide victory in the Mahkota by-election, with a margin of 20,648 votes. The Election Commission confirmed that Syed

Hussien received 27,995 votes, while his opponent, Perikatan Nasional's Mohamad Haizan Jaafar, only garnered 7,347 votes. [The Star]

The voter turnout was 53.84 percent, a slight decrease from the 55.7 percent recorded in the Johor state election in 2022.

This by-election was held following the death of incumbent Sharifah Azizah Syed Zain. [Harian Metro]

Malaysia: Government promotes AI collaboration between telecommunications companies and local media

(ga) Malaysia is promoting collaboration between telecommunications companies and local media organizations to develop artificial intelligence (AI) applications aimed at enhancing content creation and reporting efficiency. Minister of Communications Fahmi Fadzil emphasized Huawei as a key example, showing its advanced AI applications applicable across various sectors, including media and filmmaking.

Following a memorandum of understanding (MoU) signed between Huawei and U Mobile Malaysia, both companies will work together to create solutions tailored for Malaysia's vertical markets, including small and medium enterprises and logistics.

Minister Fahmi urged the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) to explore these applications, particularly in translation and network optimization. He emphasized the necessity of a comprehensive regulatory framework to mitigate risks associated with AI technology, advocating for a balanced approach that maximizes benefits while ensuring public safety. [Bernama]

Malaysia: Plantation minister calls for more funding to boost entrepreneurship and job growth

(ga) Minister of Plantation and Commodities Datuk Seri Johari Abdul Ghani has urged for increased government funding for entrepreneurship agencies to provide more business opportunities to the public, emphasizing its role in economic development and income enhancement. He highlighted the importance of agencies like Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia (AIM), the

National Entrepreneurial Group Economic Fund (Tekun Nasional), and Majlis Amanah Rakyat (MARA) in this sector.

Minister Johari noted that while the success rate of entrepreneurship initiatives might be around 30 to 40 percent, they are crucial for job creation and poverty alleviation. He also discussed the upcoming 2025 Budget, indicating that his ministry would prioritize funding for oil palm replanting to support smallholders, particularly those with aging trees that yield less. [New Straits Times]

Malaysia: Banned religious material found during police raids

(oc) Police and the Johor Islamic Religious Department have conducted raids on properties owned by Global Ikhwan Services (GISB) in the southern state of Johor. This follows the discovery of abuse at GISB-owned children's homes (see AiR No. 38 September/ 2024, 3). Subsequent investigations led to more raids, uncovering evidence of banned religious materials.

The documents found are reportedly linked to Al-Arqam, a group banned by the Malaysian state in the 1990s for alleged heretical views. Johor's Islamic Religious Affairs Committee Chairman, Mohd Khalid, stated that pictures of former Al-Arqam leaders were found at one property, suggesting that GISB members, including those running the children's homes, were worshipping Al-Arqam and its former leader.

On September 25, Mohd Fared provided updates on the investigation, noting more arrests and additional children being rescued and cared for by the Johor Welfare Department. He stated that the Islamic Religious Department is working closely with the police to ensure justice and transparency in this case. [The Star]

Malaysia: Customs seizes 3.3 kg of drugs sent via postal service in Perak

(ga) The Royal Malaysian Customs Department (JKDM) in Perak has seized 3.3 kilograms of various drugs. Two men have been arrested for further investigation under Section 39B of the Dangerous Drugs Act 1952.

In addition to the drug seizure, JKDM reported the confiscation of 387,788 sticks of cigarettes and 2,273.53 litres of untaxed alcoholic beverages. This was

part of a broader operation conducted from August to September 2024. Thirteen men and one woman have been detained in connection with the illicit sale and possession of these items. [Utusan Malaysia] [Sinar Harian]

Myanmar: Junta extends first invitation to PDF for political dialogue, excludes NUG

(sc) The Myanmar junta extended an unprecedented invitation to the People's Defense Force (PDF) and ethnic armed organizations, urging them to seek political solutions to the nation's ongoing crisis. This marks the first time the junta has invited the PDF for political dialogue since the coup.

Notably, the National Unity Government (NUG) was excluded from the invitation. The junta's statement encouraged these groups to abandon armed violence and engage in the upcoming election through formal political channels. In addition to this call for dialogue, the junta announced that a national census will be conducted on October 1, aimed at ensuring the accuracy of voter registration. [The Irrawaddy 1]

The invitation has been met with widespread rejection. The NUG dismissed it as "a bogus offer," accusing the junta of making deceptive gestures for international appearance without real intentions for dialogue. A PDF official in Myingyan Township, where ongoing battles rage, echoed this sentiment, stating there is "no reason to engage in talks."

Similarly, ethnic armed groups like the Karen National Union (KNU), Chin National Front (CNF), and Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) rejected the offer, with the TNLA demanding recognition of the junta's crimes and removal from the terrorist list as preconditions for any dialogue. The Karenni State Interim Executive Council condemned the invitation as a self-serving ploy, vowing to resist the regime and push for a federal system. [Radio Free Asia] [The Irrawaddy 2]

Myanmar: Junta's troop offensive seeks to recapture towns in northern Shan State

(tl) Myanmar's junta is transferring troops from southern to northern Shan state in an effort to retake townships that were lost to anti-regime armed groups.

On September 25, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), one of the group from Three Brotherhood Alliance said that Myanmar junta had dispatched troops from its Eastern Central Command based in southern Shan state's Hko Lan township to the townships of Mongyai, Tangyan, and Nam Lan in northern Shan state.

Since Myanmar military junta's chief Gen. Min Aung Hlaing vowed to retake townships in northern Shan state, airstrikes have intensified, leading to a threefold increase in civilian casualties compared to August. According to *Radio Free Asia*, from September 1 to 24, junta airstrikes killed around 130 people and injured more than 70 others in eight states and regions, including Mandalay, Magway, Bago, Sagaing, Tanintharyi, Shan, Rakhine, and Kayah.

A former military officer and political analyst said that the Myanmar junta likely decided to move on northern Shan state amid Chinese pressure on the Three Brotherhood Alliance to stop fighting. The Three Brotherhood Alliance captured a total of 16 townships in northern Shan state between October 2023 and January 2024 as part of the first round of "Operation 1027".

However, in June the alliance launched a second round of the offensive, capturing the northern Shan State capital Lashio city, as well as Nawnghkio and Mogoke township. [Radio Free Asia][The Irrawaddy]

Myanmar: Flood aid advances

(nf) Latest news reports on September 27 regarding food security in Myanmar in the aftermath of the floods have stated 2,000 baskets of rice will be supplied over the course of 90 days in Ben Bui and Ba An towns. Additionally, clean water will be distributed to the Nay Pyi Taw council area, Kalaw, South Shan State and schools through the use of mobile water purifiers. [Myanmar Radio and Television]

Red cross brigade members have advanced to the Northern and Southern state of Shan providing assistance by those affected by floods under instruction from the Southern Shan State Supervisory Committee. Healthcare services were offered to flood victims at a mobile clinic in Hsison village by Red Cross members and rural health centers.

Members distributed carbolic soap, electrolyte powder, clothing, and sanitary pads, food and drinking water to Kalaw and Shwenyaung townships. Due to the

mass destruction of homes suffered by the impacts of floods and water erosion volunteers attended to these flood victims in temporary shelters providing purified water, instant noodles, clothes and snacks. [The Global New Light of Myanmar]

In addition, donations were made by the Myanmar Livestock Federation and companies such as the Myanmar Sun Thiri Company and Fortune International Limited. [Myanmar Ministry of Information]

Philippines: Former mayor Guo pleads not guilty to qualified human trafficking charge

(rv) In an online arraignment on September 27, dismissed Bamban, Tarlac Mayor Alice Guo pleaded not guilty to qualified human trafficking charges before a Pasig City Regional Trial Court. The charges stem from a February 2023 raid of a Philippine Offshore Gaming Operator (POGO). Authorities discovered 800 alleged victims of human trafficking during the raid, nearly half of whom were foreign nationals. Documents obtained linked Guo to the firm's illegal activities.

Guo fled the Philippines in August 2024 but was apprehended by Indonesian police in September. Her lawyer, Nicole Jamilla, stated that Guo maintains her innocence. In addition to human trafficking charges, Guo faces graft and corruption charges at a Valenzuela Regional Trial Court and a quo warranto case in a Manila court. Her nationality is also under scrutiny due to discrepancies in her background and her inability to provide consistent information during hearings. [Inquirer.net]

An Al Jazeera documentary presented at a House Quad Committee inquiry showed detained Chinese tycoon She Zhijiang, who claimed to be a former Chinese spy, alleging Guo's involvement with the Chinese Communist Party under the name Guo Hua Ping. Zhijiang stated that both he and Guo had worked for China's Ministry of State Security, warning her about the consequences of not telling the truth. Guo reacted angrily to these claims, stating her intention to sue Zhijiang for defamation. [Rappler] [Al Jazeera]

Philippines: Sister of President Marcos Jr., withdraws from administration coalition's

2025 Senate slate

(lm) Senator Imee Marcos has withdrawn from the administration coalition's senatorial slate for the upcoming 2025 elections, where she was initially included among 12 candidates announced by her brother, President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.

In a video statement released on September 28, the death anniversary of her father, former dictator Ferdinand E. Marcos, she explained her decision was motivated by a desire to avoid placing her brother in a compromising position and to eliminate any doubts among her true friends regarding her political alignment. Imee expressed her preference to run as an independent candidate, although she did not specify if this decision meant leaving the Nacionalista Party, which is part of her brother's coalition.

She intends to clarify her political status when she files her certificate of candidacy, which is set to take place from October 1 to October 8. In recent voter preference surveys, Imee ranked between 6th to 15th, suggesting a competitive race ahead. [Rappler]

Philippines: Survey results on approval ratings and upcoming elections

(rr) President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. received a 50 percent approval and trust rating in the September 2024 Pulse Asia survey, a decline from 53 percent and 52 percent in June, respectively. Additionally, 29 percent of respondents were undecided about his performance, while 21 percent expressed dissatisfaction. His highest approval rating was in Balance Luzon at 61 percent, with the lowest in Mindanao at 26 percent.

Vice President Sara Duterte saw her approval rating drop from 69 percent to 60 percent, and her trust rating fell from 71 percent to 61 percent. Senate President Chiz Escudero scored 60 percent approval, while Speaker Martin Romualdez had a lower rating of 32 percent. The survey included 2,400 respondents with a ±2 percent margin of error. [Philippine News Agency]

In a separate survey conducted from September 15 to 19, 2024, by Publicus Asia, President Marcos maintained stable approval and trust ratings, with an approval rating of 43 percent, down just 1 point from the previous quarter, and a trust rating of 32 percent. His highest support was in Central and North Luzon, while Mindanao again recorded the lowest ratings.

Inflation remained a key concern affecting his performance.

Vice President Duterte's approval declined to 40 percent, and her trust rating fell to 33 percent, likely due to recent controversies. Senate President Escudero also experienced a decline, while House Speaker Romualdez and Chief Justice Alexander Gesmundo saw relative stability in their ratings. This survey involved 1,500 respondents and had a ±3 percent margin of error. [Philippine News Agency 2]

In another development, a recent Publicus Asia survey revealed that ACT-CIS Party-list Rep. Erwin Tulfo is the leading senatorial candidate for the upcoming 2025 elections, with 42 percent voter support. He was followed by former senators Panfilo Lacson at 38 percent and Vicente Sotto III at 37 percent. Former President Rodrigo Duterte ranked fourth with 36 percent, while Senator Christopher Go secured fifth place with 33 percent. Other notable candidates included former senator Francis Pangilinan (30 percent) and incumbent senators Francis Tolentino, Imee Marcos, and Manny Pacquiao, all tied at 29 percent. Human rights lawyer Chel Diokno received 28 percent, and Senator Pia Cayetano garnered 27 percent. The survey was conducted with 1,500 respondents from a panel of over 200,000 registered Filipino voters, ahead of the election period, which begins with the filing of candidacies from October 1 to 8. [Philippine News Agency 3]

Philippines: Courts junking Ombudsman cases to clear up dockets, says Martires

(lm) In the Philippines, Ombudsman Samuel Martires revealed that courts are dismissing Ombudsman cases due to "inordinate delay" to clear their case dockets. During a Senate budget hearing on September 23, 2024, Martires noted that these dismissals, based on the defendants' right to a speedy trial, occur even though many cases are still within the legal statute of limitations. He couldn't specify the number of cases affected but expects more dismissals for the same reason.

Martires proposed that the Senate and House of Representatives define "inordinate delay" more clearly to prevent this. He highlighted that delays in preliminary investigations are currently counted toward the total delay period.

Additionally, the Office of the Ombudsman is seeking a budget of PHP 8.57 billion (USD 154.26 million) for

2025, but is prepared to accept the PHP 5.82 billion (USD 104.76 million) proposed by the Department of Budget and Management. [PhilStar]

Philippines: Quad Comm explores proposing to revive the death penalty

(rv) In the Philippines, the Quad Committee of the House of Representatives, which includes the Committees on Dangerous Drugs, Public Accounts, Human Rights, and Public Order and Safety, is exploring proposing reviving the death penalty for heinous crimes. This initiative arises from an ongoing investigation into issues such as illegal Philippine offshore gaming operators (POGOs), the drug trade, land grabbing by certain Chinese entities, and extrajudicial killings (EJKs) associated with the previous administration's war on drugs.

During the seventh public hearing of the joint panel, Rep. Robert Ace Barbers, the overall chairperson of the Quad Committee, stressed the necessity of key legislative reforms aimed at dismantling criminal syndicates, holding corrupt officials accountable, and restoring peace and order in the country. He noted that the committee's mission extends beyond merely exposing criminal activities; it seeks to implement comprehensive reforms through well-crafted legislation to address systemic gaps.

In addition to possibly revisiting capital punishment, the committee is considering amendments to several laws, including the Cybercrime Law, the Anti-Money Laundering Act, and the Land Registration Act, along with revisions to the Local Government Code to prevent the abuse of power by local government units. [Philippine News Agency] [The Manila Times]

Philippines: Growing support for divorce legalization

(rr) In the Philippines, there is increasing support for legalizing divorce due to the high costs and lengthy processes of marriage annulments. Currently, the country is one of the few globally that does not recognize divorce, leaving couples to navigate a complicated annulment process that can take up to two years and cost around PHP 500,000 (approximately USD 8,862).

In response, the Absolute Divorce Bill has advanced in the legislative process, proposing a cap on divorce costs at PHP 50,000 (USD 886) and allowing self-representation in certain cases.

Despite opposition from conservative factions and the Catholic Church, advocates argue that legalizing divorce will provide essential options for those trapped in costly annulments and could positively impact the economy by increasing demand for housing and family spending. [Al Jazeera]

Philippines: 'Forced' resignation due to insults, hostility is illegal, Supreme Court rules

(lm) The Supreme Court (SC) of the Philippines ruled that "forced" resignations due to insults and hostility from employers are illegal and constitute constructive dismissal. In a recent decision, the SC stated that when employers create unbearable working conditions—such as verbal abuse, demotion, and hostile behavior—forcing employees to resign, it is considered constructive dismissal.

The case involved Jonathan Dy Chua Bartolome, an employee of Toyota Quezon Avenue, Inc. (TQAI), who faced hostility from senior management, including demotion and insults, ultimately leading to his resignation in 2016. Bartolome filed a complaint, which was initially upheld by the Labor Arbiter and the National Labor Relations Commission. However, the Court of Appeals ruled in favor of the company, stating Bartolome voluntarily resigned.

The SC overturned the decision, ruling in Bartolome's favor, and stated that the company's actions showed "extreme dislike and hostile behavior," leaving Bartolome with no choice but to resign. The SC ordered the company to pay Bartolome back wages, separation pay, damages, and attorney's fees. [Rappler]

Philippines: Seafarers worry over 'pro-shipowner' provision in new Magna Carta

(lm) Filipino seafarers are expressing concerns about provisions in the newly enacted Magna Carta of Filipino Seafarers, which they believe favor shipowners over workers.

The law, signed by President Marcos Jr. on September 23, aims to uphold the rights of the country's seafarers, who constitute a significant portion of the global maritime workforce. However, certain provisions, such as an "execution bond," have raised alarm among seafarers. This bond mandates that seafarers post a bond when appealing decisions, placing financial burdens on those who have already faced job loss. Critics argue this benefits shipowners and complicates the claims process for injured seafarers.

There are also concerns about the exclusion of fishing vessel workers from the law's coverage. The timing of the Magna Carta's implementation is significant, as seafarer deployment is increasing post-pandemic, raising the potential for greater risks and claims for compensation. [Rappler]

Philippines: 3,000 foreign POGO workers with downgraded visas leave country

(rr) The Bureau of Immigration (BI) announced that approximately 3,000 foreign workers from Philippine Offshore Gaming Operators (POGOs) have left the country due to downgraded visas. As of September 24, a total of 5,955 visas were downgraded, with 55 percent of those affected already having exited the Philippines.

POGO workers are required to voluntarily downgrade their visas by October 15, and deportation proceedings will begin for those who remain beyond December 31. [Philippine News Agency]

Philippines: Human Rights Watch criticizes 'red-tagging' of labor leaders

(lm) A recent report by *Human Rights Watch* alleges that the Philippine government, under President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., has engaged in a practice known as "red-tagging," which involves labeling union leaders and members as supporters or combatants of communist insurgency. The report claims this practice has led to harassment, intimidation, and violence against labor activists, undermining their rights to organize and bargain collectively.

According to the report, local officials and military personnel frequently visit the homes of union leaders in the Southern Tagalog region, threatening them with

repercussions related to alleged affiliations with the New People's Army (NPA), the armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). This environment of fear has reportedly caused many activists to withdraw from unions or end affiliations with labor federations critical of the government. Human Rights Watch highlights that since 2016, numerous union leaders have been killed after being red-tagged.

The organization calls for the disbanding of the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict, which it claims has exacerbated the red-tagging issue. It also urges the Marcos administration to protect labor rights and thoroughly investigate reported abuses.

Of note, the report also underscores the responsibility of foreign companies operating in the Philippines to conduct due diligence to avoid complicity in these alleged human rights violations, particularly in light of recent European Union regulations, most notably the new EU Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD), aimed at ensuring corporate accountability for human rights and environmental impacts. [Human Rights Watch]

Philippines: President Marcos Jr. opens first Electric Vehicle battery plant

(rr) President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. inaugurated the Philippines' first electric vehicle (EV) battery factory, marking a significant step toward clean energy. The Australian-owned lithium-iron-phosphate facility, located in New Clark City, aims to produce two gigawatt-hours of batteries annually by 2030, powering 18,000 EVs or half a million home systems. The factory will create 2,500 jobs and inject PHP 5 billion (USD 89.2 million) into the economy yearly, supporting the country's renewable energy transition. [ABS CBN News]

Singapore: More citizens see city-state as a full democracy, but also with 'minor problems'

(lm) A survey by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) found that more Singaporeans in 2023 viewed their country as a full democracy compared to 2020, but many also acknowledged "minor problems" with how democracy functions. The survey, conducted among

over 1,000 citizens, showed an increase in positive views of Singapore's democratic status, particularly among those with higher incomes and education.

The survey found that most Singaporeans still see democracy as the best form of government, with 72.2 percent agreeing despite its issues. Satisfaction with democracy in Singapore remained high, with over 80 percent expressing contentment with how democracy has functioned over recent years.

Despite the overall positive view, there was also strong resistance to authoritarian scenarios, with a significant majority disapproving of the idea of a single political party or replacing elections with a strong leader. Additionally, the survey highlighted a shift in priorities, with 28.3 percent of respondents stating that economic development and democracy are equally important, a marked increase from 8.2% in 2020.

The findings also identified three archetypes of citizens based on their attitudes toward democracy: "Contented Democrats," who are positive about democracy and the current government system; "Contingent Democrats," who moderately support democracy and have a somewhat positive view of the system; and "Ambivalent Democrats," who are more critical. [Channel News Asia]

Singapore: Authorities turn to AI in fight against new synthetic drugs

(fi) Singaporean authorities are using artificial intelligence (AI) to address the increasing threat of new synthetic drugs, also known as new psychoactive substances (NPS). These lab-made drugs, which mimic traditional narcotics, often evade traditional drug tests due to their complex and rapidly changing chemical makeup. This delay in detection and legal classification causes authorities to struggle to keep pace.

As of 2023, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reported 1,228 distinct cases of NPS across 141 countries. In Singapore, NPS emerged as a significant threat in 2018, with cases rising from fewer than three per year between 2014 and 2017 to 235 in 2018. By 2020, NPS had become one of the top three drugs abused by new drug users. According to the Central Narcotics Bureau (CNB) annual report, over 3,000 NPS pills were seized in Singapore, marking a 1,823 percent increase from the previous year.

To address this, the CNB and the Home Team Science and Technology Agency (HTX) are developing AI

algorithms for detecting new NPS before they are officially classified. [Asia One] [CNA] [CNB] [UNODOC] [HTX]

Singapore: Health Minister announces enhanced subsidies for community hospitals

(fi) During the National Medical Excellence Award ceremony, Health Minister On Ye Kung announced that, starting October 1, subsidies at community hospitals will be enhanced to match those of acute hospitals. This new subsidy framework will provide patients with subsidy rates of 50 percent to 80 percent throughout their inpatient stay. Additionally, the enhancement will allow the subsidization of advance diagnostic services such as CT and MRI scans, as well as relevant drugs at the community hospitals. This initiative aims to minimize delay in transferring patients to step-down care and reflects a broader shift toward community-based healthcare, addressing the changing needs of an aging population. [Ministry of Health] [The Straits Times]

Singapore: Government launches 24-hour anti-scam hotline

(fi) Singapore has launched a 24-hour anti-scam hotline, part of the ScamShield Suite, which also includes a website, app, and social channels on WhatsApp and Telegram. This initiative aims to address the increasing number of scams, which rose by 16.3 percent in the first half of 2024, with at least USD 295 million (SGD 385.6 million) lost. Additionally, the government revealed that in the first half of 2024, self-effected transfers accounted for 86 percent of all scam cases reported. [Singapore Police Force] [CNA]

In related news, the Singapore Police Emergency Short Message Service (SMS) Sender ID has been updated from 71999 to 70999 as of October 1. This change is part of the Ministry of Home Affairs' effort to standardize the Sender IDs used by Home Team Departments, enhancing public recognition and protection against scams. In the first half of 2024, government impersonation scams were among the top 10 scam types, with average losses reaching approximately USD 116,534. [Singapore Police Force] [SPF Statistics]

Singapore: 4 in 5 students under 18 want media literacy classes

(lm) A survey by Milieu Insight, a market research firm based in Singapore, found that four in five students under 18 in the city-state want media literacy classes added to their curriculum, with over 60 percent encountering fake news, mostly from social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok. [ChannelNews Asia]

Thailand: Ruling Pheu Thai, opposition People's Party retreat on constitutional amendment

(bk/lm) A recent push by Thailand's ruling Pheu Thai Party to amend the constitution article by article has been abruptly halted due to significant opposition from key coalition partners, including the Bhumjaithai and United Thai Nation parties. The coalition partners expressed concerns that the proposed amendments might inadvertently strengthen opposition factions, particularly those aligned with Palang Pracharath Party leader Prawit Wongsuwan.

The proposed amendments included changes to election eligibility, which would prohibit individuals with uncompleted criminal sentences from running for the lower House for at least ten years. Additionally, there was a move to change the requirement from "evident integrity" to "no actions clearly indicating dishonesty," along with clarifications regarding conditions under which ministerial status may be terminated. Other amendments aimed to set stricter ethical standards for those in ministerial roles, require a two-thirds majority of judges for Constitutional Court decisions, and impose stricter guidelines for cases involving MPs' unusual wealth. Pheu Thai also proposed allowing for the drafting of a new constitution.

Following a Cabinet meeting on September 24, Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra met with coalition leaders, resulting in a decision to abandon the amendment plans. Observers believe that this move was aimed at preventing a legal backlash against Paetongtarn herself, who faces several ethics-related complaints, including those concerning her shares in the controversial Alpine Golf Club. [Bangkok Post]

After the ruling Pheu Thai Party announced it would not pursue changes regarding the court's ethical oversight, the main opposition People's Party also

decided to temporarily set aside its proposal to limit the Constitutional Court's powers, considering that it might jeopardize support for other constitutional amendment initiatives.

The party's plan to amend the constitution to redefine the Constitutional Court's role is part of seven proposed constitutional amendments. Instead, the party will continue to push for its remaining six constitutional amendment packages, which include undoing the effects of the 2014 coup, strengthening anti-corruption mechanisms, enhancing civil rights, reforming the military by ending conscription, improving parliamentary efficiency, and making the constitutional amendment process easier. The People's Party is focused on ensuring these amendments are passed before the next general election, as drafting a completely new constitution may not be feasible within that timeframe. [The Nation]

Thailand: Pheu Thai to push for new constitution after Senate vote maintains double majority requirement

(lm) Thailand's ruling Pheu Thai Party plans to meet with coalition partners to push for a new constitution after the Senate voted on September 30 to retain the double majority requirement for passing a referendum on a new supreme law. The Senate voted 164-21 in favor of keeping this requirement, which means that both a high voter turnout and majority approval are needed, making it more challenging for a new charter proposal to succeed. Prior to this vote, the House of Representatives had approved a simpler majority requirement for the referendum.

Parliament's lower house, the House of Representatives, had already approved the charter referendum bill, prior to the Senate vote. However, before this week's vote, a Senate ad hoc committee voted to revert to the countering the House's approval of a simple majority. In light of this, concerns were raised by some minority senators over the sudden reversal in the Senate committee's decision, with one senator suspecting that external influences may have affected the outcome. However, the Senate committee chairman dismissed these claims as unfounded. [Bangkok Post 1] [Bangkok Post 2]

Given the situation, Prime Minister's Office Minister Chousak Sirinil indicated that a joint committee could be formed to reconcile differences between the lower and upper houses regarding the referendum's voting requirements. Time is critical, as the government plans

to hold the referendum alongside provincial council elections on February 2, 2025, and seeks to ask voters if they support drafting a new charter while keeping the definitions of Thailand as a unitary state and retaining the monarchy's role.

Pheu Thai is also considering amending Section 256 of the constitution to allow for a new charter to be drafted and put to a referendum directly, which aligns with the government's policy. The next steps involve either finding a resolution between the Senate and the House or suspending the bill for 180 days if no agreement can be reached. [Bangkok Post 3]

Thailand: Election Commission dismisses two complaints against prime minister

(bk) The Election Commission (EC) of Thailand has rejected two out of over ten complaints filed by the public that sought the dissolution of certain political parties and the removal of Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra along with some Cabinet members. EC Secretary-General Sawaeng Boonmee stated that the two complaints were dismissed because they did not meet the required criteria, lacking specific allegations of wrongdoing or violations of legal articles. Instead, they seemed to pose general questions without substantiation. [The Nation 1]

Meanwhile, political activist and Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP) member Ruangkrai Leekitwattana who had previously lodged complaints against the Prime Minister regarding alleged ethical breaches, has filed at least two separate petitions with the Election Commission to investigate Prime Minister Paetongtarn.

The first petition centers around the prime minister's recent appointments of Somsak Thepsutin as Public Health Minister and Pol Col Tawee Sodsong as Justice Minister. Ruangkrai alleges that these ministers granted privileges to former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, Paetongtarn's father and de facto leader of the ruling Pheu Thai Party, during his time at the Police General Hospital, which he claims may violate constitutional ethical standards.

In his complaint, Ruangkrai referenced a National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) report that raised concerns about preferential treatment for Thaksin while he was detained. The NHRC report highlighted issues with regulations regarding inmate transfers for medical treatment, suggesting that these could allow inmates to remain outside prison longer than intended without proper oversight. [Bangkok Post]

The second petition accuses Prime Minister Paetongtarn of violating anti-corruption laws. He claims that Paetongtarn held a 30 percent stake in Alpine Golf and Sports Club after being elected prime minister on August 16, despite the law prohibiting Cabinet members from holding more than 5 percent of shares in a company. Paetongtarn transferred the shares to her mother on September 3, but the registration occurred on September 4, both dates after her election.

Political analysts believe Ruangkrai's actions may be politically motivated, aimed at the Pheu Thai Party on behalf of PPRP leader Prawit Wongsuwan. Ruangkrai has previously lodged complaints against Paetongtarn, including one for making a "mini heart" gesture during a photo session. [The Nation 2]

Thailand: People's Party chief appointed opposition leader by royal command

(lm) The People's Party leader, Natthaphong Ruengpanyawut, has been appointed as the opposition leader by royal command, effective immediately.

The People's Party was formed after the main opposition Move Forward Party (MFP) was dissolved by the Constitutional Court in August for attempting to challenge the constitutional monarchy. All former MFP members joined the People's Party, and Natthaphong was appointed as its leader. [The Nation]

Thailand: Parliament's lower house to probe PPRP leader Prawit

(lm) House Speaker Wan Muhamad Noor Matha has authorized the House Ethics Committee to investigate Gen Prawit Wongsuwon, leader of the Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP), following a petition regarding his frequent absences from parliamentary sessions. Since July 3, 2023, Gen Prawit has reportedly attended only 11 out of 95 meeting days, submitting personal leave 83 times and taking one sick day.

The investigation comes after Prompong Nopparit, a former spokesman for the ruling Pheu Thai Party, raised concerns that Gen Prawit's absences might indicate a failure to fulfill his responsibilities as a party-list MP. Prompong has also petitioned the National Anti-Corruption Commission to look into whether

these absences violate ethical standards or constitute a misuse of power.

While the House regulations permit MPs to take leave for various reasons, the complexity of determining whether Gen Prawit's absences are inappropriate remains a challenge. The Ethics Committee will review the situation, but they cannot compel Gen Prawit to provide statements as a court would. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Government launches THB 10,000 digital wallet scheme amid funding uncertainties

(lm) The Thai government's THB 10,000 (USD 310) digital wallet handout scheme has launched, with the government distributing the cash handouts to 12.4 million state welfare cardholders and 2.1 million disability cardholders. [Bangkok Post 1] [Bangkok Post 2]

Initially designed as a “digital wallet” stimulus program for 45 million Thais aged 16 and over, there are now uncertainties about future funding and the amount recipients will receive in subsequent rounds, which may be reduced to THB 5,000 (approximately USD 140) per person due to financial constraints and the need to assist flood victims.

Of note, recipients of the handout can use the funds as they choose, including paying off debts, according to Deputy Prime Minister Phumtham Wechayachai. The government is focused on addressing people's problems, despite some critics suggesting the scheme could be viewed as vote-buying. The government also warned lenders against intimidating recipients to use the funds to settle debts, with police taking action against any violations. [Bangkok Post 3]

As recipients of the handout can use the funds as they choose, anti-drunk driving advocates are urging recipients to avoid spending the funds on alcohol to prevent accidents. [Bangkok Post 4]

Despite the program, some opposition politicians argue that the reduced budget for the handout scheme will not significantly boost economic activity, as many businesses continue to report slow sales.

Thailand: Deputy Finance Minister Julapun pushes for talks on casino

complex plan

(lm) Deputy Finance Minister Julapun Amornvivat is pushing for talks involving relevant state agencies to discuss the government's plan to allow casinos to operate within entertainment complexes. The discussion, expected to conclude by mid-October, will focus on the mechanism for tax collection, which must comply with the State Fiscal and Financial Disciplines Act. The act mandates that tax collection responsibilities remain with the Finance Ministry's Customs, Revenues, and Excise departments, preventing the delegation of this task to a separate committee.

Julapun also addressed the House's suggestion to establish a fund to assist individuals with gambling problems, stating that further discussions are needed, as existing rules forbid setting up redundant funds. He noted that the entertainment complex project would be open to private investors, including major entertainment companies like Walt Disney and Universal Studios, provided they follow the required regulations. The government aims to develop clear rules to regulate the business once the entertainment complex bill receives House approval, with careful assessment to prevent negative impacts on the economy and society. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Labour Minister apologizes for wage increase delay as committee awaits BoT appointment

(lm) Thailand's Labour Minister, Phiphat Ratchakitprakarn, apologized to minimum wage earners after the tripartite wage committee once again postponed a decision on raising the daily wage to THB 400 (USD 12.40) due to a lack of quorum. The delay occurred as the Bank of Thailand (BoT) has yet to appoint a new representative to the committee, causing meetings to stall. The minister is hopeful that a new meeting could be arranged soon once the BoT names a replacement.

Despite the delay, the government remains committed to implementing the wage increase, with Phiphat noting that the current wage has seen minimal adjustments in the past 12 years, averaging only about THB 8 annually. He also emphasized that the wage increase is crucial, though he acknowledged it may face opposition from employer representatives, particularly regarding a nationwide uniform rate.

The current wage varies between THB 330 and THB 370, and the proposed change would affect larger companies or factories with 200 or more workers. Phiphat also mentioned plans to eventually increase the minimum wage to THB 600 by 2027, although he stressed the need for a sustainable approach in line with Thailand's economic conditions. [Bangkok Post 1] [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: Supreme Administrative Court selects new president

(lm) Prasitsak Meelarp, the vice president of the Supreme Administrative Court, has been appointed as the new court president, with his selection receiving royal endorsement. His official start date is set for October 1, as he succeeds Vorapot Visrutpich, who is retiring after reaching the mandatory age limit of 70.

Prasitsak was nominated by the Judicial Commission of the Administrative Courts and his appointment was approved by the Senate on September 3 before being forwarded for royal endorsement.

He holds a bachelor's degree in law from Ramkhamhaeng University and a master's degree in political science from Thammasat University, and he has passed the Thai bar exam. His career includes serving as a public prosecutor from October 1997 to January 2001 at the Office of the Attorney General before joining the Central Administrative Court in February 2001. Since October 2020, he has held the position of vice president of the Supreme Administrative Court. [Bangkok Post]

Prasitsak Meelarp, the vice president of the Supreme Administrative Court, has been appointed as the new court president of Thailand, with his selection receiving royal endorsement. His official start date is set for October 1, 2024, as he succeeds Vorapot Visrutpich, who is retiring after reaching the mandatory age limit of 70.

The appointment follows a significant development in which the Senate in April voted down the nomination of former deputy president Wissanu Waranyoo for the same position. Wissanu's nomination was rejected in a secret ballot by a vote of 158 to 45. He had been nominated by a standing committee that vetted his background and ethical behavior record. However, his close association with Piyabutr Saengkanokkul, a mentor to core members of the Move Forward Party known for advocating monarchy reform, drew criticism.

Thailand: Phairach Pornsomboonsiri appointed as new Attorney General

(msz) Phairach Pornsomboonsiri has been appointed as the new Attorney General of Thailand, succeeding outgoing Attorney General Amnat Jedcharoenruk. His appointment, which has received royal endorsement, will take effect on October 1. Parliament's upper house, the Senate, approved his appointment earlier this month, with a significant majority of 184 votes in favor, two against, and nine abstentions.

Phairach holds a bachelor's degree in law with First Class Honours from Chulalongkorn University and a Master of Law from Tulane University. He is recognized for his work in rights protection and has collaborated with the Foreign Ministry, where prosecutors are tasked with providing legal advice and lectures to Thai embassies abroad. Additionally, he served as an Ordinary Member of the executive committee of the International Association of Prosecutors (IAP), which facilitates global knowledge exchange among prosecutors. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Kitrat Phanphet appointed as acting national police chief

(msz) Thai Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra has appointed Deputy police chief Pol Gen Kitrat Phanphet as the acting national police chief, effective October 1. This appointment follows the retirement of Pol Gen Torsak Sukvimol at the end of September. Kitrat, who graduated from Police Cadet Class 41 and the Armed Forces Academies Preparatory School Class 25, is scheduled to retire in 2026.

The process for appointing a new permanent police chief will commence after October 3, when new regulations from the Police Commission come into effect. There are three potential candidates for the position: Pol Gen Kitrat, who is the most senior; police inspector-general Pol Gen Kraiboon Suadsong; and deputy police chief Pol Gen Thana Choowong. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Former CU Savings Coop chairman sentenced to five years for USD 39 million embezzlement

(lm) The Criminal Court in Thailand has sentenced Bancha Chalapirom, the former chairman of the Chulalongkorn University Savings Cooperative (CU Savings Coop), to five years in prison for embezzling over THB 1.4 billion (approximately USD 39 million) from the cooperative. The court ruled that Bancha was guilty under Sections 353 and 254 of the Criminal Code. Following the sentencing, Bancha requested bail to appeal the case, which the court granted.

The Department of Special Investigation (DSI) found that Bancha, who served as chairman from 2012 to 2014, approved loans to several credit unions and cooperatives. The DSI alleged that he misused his authority by dishonestly misappropriating assets for the benefit of third parties, violating multiple sections of the Criminal Code.

As of 2023, the CU Savings Coop had 15,592 members and total assets amounting to THB 35.76 billion (approximately USD 1.1 billion), with liabilities of THB 17.7 billion (approximately USD 547 million), including deposits and short-term loans. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Bail for Thanong in Rolls Royce-THAI bribes case

(lm) Former Thai finance minister Thanong Bidaya was released on bail by the Criminal Court for Corruption and Misconduct Cases on September 25 after being arraigned on bribery charges related to a decades-old deal involving Rolls-Royce engines for Thai Airways International (THAI). The lawsuit, filed by the National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC), accuses Thanong of violating the State Employees Offences Act while serving as THAI chairman and adviser on long-term investments.

The charges stem from an investigation launched after Rolls-Royce admitted to paying THB 254 million (USD 7.87 million) in bribes between 1991 and 2005 to secure engine deals for Boeing and Airbus aircraft. Also charged is Kaweepan Ruengpaka, THAI's former vice president for finances. Both defendants are prohibited from traveling abroad unless granted court permission, and their plea hearing is set for October 7. The NACC pursued the case after the Office of the Attorney General declined to do so. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Khlong Luang mayor removed from office amid corruption allegations

(bk) The mayor of Khlong Luang municipality in Pathum Thani province, Ekkapot Panyaem, has been dismissed from office following a National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC) ruling that found merit in a corruption case against him.

The case involves alleged irregularities in procuring Covid-19 relief "survival bags" worth THB 11 million (USD 320,000) in 2021, which were purchased from a company with whom Ekkapot had a prearranged agreement, violating legal procurement protocols. It was also found that the number of bags purchased exceeded the number of people registered to receive aid.

Ekkapot, formerly a folk singer, was also previously arrested in 2023 over a separate corruption case involving embezzlement of THB 3 million (USD 87,000) related to a landfill project. [The Nation]

Thailand: Outgoing Chiang Rai governor faces probe over absence

(lm) Thailand's Interior Ministry is initiating a disciplinary investigation against outgoing Chiang Rai governor Puttipong Sirimart due to his repeated absences during relief operations in the flood-affected province. Deputy Prime Minister and Interior Minister Anutin Charnvirakul announced the probe on September 29, a day before Puttipong's retirement.

The investigation was ordered following observations of Puttipong's minimal presence during a recent visit by Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra and most cabinet members, who were in Chiang Rai to oversee flood relief efforts. Puttipong reportedly attended only one meeting with the prime minister before leaving for Bangkok to attend his retirement party.

Anutin characterized the governor's actions as negligent and stated that his impending retirement should not excuse his lack of attendance. He expressed that Puttipong's absence is a "disgrace" to the Interior Ministry. Previously, Puttipong had attributed his absence during a visit by Anutin and Deputy Prime Minister Phumtham Wechayachai on August 24 to a missed flight from Bangkok to Chiang Rai. The province has been severely impacted by recent floods, necessitating effective leadership during relief operations. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Panel blames ‘sole importer’ for invasive fish

(lm) A House of Representatives sub-committee in Thailand has held a sole importer responsible for the spread of the invasive blackchin tilapia fish, which has caused widespread ecological damage across 79 districts in 19 provinces. The fish have been linked to significant declines in shrimp populations and the disruption of local aquatic ecosystems.

The sub-committee, chaired by opposition People’s Party MP Wayo Assawarungruang, recommended that state agencies, including the Department of Fisheries and the Department of Marine and Coastal Resources, take legal action against the company under Section 97 of the National Environment Quality Promotion and Protection Act 1992 for importing the species.

The sub-committee's investigation revealed that the company imported 2,000 blackchin tilapia from Ghana in 2010, with the stated goal of improving the Nile tilapia species at a research center in Amphawa district, Samut Songkhram. Permits had been issued by the Department of Fisheries for previous imports in 2006 and 2008, but the company did not act on them at the time. Despite this, the blackchin tilapia have since spread to multiple areas, some of which are not connected to rivers or the sea, indicating potential human involvement in their distribution.

DNA tests confirmed that blackchin tilapia found in six provinces between 2017 and 2021 were genetically identical to fish samples from Ghana and the Ivory Coast, confirming their origin. These findings raised further concerns about how the species spread so widely and quickly across regions not naturally linked to each other.

CP Foods Plc, part of the Charoen Pokphand agribusiness conglomerate, has acknowledged that it imported the fish in December 2010 with permission from the Department of Fisheries for research purposes. However, the company claims that the project was terminated a month later after the fish became weak and died. According to CP Foods, the fish were disposed of in accordance with regulations, and the process was documented under Department of Fisheries guidelines. The company has also pursued legal action against an activist who accused them of being responsible for the spread of the species. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Final ruling issued on Central Village access dispute

(lm) The Central Administrative Court has upheld a 2019 order for Airports of Thailand (AoT) to stop blocking access to the Central Village luxury shopping center near Suvarnabhumi Airport, resolving a five-year dispute. The conflict began in August 2019 when AoT blocked entry to the mall, claiming legal authority over Highway 370, the road providing access. The court ruled that AoT had no right to block access and ordered it to pay THB 2.99 million (USD 92,780) plus 7.5 percent interest to Central Pattana (CPN) and its mall operator for damages. The court's final ruling follows a 2019 injunction that had temporarily lifted AoT's blockage. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Marriage Equality Bill becomes law

(lm) Thailand's Marriage Equality Bill has officially become law following royal endorsement and publication in the Royal Gazette, making Thailand the third country in Asia, after Taiwan and Nepal, to recognize same-sex marriage. The law, which will take effect on January 22, 2025, allows same-sex couples to legally register their marriages and includes adoption and inheritance rights.

The law replaces gender-specific terms like "men," "women," "husbands," and "wives" with gender-neutral language, and amends 60-70 sections in the Civil and Commercial Codes. However, legal scholar Vitit Muntarbhorn noted that other related laws, including those on surrogacy, gender recognition, and employment, still need to be amended to ensure full legal protections for LGBTQ+ communities. [Bangkok Post 1]

On January 22, 2025, over 1,000 same-sex couples will join mass weddings to mark the enactment of Thailand's Marriage Equality Bill. Bangkok Pride, in partnership with the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration, aims to host 1,448 couples, symbolizing the amended sections of the Marriage Law. The event is open to local and international couples, with 183 already registered. [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: Anti-trafficking center opened

(lm/msz) The Thai government has opened the Thailand Victim Identification and Referral Centre in Don Muang district to strengthen efforts in combating human trafficking and improve the country's ranking in the US State Department's Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report.

The center, part of the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) launched in 2022, will serve as a temporary shelter for trafficking victims, providing basic amenities and support services. It is managed by the Royal Thai Police, the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration, and the Ministries of Social Development and Human Security and Labour. Additional centers are planned for provinces including Chiang Mai, Phuket, and Chon Buri, as Thailand strives to elevate its TIP ranking from Tier 2 to Tier 1. [Bangkok Post 1]

In related updates, police recently arrested two Thai women and a Chinese man for their alleged involvement in a human trafficking network that tricked Thai women into prostituting themselves in the West African state of Benin. The trio were charged with human trafficking, involvement in prostitution, being members of a crime organization and misleading people into leaving the country. [Bangkok Post 1]

Thailand: Hundreds of illegal workers arrested in Ayutthaya

(lm) Authorities in Ayutthaya's Uthai district arrested 272 illegal workers from Myanmar during a raid on a construction camp on Tuesday morning. The workers, who had crossed into Thailand through Mae Sot district, each paid job brokers THB 20,000 (USD 620) for travel and work arrangements. They earned THB 500 (USD 15.50) per day as laborers, while skilled workers made THB 600 (USD 18.60) per day. The workers cited Myanmar’s civil war as the reason for seeking employment in Thailand. This was the second raid on the camp in two years, and all the detained workers will be charged and deported back to Myanmar. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Online gold sellers face fraud rap

(lm) A high-profile online retailer and her husband face fraud allegations after selling substandard gold jewelry to customers. Twenty people filed complaints with the Consumer Protection Police Division, while an

additional 135 customers were unable to attend. The estimated damages from 155 complainants total at least THB 2 million (USD 62,080).

The couple allegedly sold gold jewelry with lower gold content than advertised during live sessions on social media. Customers seeking refunds from the couple's gold shop in Bangkok were told they must return both the jewelry and any free gifts to receive a full refund. Some customers expressed frustration, with others agreeing to refunds after signing agreements not to pursue legal action. There are also concerns about the unknown origin of some jewelry items, which cannot be resold to other shops. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Opposition People's Party calls for urgent action as statute of limitation nears in Tak Bai incident

(lm) Opposition MP Romadon Panjor from the People's Party has urged Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra to ensure that police take prompt action in two cases related to the 2004 Tak Bai massacre, as the 20-year statute of limitations approaches on October 25. Romadon emphasized the urgency of the situation, urging the Office of the Attorney General and security authorities to move forward with the prosecution before the statute expires, which would result in the suspects escaping legal accountability. [Bangkok Post 1]

The Tak Bai massacre occurred in Narathiwat, one of Thailand's southern border provinces, during a protest outside the Tak Bai police station. The demonstration initially called for the release of six detainees but escalated when security forces intervened. Seven protesters were shot and killed, and over 1,300 were detained. Of those detained, 78 died from suffocation and being crushed after being forced into overcrowded army trucks for transportation to a military camp two hours away.

The incident shocked the nation and became a key event in Thailand's ongoing southern insurgency. Then-Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, father of current Prime Minister Paetongtarn and de facto leader of the ruling Pheu Thai Party, issued an apology but stopped short of accepting full responsibility for the deaths. Despite the tragedy, no one has ever been prosecuted for the deaths, leading to a longstanding sense of injustice among affected communities and human rights advocates.

Two criminal cases stemming from the massacre remain unresolved. Gen Pisal Wattanawongkiri, now a Pheu Thai MP and former Fourth Army Region commander, is one of the key suspects who has yet to be prosecuted. His claim of parliamentary immunity has delayed legal proceedings, even though the Court of Justice requested his prosecution. A witness examination hearing on September 12 saw no appearance from Gen Pisal or his co-defendants.

Arrest warrants have been issued for six co-defendants, but authorities have been slow to act on Gen Pisal's case. Justice Minister Tawee Sodsong recently said he has not seen an arrest warrant for Gen Pisal, indicating it is the responsibility of the police to act. Tawee also noted that Gen Pisal has reportedly taken leave for medical treatment abroad, but his whereabouts remain unclear. [Bangkok Post 2]

In addition to Gen Pisal's case, another related case involves the indictment of eight more suspects, including a former commander of the 5th Infantry Division. The Attorney General resolved to indict these individuals on September 12, placing the responsibility on police and security forces to ensure they stand trial. [Bangkok Post 1]

Thailand: Human rights commission seeks Land Bridge changes

(lm) Thailand's National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) has urged Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra to reconsider the Land Bridge megaproject, warning that it may not be worth the investment and could harm the environment and local communities. The project, which would link two major ports in Chumphon and Ranong via a highway and railway, is estimated to cost THB 1 trillion (USD 31 billion).

The NHRC called for clearer information from relevant government agencies and new public hearings to gather feedback from affected groups, including local fishermen, farmers, and ethnic minorities. Concerns were raised about the environmental and economic impacts, with the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) considered incomplete.

The NHRC highlighted a 2016 study recommending Ranong be preserved as a natural resources area and found the project to be not worth the investment. The commission is advocating for further studies on the project's potential harm before proceeding. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Investigation launched into substandard meals at Phetchaburi school

(lm) The Basic Education Commission (OBEC) and the National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC) are investigating Rajaprajanugroh 47 School in Phetchaburi, Thailand, after photos of substandard meals circulated online. The images showed meals like plain rice with deep-fried sausages still in their plastic casings and undercooked pork in a noodle dish, prompting concerns about food safety.

If found negligent, the school may face disciplinary action. The NACC is also reviewing the school's budget documents, suggesting that social media complaints might stem from internal conflicts. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Private hospitals opting out of government health scheme

(lm) Private hospitals in Thailand are increasingly opting out of the Social Security Office (SSO) health insurance program due to mounting financial losses from low reimbursement rates. Over the past decade, the number of private hospitals participating in the scheme has dropped from 123 to 93. The Private Hospitals Association (PHA) attributes this decline to the SSO's reduced payments for treating patients with serious or chronic conditions.

In 2020, payments to affiliated hospitals under the "adjusted relative weight" formula were set at THB 12,000 (USD 373), but this was reduced to THB 10,000 (USD 311) in 2022 and further cut to THB 7,200 (USD 224) in recent months. These cuts are reportedly due to budget constraints within the Social Security Fund.

PHA President Paiboon Eksaengsri warned that if this situation continues, more private hospitals will leave the program, placing a greater burden on public hospitals. While the Public Health Minister acknowledged the issue and suggested increased funding, no official response has been given by the SSO or the Labour Ministry. The SSO serves about 25 million members in Thailand. [Bangkok Post 1]

In related updates, Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra has expanded the 30-baht universal healthcare coverage scheme to allow Bangkok residents to access healthcare services at all registered clinics, pharmacies, and healthcare units, in addition to

hospitals. This upgrade transitions the scheme from "30-baht treatment for all diseases" to "30-baht treatment at all locations."

The updated scheme, which began in four pilot provinces on January 7, is now available in 46 provinces, including the capital. Cardholders needing minor medical care can seek assistance at local healthcare units, such as pharmacies and primary clinics, at no cost. These units offer care comparable to large hospitals but with shorter wait times. [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: Health ministry seeks tax perks to fight non-communicable diseases

(lm) The Public Health Ministry of Thailand is proposing tax incentives for individuals as part of a campaign to combat Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs), according to Minister Somsak Thepsutin. With approximately 400,000 deaths annually attributed to NCDs in Thailand, the ministry aims to emphasize prevention over treatment.

Somsak highlighted the role of lifestyle factors such as tobacco use, physical inactivity, poor diets, and air pollution in increasing NCD risk. To promote awareness, the ministry plans to leverage one million village health volunteers nationwide to implement campaigns like the "Eat wisely and not get sick" initiative.

Reducing the prevalence of NCDs could alleviate significant health expenses for the government, estimated at THB 1.6 trillion (USD 44 billion) annually, which includes THB 130 billion (USD 3.6 billion) on medicines alone. The ministry is considering compensating health volunteers for their efforts and is exploring potential tax incentives for food manufacturers that reduce salt and sugar in their products.

Additionally, the ministry is working on drafting Thailand's first NCD bill to encourage healthy practices. Discussions on individual tax incentives for maintaining good health will take place in an upcoming meeting. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Government estimates North flood damage to be about THB 3 billion

(msz) On September 24, Deputy Finance Minister Julapun Amornvivat referred to the estimation of the Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council that the flood damage in the North cost around THB 3 billion. Julapun added that the flood damage had not spread widely enough to have significant effects on this year's economic growth. [Bangkok Post 1]

Meanwhile, relevant agencies and departments have been working to assist and compensate flood victims in the North and Northeast regions. According to Apisak Sawatdirak, manager of the Mae Sai Office of the Provincial Waterworks Authority (PWA), around 80 percent of the water supply has been restored. Mae Sai District Chief Narongpol Kid-an said that there are approximately 500 households living in various shelters under the care of officials and volunteers until they can restore their homes and normal lives.

Separately, Thailand's Commerce Minister Pichai Naripthaphan has ordered the Department of Internal Trade (DIT) to take legal action against backhoe operators in flood-affected provinces for price-gouging on mud removal services. Violators could face fines of up to THB 10,000 for failing to display prices, and those found guilty of overcharging may face up to seven years in prison or fines of up to THB 140,000. [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: Strong baht hitting exporters and tourism, says central bank

(lm/msz/bk) The Thai baht has appreciated rapidly, affecting both exporters and tourism spending, according to the Bank of Thailand (BoT). The baht reached its highest level in 31 months, trading at THB 32.235 (USD 1.00). It has risen 5.8 percent year-to-date, making it the second-best performing currency in the region after Malaysia's Ringgit. The stronger baht has resulted from a weak US dollar and strong regional currencies like China's Yuan and Japan’s Yen.

The baht's appreciation comes ahead of a meeting between the BoT and the Finance Ministry, where discussions will focus on the currency's impact and the country's inflation target. This follows government pressure on the BoT to cut interest rates to stimulate the economy and to alleviate household debt. However, the central bank has resisted, keeping rates unchanged at 2.5 percent, the highest in a decade, and a further rate review is scheduled for October 16.

Exporters are impacted by reduced profits when converting earnings back to the local currency, while tourism spending is also being affected. In August, exports rose by 11.4 percent compared to the previous year, and the country recorded a trade surplus of USD 2.4 billion. Against this backdrop, the Thai Chamber of Commerce and private sector groups have also called for rate cuts to slow the baht's appreciation, warning for example that a strong baht could hinder Thailand's rice exports, with only 8.5 million tons of rice expected to be exported compared to rivals like India and Vietnam. [Thai PBS World]

Despite this, the BoT forecasts economic growth of 2.6 percent for 2024, following last year's 1.9 percent expansion, although fiscal policy uncertainties pose challenges to the outlook. [Bangkok Post 1]

On a related note, foreign direct investment (FDI) in Thailand's logistics sector reached THB 6.371 billion (USD 0.2 billion) in July, primarily focusing on goods and passenger transport. Investors mainly hailed from China, the Netherlands, South Korea, Japan, and Hong Kong. By the end of July, over 43,800 logistics companies were operating in Thailand, though 81 firms shut down during the month. [The Nation]

To support the agricultural sector, the Thai cabinet approved a THB 23.17 billion (USD 718 million) budget allocation for the second and third phases of a debt moratorium for farmers, effective from October 2024 to September 2026. [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: Senator calls for action to prop up SMEs

(lm) Senator Nantana Nantavaropas urged the Thai Commerce Ministry to take action in support of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) affected by multinational e-commerce platforms selling cheap, low-quality goods. She raised concerns about the rapid growth of platforms like Temu, which offer products at low prices by eliminating middlemen. This influx of inexpensive goods from Chinese manufacturers is impacting Thai SMEs and contributing to a growing trade deficit with China, which increased by 15.66 percent in the first half of the year.

Commerce Minister Pichai Naripthaphan acknowledged these concerns and said he discussed the issue with the Chinese Ambassador, who assured compliance with Thai import regulations. Pichai also emphasized the need for collaboration between the Finance Ministry and the Bank of Thailand to support

SMEs, including reducing debt burdens through lower interest rates. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Carbon credits 'key' to winning climate fight

(lm) The Royal Forest Department (RFD) highlighted the significance of carbon trading schemes in preserving Thailand's forests. During a recent event, RFD Director-General Surachai Achalaboon pointed to the success of a pilot carbon credit program in Ban Khong Ta Bang, Phetchaburi, where the community has earned THB 7.09 million (USD 220,940) from carbon credits since joining the Thailand Voluntary Emission Reduction Program (T-Ver) in 2015. The community's initiatives, such as planting trees and rehabilitating old-growth forests, have generated 5,259 tons of carbon credits.

Surachai noted the growing demand for carbon credits, especially from the industrial sector, which will create sustainable income for local communities while helping Thailand achieve carbon neutrality by 2050 and net-zero emissions by 2065. Currently, 121 community forests are registered under T-Ver, with 276 more in the process of applying. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Infrastructure developments

(lm/bk) The Expressway Authority of Thailand (Exat) plans to establish public-private partnerships (PPPs) for the THB 20.7 billion (USD 642 million) Srinakarin-Suvarnabhumi Airport Expressway project, expected to open in 2030. Exat is currently gathering feedback through public hearings and aims to finalize project details in the coming months, followed by an environmental impact assessment [Bangkok Post]

In parallel, the Transport Ministry is seeking Cabinet approval for THB 44.44 billion (USD 1.37 billion) to construct the first phase of Motorway No. 8. This phase will span 61 kilometers from Nakhon Pathom, an outlying province of Bangkok, to Pak Tor district in Ratchaburi, a western province bordering Myanmar. The ministry anticipates that funding approval will occur by the end of this year or early next year, allowing for land expropriation to begin in 2026, with construction set to start in 2027 and completion expected by 2031. [The Nation]

Thailand: New Navy chief backs submarine deal with China

(lm) The newly appointed Thai navy chief, Admiral Jirapol Wongwit, has expressed support for continuing the navy's submarine procurement project with China. This announcement came after a command handover ceremony, where Adm Jirapol emphasized the importance of the submarine acquisition for the navy's capability-building and maritime security.

The submarine is being constructed by China Shipbuilding & Offshore International Co. under a government-to-government deal valued at THB 13.5 billion (USD 387 million). However, the construction was delayed due to the Covid-19 pandemic and an issue involving the engine. Originally, the plan was for the submarine to be fitted with a German-made diesel engine, but Germany refused to sell it to China due to its classification as a military item, forcing a delay in the procurement.

Following Germany's refusal to supply the engine for Thailand's submarine procurement deal with China, Bangkok in October last year announced that it would no longer acquire the S26T Yuan-class submarine. However, this decision was reversed in May, following a visit by Chinese military and shipbuilding personnel to Bangkok.

In October last year, Bangkok announced that it would no longer pursue the S26T Yuan-class submarine. However, this decision was reversed in May after a visit from Chinese military and shipbuilding representatives to Thailand. The submarine will now be delivered with a Chinese-manufactured engine despite previous objections from Thai officials. To compensate for deviations from the original contract, China has offered additional support, including tools, a training simulator, and insurance for the project.

Adm Jirapol said he plans to meet with Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister Phumtham Wechayachai to discuss the project and its importance. He also mentioned his readiness to defend the scheme before House panels, emphasizing the significance of the submarine for maintaining maritime security. The frigate procurement plan, which also forms part of the navy's capability-building, faced a funding setback after the House committee rejected a request for THB 17 billion (USD 487 million) from the 2024 budget, with the navy planning to seek funds in 2026. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Narathiwat bomb blast injures eight soldiers

(lm) Eight soldiers were injured in a roadside bomb explosion in Rangae district, Narathiwat, on September 26, in what authorities believe was an attack by insurgents. The bomb, attached to a power pole, was detonated as a military pickup truck carrying soldiers from the 4805 Ranger Task Force drove past.

In a separate incident in Pattani, authorities were on alert after surveillance cameras were stolen from three locations in Thung Yang Daeng district. The thefts raised concerns that they might be part of a plan to launch an attack on security forces, prompting preventive measures. [Bangkok Post 1]

Additionally, on September 29, a car bomb explosion in Narathiwat injured two soldiers and caused significant damage to nearby houses close to the residence of the Tak Bai district chief. [Bangkok Post 2]

Timor-Leste: Government launches solar energy project

(mu) The government of Timor-Leste, in partnership with the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and funded by Japan, launched a solar energy project on September 24. Solar panels will be installed to provide stable power for preserving medicines and vaccines, reducing operational costs and carbon emissions.

The project is expected to improve energy sustainability and healthcare services, with completion planned for March 2025. It also includes other national infrastructure, like rural health posts and schools, and aims to improve energy access for remote households.

The initiative is part of a broader project aimed at promoting renewable energy and climate resilience across Pacific island countries. [Government of Timor Leste]

Vietnam: Court sentences former government accountant to death for embezzlement

(lm) A Hanoi court sentenced Nguyen Hoang, the former chief accountant of the National Institute of Hygiene and Epidemiology, to death for embezzling

over VND 152 billion (approximately USD 6.2 million). His theft occurred between March 2009 and February 2023, during which he altered financial statements to conceal his actions. Hoang admitted to using the embezzled funds for personal expenses and gambling.

Additionally, two institute directors and another former accountant received prison sentences of three to four years for their negligence, which contributed to the situation. This sentencing follows the death penalty given to real estate tycoon Truong My Lan for her involvement in a USD 12 billion fraud case, raising awareness about the use of capital punishment for financial crimes in Vietnam. [TIME]

Vietnam: Inmates on hunger strike to demand release of political prisoners

(lm) Three Vietnamese inmates at Prison No. 6 in Nghe An province have initiated a hunger strike to protest harsh prison conditions and demand the release of all political prisoners. Trinh Ba Tu, Bui Van Thuan, and Dang Dinh Bach commenced their strike to call for political reform and the end of the Communist Party's monopoly on power, emphasizing the need for a rule of law that protects human rights.

Relatives of the inmates report that they have been subjected to "inhumane" treatment, including confinement in overcrowded and unsanitary "tiger cages," which limits their ability to exercise and interact with other prisoners. Bui Van Thuan's wife described the cramped conditions, stating that inmates had to manage basic hygiene within their cells.

This is not the first hunger strike for the three inmates; they have previously protested against their treatment and conditions. Trinh Ba Tu is serving an eight-year sentence for "disseminating documents" against the state, Dang Dinh Bach for tax evasion, and Bui Van Thuan for "propaganda against the state." [Radio Free Asia]

Vietnam: Hundreds protest outside labor brokerage in Hanoi

(wn) Hundreds of Vietnamese workers staged a protest outside Educa Vietnam, a labor brokerage firm in Hanoi, after being informed at the last minute that they could not travel to South Korea for construction jobs. Each worker had paid nearly VND 300 million

(USD 12,200), only to be told their flights were postponed, leaving them stranded.

Educa Vietnam attributed the delay to workers failing to show up as registered. However, government officials disclosed that the company lacked the necessary license to send workers abroad. The Labor Ministry further clarified that official worker placements are arranged directly between Vietnamese provinces and South Korea, without the involvement of intermediaries. [Radio Free Asia]

Vietnam: Domestic violence persists despite legal progress

(lm) Domestic violence is a significant issue in Vietnam, with a 2019 national study finding that nearly 63 percent of ever-married women experienced some form of abuse. Despite progress in laws addressing domestic violence, many victims are still reluctant to report incidents due to stigma and inadequate legal protections. But support services are providing hope to victims, with increasing awareness leading more women to report their experiences. [Radio Free Asia]

Vietnam: Musk's SpaceX plans USD 1.5 billion investment

(wn) Elon Musk's SpaceX plans to invest USD 1.5 billion in Vietnam, according to the Vietnamese government. This investment could help advance discussions regarding the launch of Starlink satellite services in the country, which had previously stalled since late 2023 due to concerns over company ownership and regulatory issues.

Vietnamese President To Lam mentioned the proposal following a meeting with SpaceX's Tim Hughes in New York, emphasizing the need for collaboration to finalize preparations for the investment. Although the specific areas of investment were not disclosed, Hughes stated that SpaceX aims to provide Starlink services to Vietnam, focusing on benefits for education and disaster prevention.

Vietnam presents a promising market for satellite internet, given its population of 100 million and the challenges posed by its mountainous terrain and aging internet infrastructure. However, the investment could provoke tensions with Beijing, particularly regarding operations in the disputed South China Sea.

Previous discussions had been complicated by Vietnamese regulations that limit foreign ownership in local firms and require domestic data storage. SpaceX has suppliers in Vietnam, aligning with the country's status as a major industrial hub for U.S. companies. [Reuters]

Vietnam: Trade in agriculture, forestry, fisheries nears USD 70 billion turnover

(wn) In the first half of September 2024, Vietnam's trade turnover of agricultural, forestry, and fishery products reached USD 1.48 billion, with exports at USD 1.03 billion and imports at USD 448 million. From January to mid-September, the total trade turnover in these sectors was nearly USD 69.84 billion, with a trade surplus of USD 12.4 billion.

Wood and forestry products led exports at USD 10.9 billion, followed by seafood (USD 6.68 billion), fruit and vegetables (USD 5.18 billion), coffee (USD 4.13 billion), and rice (USD 4.06 billion). Major imports included animal feed (USD 3.45 billion) and cashew nuts (USD 2.55 billion). With a strong year-on-year growth rate, Vietnam is on track to meet its 2024 export target of USD 55 billion for agricultural, forestry, and fishery products. [Asian News Network]

Vietnam: High-speed rail fares set at 75 percent, construction to begin by 2027

(wn) Vietnam's upcoming high-speed rail project, set to link Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, will have fares set at 75 percent of flight tickets, ranging from VND 1.7-6.9 million (USD 69-280).

The 1,500-kilometer rail line, with a speed of up to 350 kilometers per hour, is estimated to cost VND 1.7 quadrillion (USD 69 billion). Construction is expected to start in 2026-2027, and the rail will have 23 passenger stations and five cargo stations across 20 provinces. The project aims to boost annual GDP by 0.97 percent and will primarily serve passenger transport, with the existing railway network focusing on cargo. [Vietnam Express]

Vietnam: Emerging sectors face labor shortages amid surging recruitment demand and skill gaps

(cc) educational programs. Recruitment demand has surged by 30 percent compared to 2023, particularly in key southern economic regions and fast-growing industries such as construction, real estate, and logistics. Despite the increased demand, 85 percent of companies report labor shortages, with 30 percent facing severe gaps.

The absence of structured training for new industries like e-commerce, coupled with changing job seeker expectations, exacerbates the issue. Many companies, including those in e-commerce and printing, have resorted to developing in-house training programs to build a skilled workforce.

Additionally, job seekers are increasingly prioritizing salaries, work environment, and company culture, while businesses face challenges in recruitment efficiency and applicant screening. Flexible work arrangements are also gaining popularity, with about 30 percent of employees opting for part-time or freelance positions. [Vietnam News]

Vietnam: National Assembly Standing Committee calls for review to expand health insurance eligibility

(wn) The National Assembly (NA) Standing Committee of Vietnam has called for a comprehensive assessment of expanding health insurance eligibility to ensure fairness and sustainability. During their 37th session, deputies discussed the amended Law on Health Insurance, recommending a study to determine who qualifies for insurance and what treatments are covered.

Key proposed changes include transitioning from a four-tier to a three-level healthcare system, effective January 1, 2025, alongside other amendments affecting 40 provisions related to insurance eligibility, payment responsibilities, benefits, and fund management.

The NA's Social Affairs Committee supports expanding eligibility but emphasizes the need for a detailed evaluation of the impact on state-subsidized groups and those covered by employers.

Additionally, the NA Standing Committee reviewed a draft Law on Teachers, which outlines key policies regarding teacher standards, recruitment, and working conditions. The committee called for more specific rights for educators and policies to attract and retain high-performing teachers. [Vietnam News]

Vietnam: Ho Chi Minh City aims for high-tech sector to drive 40 percent of regional economy by 2030

(cc) Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), Vietnam's largest city and a major economic hub in the south, is embarking on a bold plan to increase the high-tech sector's contribution to its Gross Regional Domestic Product (GRDP) to 40 percent by 2030.

The city aims to transform into a modern industrial hub by 2045, aligning with national resolutions that call for substantial improvements in socio-economic infrastructure. To achieve this ambitious target, the city will focus on industrial modernization, infrastructure development, workforce enhancement, and administrative reform. [Vietnam News 1] [The Saigon Times]

Despite occupying only 0.63 percent of Vietnam's land area and comprising 9.4 percent of its population, HCMC plays a significant role in contributing to the national GDP and tourism. However, HCMC has faced challenges, including declines in its contributions to exports and industrial production. Currently, high-tech industries account for just 23 percent of the city's GRDP.

In related updates, at the 5th Ho Chi Minh City Economic Forum on September 25, key figures, including the Prime Minister, discussed the necessity for the city to shift toward digitalization and sustainability. The forum proposed restructuring the economy to emphasize digitalization and core industries, aiming to rejuvenate growth in the region. [Vietnam News 2] [People's Army Newspaper Online]

Vietnam: Government, industry associations partner to promote sustainability

(cc) Vietnam's Ministry of Industry and Trade (MoIT) has signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with industry associations in the textile and footwear industry to promote sustainable practices within the sector. This agreement formalizes collaboration between the government and stakeholders, including the Vietnam Textile and Apparel Association (VITAS) and the Leather and Footwear Association of Vietnam (LEFAS).

The MoU emphasizes the development of practices centered on resource conservation, energy efficiency, and eco-friendly production methods. While specific initiatives are yet to be detailed, potential areas of focus include the adoption of cleaner technologies, the use of recycled materials, enhanced waste management practices, and sustainability training for workers. [Vietnam News] [Vietnam.vn]

International Relations, Geopolitics and Security in Asia

Australia, US, UK defense chiefs meet as AUKUS sharpens focus on China deterrence

(alk) During the third AUKUS Defense Ministerial in London last week, the US, UK, and Australia discussed progress in deterring China's assertive actions in the Indo-Pacific and reaffirmed their commitment to the alliance. The three countries aim to bolster military capabilities and security in the Indo-Pacific, with two primary goals: equipping Australia with nuclear-powered submarines and developing advanced defense technologies.

Under the first primary goal, Australia is on track to acquire conventionally armed, nuclear-powered submarines by the early 2030s. US and UK efforts have already seen Australian sailors undergoing nuclear submarine training, and a US submarine visited an Australian port, marking a significant milestone. Australia's government has invested heavily in workforce development and industrial base expansion to support the submarine program. The three nations are also working with the International Atomic Energy

Agency (IAEA) to ensure compliance with non-proliferation standards.

Under the second primary goal on emerging defense technologies, including artificial intelligence, quantum computing, cyber, and hypersonic capabilities, the three nations will conduct joint experiments on unmanned maritime systems this year. Collaborative efforts are underway to strengthen supply chains, streamline export controls, and accelerate innovation in advanced defense technologies. The partnership is also engaging with Canada, South Korea, and New Zealand to explore further collaborations on these technologies.

The meeting emphasized the importance of a coordinated, rules-based international order, reinforcing the long-term nature of the AUKUS partnership to enhance regional stability and security. [US Department of Defense] [AUKUS Defence Ministers' Meeting Communique]

In response, China has criticized AUKUS, accusing it of provoking a nuclear arms race, but defense officials say AUKUS aims to enhance security and stability in the region. Recent joint military exercises between China and Russia underscore growing ties between the two nations. Lessons from the conflicts in Ukraine and Israel are also shaping AUKUS strategies, particularly in areas like drones and munitions stockpiles. [CBS News]

Chinese foreign minister condemns trade sanctions, pushes for peace at United Nations General Assembly

(alk/to) China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi, during the United Nations General Assembly, called for an end to escalating conflicts worldwide, emphasizing the need for peace and cooperation. He condemned unilateral sanctions, trade blockades, and the imposition of a Cold-War mentality, particularly in relation to US-led policies. In addition, he held various meetings with his Russian, Ukrainian, and US counterparts as well as with Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian.

Wang reiterates China's vision of multipolar world

During his speech at the General Assembly, Wang highlighted China's vision for a multipolar world, stressing that all countries should be treated as equals. He called for a global order based on fairness, justice, and mutual respect, aligning with President Xi Jinping's initiatives for peace, security, and sustainable development. In line with this vision, Wand reaffirmed

China's opposition against hegemony and support for technological cooperation, and urged action against climate change, while supporting developing countries through initiatives like the Belt and Road and tariff reductions for African nations.

Additionally, Wang affirmed China's commitment to peaceful development, advancing global governance, and fostering dialogue among civilizations. He reiterated that China opposes interference in internal affairs, particularly regarding Taiwan, asserting it as an integral part of China. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China 1]

Wang holds bilateral talks with Russian and Ukrainian counterparts

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi held separate meetings with his Russian and Ukrainian counterparts and Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian on the sidelines of last week's United Nations General Assembly.

During his meeting with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha, Wang emphasized China's commitment to maintaining strong relations with Ukraine and its willingness to provide further humanitarian aid. Wang also restated China's position advocating for a peaceful resolution of the conflict, emphasizing the need for continued dialogue between all parties.

Following the meeting, Sybiha stated "the perspective of further contacts at the highest level", indicating the potential for talks between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, was discussed. Xi has met Russian leader Vladimir Putin many times in the past two years. However, he has yet to speak to the Ukrainian president in person. [South China Morning Post 1]

In a separate meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, Wang discussed the long-standing strategic partnership between China and Russia, with both sides pledging to enhance bilateral cooperation. Lavrov expressed Russia's willingness to work closely with China on deepening diplomatic and economic relations. [Global Times]

According to a statement of the Russian foreign ministry, the Wang and Lavrov emphasized "the importance of enhancing the two countries' foreign policy coordination at international platforms, such as the UN and its Security Council, BRICS, SCO, APEC, G20, and other formats." They also shared the view "that Western countries' illegitimate sanctions … are unacceptable," stressing the effect of undermining the

stability of the global economy and universal forms of trade and economic cooperation. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Russia]

The meetings took place on September 25 as part of broader diplomatic efforts by China to engage with both sides of the conflict and position itself as a mediator in the ongoing conflict.

Blinken questions China's peace efforts in meeting with Wang

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken raised doubts about China's sincerity in promoting peace in Ukraine, raising concerns over Chinese exports that support Russia's military efforts during his meeting Wang. Blinken emphasized that China's actions, especially its delivery of machine tools and microelectronics to Russia, is in odds with its claims of seeking peace.

Blinken highlighted that while China has not directly provided weapons to Russia, its exports of critical technologies make it possible for Russia to continue its war in Ukraine. He warned that Washington may press further sanctions if China continues to assist Russia in this way. Blinken's comments come as the US and China are attempting to ease tensions through diplomacy, though significant disagreements remain. [France 24]

In response, Wang Yi emphasized that China's position on the Ukraine conflict is "aboveboard" and has consistently focused on promoting dialogue and peace. He urged the US to cease its accusations, sanctions, and what he called "smearing" of China, restating that China is not involved in the conflict. [Ministry of Foreign Relations, China 2]

Wang chairs "Friends for Peace" ministerial meeting

Wang co-chaired the inaugural meeting of the "Friends for Peace" group at the United Nations, alongside Brazilian Foreign Minister Mauro Vieira. This group, composed of 17 Global South countries, aims to promote a peaceful resolution to the Ukraine crisis.

During then meeting China and Brazil, alongside Algeria, Bolivia, Colombia, Egypt, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Mexico, South Africa, Turkey and Zambia, sought to advance long-standing aims to mediate peace between Russia and Ukraine, proposing a conference for "fair discussion."

Wang emphasized the importance of de-escalating the conflict and restated China's role as a mediator, stating the need for reconciliation, dialogue, and respect for

national sovereignty. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China 2] He further reiterated China's opposition to using the Ukraine crisis as a pretext for sanctions. [South China Morning Post 2]

In his address to the General Assembly, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in his speech firmly rejected the renewed peace plan proposal from China and Brazil, which suggests international peace conference to be held “at a proper time that is recognized by both Russia and Ukraine, with equal participation of all parties as well as fair discussion of all peace plans.” [Government, Brazil]

He questioned Brazil and China’s motivations behind their peace plan and stressed that the only acceptable peace plan is for Russia to withdraw its forces, in line with the UN Charter's principles of independence and territorial integrity.

The U.S. has repeatedly accused China of materially supporting Putin’s war effort, with officials in Washington claiming that Moscow’s invasion would not be sustainable without Beijing’s help. [Radio Free Asia] [Reuters]

Wang pushes for cease fire in Middle East, reaffirms support for Iran

Wang advocated for a ceasefire in the Middle East following the death of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, urging dialogue and a two-state solution for Israel and Palestine. He also stressed that outside nations should not stoke division in Asia. [South China Morning Post 3]

Wang, furthermore, met with Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian, reaffirming China’s backing of Iran in maintaining its sovereignty amid growing tensions between Israel and Hezbollah. Wang Yi pledged that China would continue to support Iran in safeguarding its national security and dignity.

In a separate statement made in Tehran, Chinese officials noted that China has always been a reliable partner for Iran, opposing external interference and sanctions. The Chinese foreign ministry emphasized China’s commitment to promoting peace, advocating for an immediate ceasefire in the ongoing Gaza conflict. [South China Morning Post]

Italian police uncover drug gang using Chinese money brokers

(to) Italian police have arrested 61 people across four countries and seized EUR 60 million as part of a major international operation against drug trafficking and money laundering. The investigation revealed relations between Albanian drug gangs and Latin American cartels, while also uncovering a complex money laundering system involving Chinese money brokers, who acted as Intermediaries for financial transactions.

The cash from drug sales was funneled through a Chinese gang, which used a shadow banking network to transfer illegal funds abroad. The operation, which began in 2020, involved encrypted communications and cooperation with law enforcement agencies in Albania, Switzerland, and Poland. Europol also supported the investigation, which has resulted in multiple arrests and the seizure of significant amounts of cash and drugs. [Reuters]

China fires ICBM into Pacific Ocean

(to) China successfully launched an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) into the Pacific Ocean, its first public test of such a missile in more than four decades, with images of the missile released. The launch was conducted on September 25 by the People's Liberation Army Rocket Force. The ICBM, carrying a dummy warhead, landed in an assigned area in the Pacific. [Ministry of Defense, China]

It marks the first such test over the Pacific Ocean in more than four decades after Beijing test-fired the first ICBM into the South Pacific in 1980. Since then, China has quietly conducted more ICBM tests, mostly over its own territory. Most of them landed in the Xinjiang region. [CNN]

The US and France confirmed it had received a notice in advance, with the Pentagon calling it a positive step in preventing miscalculations and French Polynesia President Moetai Brotherson informing that the missile landed near the exclusive economic zone. [South China Morning Post]

China affirmed that the launch was part of routine military training and not directed at any specific country. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China]

However, analysts believe it sends a strong message to the US and its allies as the test comes as tensions escalate in the region, with China and Russia conducting joint naval exercises near Japan and ongoing disputes in the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea.

The test has further deepened concerns among neighboring countries, particularly Japan, which was not informed beforehand. Furthermore, Australia and New Zealand demanded an explanation from Beijing about test launch and announced they would share their views with Pacific Island Forum representatives at the United Nations General Assembly. [AA] [Radio Free Asia]

China holds military exercises in South China Sea

(to) The Chinese military furthermore carried out combat readiness patrols in parts of the South China Sea from September 30 to October 1, as reported by state media. These patrols follow a series of military drills conducted by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) over the weekend, aimed at growing combat capabilities in the region. The Southern Theater Command of the PLA oversaw these exercises, which were intended to maintain peace and stability in the disputed waters. [Reuters 1]

The patrols came on the heels of military exercises the Chinese air and naval forces held in the South China Sea on September 28.

China's People's Liberation Army conducted patrols and early warning exercises around the disputed Scarborough Shoal. This is part of China's regular maneuvers in a waterway where warships spend over 20,000 days annually. [Reuters 2]

PLA monitors foreign warships in Taiwan Strait

(to) The Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) closely monitored a group of warships from Australia, New Zealand, and Japan as they sailed through the Taiwan Strait on September 25.

According to China's Ministry of Defense, the Australian destroyer HMAS Sydney, New Zealand's supply ship HMNZS Aotearoa, and Japan's destroyer JS Sazanami made the passage through the Taiwan Strait. The PLA tracked and monitored the warships when they were passing by.

Chinese observers and military officials have labeled the passage as a political move, accusing the three countries of using the passage to show off military strength under the guise of "freedom of navigation."

The Chinese Foreign Ministry reiterated that Taiwan is a core issue for China's sovereignty and territorial integrity, adding that foreign military movements in the Taiwan Strait are seen as provocative. [Global Times]

New Zealand's Defense Minister Judith Collins confirmed that this was the first time a New Zealand naval vessel had passed through the Taiwan Strait since 2017. Collins described the transit as a routine activity in accordance with international law. Australia's Department of Defense echoed this statement, stating that the passage demonstrated their commitment to a free and open Info-Pacific region. [Reuters]

Chinese nuclear-powered submarine sinks

(to) US Department of Defense has confirmed that a Chinese nuclear-powered attack submarine sank earlier this year, potentially embarrassing Beijing as it expands its military capabilities. The incident, first reported by the Wall Street Journal, and occurred between May and June, involved China's newest nuclear-powered submarine sinking next to a pier. [Wall Street Journal]

The cause of the sinking is still unclear, and there is no confirmation if the submarine carried nuclear fuel at the time.

China's embassy in Washington stated that they had no information to provide on the matter. The US Department of Defense has been monitoring China's military developments, as the country continues to expand its navy, which is now the largest in the world.

This comes as tensions rise in the Asia-Pacific region, with concerns over China's increasing military capabilities. On September 26, China conducted a rare intercontinental ballistic missile launch into the Pacific, raising concerns about its nuclear buildup (see article in this edition). [Reuters]

Mongolia's president and foreign minister meet world leaders in the 79th UN General Assembly

(fs) During the 79th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, Mongolian dignitaries President Ukhnaagi Khurelsukh and Foreign Minister Battsetseg Batmunkh held meetings with representatives from

several countries aimed to enhance bilateral relations and mutual cooperation.

Mongolian president meets Spanish prime minister

During the meeting on September 24, Mongolian President Ukhnaagi Khurelsukh and his Spanish counterpart Pedro Sánchez addressed the potential for deepening bilateral relations between both countries in the political, cultural and economic spheres.

Furthermore, Sánchez affirmed that Spain will work to intensify relations between Mongolia and the European Union and serve as a bridge to connect Mongolia with other EU member states. [Montsame]

Mongolian foreign minister meets counterparts

In her meeting with the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of Vietnam Bui Thanh Son, Mongolian Minister of Foreign Affairs Battsetseg Batmunkh emphasized that the two nations' long-standing friendly diplomatic relations, which were established 70 years ago, have been successfully growing and bolstered on the basis of the "Principle of Friendship and Cooperation."

Both sides expressed willingness to finalize the Joint Declaration on Strengthening the Comprehensive Partnership between Mongolia and Vietnam, in order to strengthen cooperation in areas like trade, investment, tourism, and culture. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mongolia 1]

In meeting with Portuguese counterpart Paulo Rangel, the two ministers discuss ways to improve cooperation in a number of mutually beneficial sectors and address other global issues of common concern were also discussed. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Mongolia 2]

With Albanian Foreign minister Igli Hasani, Batmunkh discussed ways to deepen bilateral ties in areas of mutual interest, with an emphasis on advancing collaboration in the tourism and cultural sectors. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mongolia 3]

During talks with her Dominican Republic counterpart Roberto Álvarez, Batmunkh discussed collaboration to further strengthen bilateral relations. Both ministers reached an agreement on the exemption of visa requirements for diplomatic, official, and regular passport holders. They also signed a Memorandum of Understanding on Political Consultation between both nations, which is aimed at facilitating the implementation of mutually beneficial measures in

politics, trade, economy, tourism, education, and culture. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mongolia 4] [Sonin]

Meanwhile, Batmunkh and her Czech counterpart Jan Lipavský discussed the possibility of establishing direct flights between the capitals of the two nations as a means of strengthening bilateral ties as well as promoting trade and people-to-people exchanges. The two ministers also discussed the upcoming 75th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between both countries in 2025, and the official trips and events that will take place to commemorate it. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mongolia 5]

During talks with South Korean Foreign Minister Cho Tae-Yul, both sides reaffirmed commitment to work on the Economic Partnership Agreement between Mongolia and the Republic of Korea, which is currently being negotiated.

South Korea is considered to be a key "third neighbor" for Mongolia, which are countries other than its immediate neighbors, Russia and China, with which Mongolia seeks to establish strong diplomatic, economic, and strategic ties to balance the Russian and Chinese influence and diversify its international relationships. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mongolia 6] [The Diplomat]

Mongolian Prime Minister receives UN Resident Coordinator and FAO Representative

(fs) Mongolian Prime Minister Oyun-Erdene Luvsannamsrai held a meeting with Resident Coordinator of the United Nations in Mongolia Tapan Mishra and Representative of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations in Mongolia Vinod Ahuja on September 25.

Luvsannamsrai and Mishra discussed several cooperation issues, such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF 2023-2027), which is being implemented together by the UN and Mongolia, as well as the 2024-2028 Action Program of the Government of Mongolia. Luvsannamsrai stressed the importance to align the UNSDCF with the government's 2024–2028 Action Plan and underlined his eagerness to enhance the cooperation between Mongolia and the UN.

Afterwards, Luvsannamsrai received FAO representative in Mongolia Vinod Ahuja and expressed Mongolian's interest to deepen relations and collaboration with the Food Agriculture Organization. He also expressed gratitude for the FAO's significant contribution to the Government's social and economic development objectives, noting that over the previous 50 years, FAO has implemented more than 200 projects and programs in Mongolia. [Montsame]

South Korea at the UN General Assembly

(jb/ac) South Korean Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul attended the 79th session of the United Nations General Assembly, held from September 22 to 23 at the UN headquarters in New York.

Cho reaffirms multilateralism

With a focus on the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, Cho argued that despite the growing cynicism towards world peace and international cooperation, the importance of multilateralism should not be lost. Invoking the history of UN intervention in South Korea after the Korean War and the support that the UN lent to Korea in rebuilding the nation with prosperity and security, Cho emphasized the need for the support of UN agencies and programs.

South Korea, he announced, would be a Global Pivotal State, as envisioned by President of South Korea Yoon Suk Yeol. It would play the role of a facilitator for international cooperation and diplomacy as a peaceful resolution to conflict rather than a resort to aggressive means. South Korea is an elected member to the Security Council for the 2024-2025 circuit; it aims to work on conflict resolution and reconciliation processes during this term.

Cho stated the need to rethink the Security Council (SC) structure as well as the criteria for elected membership and asked for the SC to cast a wider net in terms of its elected membership. [Yonhap News] [United Nations] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea 1]

South Korea urges action on Ukraine

Regarding the ongoing war in Ukraine, Cho called for immediate action to cease all hostilities while condemning the deepening military cooperation and continued arms transfers between Russia and North Korea (see AiR No. 26, June/2024, 4).

He emphasized that any cooperation that directly or indirectly contributes to the North Korean regime's military capabilities constitutes a blatant violation of UNSC sanctions. Cho strongly urged North Korea to comply with the relevant UNSC resolutions and commit to dialogue and non-proliferation. [Reuters] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea 2]

North Korean human rights abuses

Cho also highlighted the concerning human rights abuses in North Korea, including the abduction of citizens, detentions, unrepatriated prisoners of wars, the forced repatriation of defectors back to North Korea.

Moreover, Cho underscored North Korea's control of information from the outside world, citing the Cultural Act, which prohibits its subject from watching or to engaging with South Korean cultural materials. He highlighted that teenagers have been recently executed for watching a South Korean drama (see AiR No. 29, July/2024, 3).

Cho underscored the importance to highlight North Korea's human rights on the multilateral stage. Cho expressed the urgency to highlight the linkage between North Korea's human rights abuses and its nuclear and missile capabilities, which Cho described as 'two side of the same coin'. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea 3]

Cho comments on state of international security at Open Debate

At the Security Council High-Level Open Debate on Maintenance of International Peace and Security, Cho emphasized the importance of the Security Council in maintaining international peace at a time of global crisis. However, he pointed out that the Council had its limitations in effectively addressing pressing issues, citing besides wars in Gaza and Ukraine, the large-scale humanitarian crisis besetting Sudan.

The Foreign Minister's comments on Sudan being a devastating internal displacement crisis "exacerbated by looming famine and outbreaks of disease" come at a time when Sudan's army has launched a major operation for the recapturing of Khartoum, the nation's capital, from the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) which are the primary paramilitary forces occupying Khartoum. The RSF has been accused of committing violations against the civilian population in Sudan not only since the war broke out in 2023, but also as part of their history of obstructing humanitarian aid and taking justice into their own hands. The Khartoum

offensive is set to be the most crucial moment in the war since the beginning of the 2023 war. Despite the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres calling for a ceasefire, action from the UN remains indecisive in the war. [The Guardian]

Cho also refocused on the case of Russian and North Korean alliance in the arms trade and urged the Security Council to "guard the principles of the UN Charter, in recognition of their greater responsibility for promoting global peace and security".

He pleaded that international humanitarian law be adhered to and that the Geneva Conventions be taken seriously, especially to protect the most vulnerable among human populations, women and children. Cho also called for a cease in attacks on medical and humanitarian personnel "as they disrupt the delivery of life-saving assistance to those most in need". [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea 4]

South Korean foreign ministry asks Israel and Lebanon to accept ceasefire

(jb) The South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs has issued an announcement pushing Israel and Lebanon to accept the 21-day ceasefire proffered by the United States and France. [The Korea Times]

The foreign ministry emphasized its concern over the humanitarian crisis which has beset Gaza since the war began, which includes the destruction of infrastructure and a severe lack of food, water and medical aid for the Palestinians in Gaza, a majority of whom are under the age of 14. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea 1]

South Korea's call for Israel and Lebanon to agree on a ceasefire followed the US' and France's call for a 21-day ceasefire a day earlier, on September 26. Other nations which called for the ceasefire included Qatar, Australia, Canada, the European Union, Germany, Italy, Japan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. [WION] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea 2] [Al Jazeera]

South Korea has largely maintained a pragmatic approach in its relationship with Israel, while also engaging in economic cooperation with the nation since the 1990s. South Korea also signed a free trade agreement with Israel in 2021, which further entangled both nations. However, this relationship has not sullied South Korea's neutral and humanitarian stance during the Israel-Hamas war. [The Diplomat]

European commerce representatives demand clarity over South Korea workplace safety regulation

(ac) The European Chamber of Commerce in South Korea (ECCK) has raised concerns about the Serious Accidents Punishment Act (SAPA), which holds CEOs liable for workplace accidents.

During a press conference on September 26, the ECCK warned that the strict nature of SAPA could deter foreign direct investment (FDI). It highlighted that one of their key concerns is the act's "far-reaching effects across all industries," noting that the SAPA imposes harsher punishments compared to the UK's Corporate Manslaughter Act.

The Serious Accidents Punishment Act, which came into effect in January 2022, penalizes individuals with up to one year of imprisonment and fines of up to USD 752,000 for serious workplace accidents, including fatalities. The ECCK also expressed concerns about the vague definition of a "responsible managing person" under SAPA, which could lead to misinterpretation and arbitrary enforcement. [The Korea Times]

Taiwan opens offices worldwide to promote global visibility

(am) The Taiwanese Tourism Administration has declared its intentions to increase its representative offices and tourism centers worldwide. Its projected goal is the opening of 18 representative offices and 7 tourism information centers by the end of 2025.

So far this year three representative offices have been built. Information centers have also been made in Jakarta, Mumbai and Paris.

The Taiwanese Government in a report released on May 31 stated their aims of attracting more than 10 million international travelers annually to Taiwan. So far in 2024 only 5 million persons have travelled to Taiwan. This is due to reasons like the recent Taiwan earthquakes and tense cross-strait relations with China. [Taipei Times]

India rejects Nepal, Bangladesh, and Pakistan's efforts to revive SAARC at UN

meeting

(lm) India has cold-shouldered recent attempts by Nepal, Bangladesh, and Pakistan to revive the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), an organization that has been largely inactive since 2016. Nepal initiated a proposal to hold a meeting of SAARC foreign ministers on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in New York, but the meeting could not take place, primarily due to India's reluctance. According to sources, India was clear that any move to revive SAARC would be futile as long as Pakistan continued supporting terrorism targeting India.

In the lead-up to the UNGA, Bangladesh's interim government leader Muhammad Yunus had also called for the revival of SAARC and expressed hopes of meeting with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to encourage SAARC leaders to gather for a symbolic photo opportunity. However, this plan failed when Modi returned to India before Yunus arrived in the United States. Subsequently, Yunus raised the issue with Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif during a bilateral meeting, suggesting that Bangladesh and Pakistan could work together on SAARC revival. Sharif agreed that they could approach the matter step by step. Yunus also met with Nepalese Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli, who had originally pushed for the foreign ministers' meeting. [Deccan Herald]

However, instead of participating in a SAARC meeting, Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar hosted a meeting for the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), which includes five of the eight SAARC members but excludes Pakistan.

Participants included the foreign ministers of Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal, along with representatives from Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Myanmar, and the BIMSTEC Secretary General. The discussions focused on various sectors, including health, food security, climate change, security, trade, and investment.

Member states expressed a strong commitment to exploring opportunities for capacity building and skill development and supported the establishment of BIMSTEC Centres of Excellence. The meeting concluded with a unified intention to deepen cooperation within BIMSTEC and prepare for the upcoming Leaders' Summit.[Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh's interim government, ICC discuss cooperation, Rohingya crisis

(lm) The ICC Chief Prosecutor, Karim AA Khan, met with Bangladesh's interim leader, Muhammad Yunus, on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly to discuss strengthening cooperation between Dhaka and the International Criminal Court (ICC) in ensuring accountability for crimes committed against the Rohingya.

Importantly, the discussions also focused on potential ways to file a crimes against humanity case against those responsible for the violent government crackdown on widespread protests in Bangladesh during July and August 2024. The protests, which were initially student-led, escalated after the government responded with violent repression, including the use of live ammunition, rubber bullets, and military deployment. The crackdown resulted in hundreds of deaths, with some reports suggesting that over 1,000 people were killed, and many more injured or arrested. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh deposits instrument of ratification of BBNJ Agreement

(lm) Bangladesh has formally deposited its instrument of ratification for the BBNJ Agreement (Agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction) during a high-level treaty event at the UN General Assembly. The BBNJ Agreement, adopted on June 19, 2023, seeks to strengthen the international framework for conserving marine biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction through environmental impact assessments and capacity-building for developing nations.

By ratifying the agreement, Bangladesh joins the early group of nations committed to the swift entry into force and effective implementation of this significant international accord. Bangladesh was actively involved in the negotiations and contributed to areas such as Marine Genetic Resources (MGRs) and technology transfer. The agreement will take effect once 60 nations have ratified it. [Dhaka Tribune]

World Bank pledges USD 3.5 billion to support Bangladesh reforms

(lm) The World Bank (WB) has pledged USD 3.5 billion to support Bangladesh's reform initiatives, with USD 2 billion allocated as fresh lending and USD 1.5 billion repurposed from existing programs. WB Group President Ajay Banga made this announcement during a meeting with Bangladesh's Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York.

The funds will be used to support reforms in key sectors such as digitization, liquidity, energy, power, and transport. Yunus emphasized the importance of the WB's support in rebuilding the country and requested creative approaches in the lending program. Additionally, discussions touched on regional energy cooperation, particularly the sharing of hydro energy produced in Nepal and Bhutan with neighboring countries, including Bangladesh. [Dhaka Tribune]

United States launches Young Leaders Initiative for South Asia

(lm) The United States has launched the Young South Asian Leaders Initiative (YSALI) to empower youth across South Asia. The initiative was introduced by Acting Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy Lee Satterfield and Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs Donald Lu at the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York.

YSALI will offer networking, leadership training, professional exchanges, and academic fellowships to South Asia's more than 420 million youth. This initiative is part of a broader US effort to engage young people globally, expanding upon similar programs like the Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI) and the Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI). [Dhaka Tribune]

ADB president visits Bhutan, strengthens commitment for Bhutan’s development

(lm) Asian Development Bank (ADB) President Masatsugu Asakawa visited Bhutan from September 23-26, 2024, to strengthen collaboration following the launch of ADB's new Bhutan Country Partnership Strategy (CPS) for 2024-2028. The CPS aims to foster inclusive, sustainable, and resilient growth by focusing on public sector management, private sector development, climate-adaptive infrastructure, and

investing in youth employability, aligning with Bhutan's 13th Five-Year Plan.

Since 1982, the ADB has been a key development partner for Bhutan, with a total commitment of USD 1.2 billion by 2023. During the visit, ADB signed a USD 30 million loan agreement for the Distributed Solar for Public Infrastructure Project, which will install rooftop solar panels on public buildings to generate up to 35 MW of energy. Asakawa also met Bhutanese officials to discuss investment areas such as renewable energy, health, education, transport, and urban development. [Kuensel 1] [Kuensel 2]

European Union delegation in Bhutan to reinforce diplomatic relations

(lm) A delegation from 18 European Union (EU) Member States, including 14 ambassadors, arrived in Bhutan to strengthen diplomatic relations and cooperation. Led by EU Ambassador Hervé Delphin, the delegation will be in Bhutan until October 1, participating in the Bhutan Innovation Forum in Paro to support foreign investment efforts and visiting EU-funded projects.

Key topics of discussion include strengthening EU-Bhutan partnerships, development under Bhutan's 13th Five-Year-Plan, and the Gelephu Mindfulness City project. The EU has allocated EUR 31 million for Bhutan from 2021 to 2024 under its Multiannual Indicative Programme, supporting climate change, governance, and digital transformation. Additional funding includes EUR 1.3 million for sustainable tourism, EUR 3.5 million for civil society projects, and a EUR 150 million loan from the European Investment Bank for renewable energy projects. [Kuensel]

Bhutan inches closer to malaria-free status

(lm) Bhutan is nearing malaria-free status, having reported zero indigenous cases for the third consecutive year. A recent malaria case in Phibsoo, Sarpang, is under investigation, and if confirmed as non-indigenous, Bhutan will be eligible for the World Health Organization's malaria-free certification by 2025.

Bhutan's malaria incidence has decreased dramatically from 39,000 cases in the 1990s to fewer than five cases

in 2022, with no deaths reported since 2019. Cross-border cooperation with India also helps in controlling imported cases. If Bhutan achieves certification, it will join other South Asian countries like Maldives and Sri Lanka, which became malaria-free in 2015 and 2016, respectively. [Kuensel]

India surpasses Japan to claim position as third-largest power in Lowy Institute's Asia Power Index

(cr) The Lowy Institute, an independent think tank based in Australia, has published its 2024 Asia Power Index, which assesses the distribution of power in Asia by ranking 27 countries and territories based on their ability to influence their surroundings. The Index employs 131 indicators across eight thematic areas, including military capability, economic relationships, and diplomatic influence, to measure each nation's standing.

Key findings indicate that China's power is stabilizing at a level below that of the United States, while still remaining ahead of other Asian countries. The US continues to maintain a strong presence in Asia, despite losing some ground in military capabilities to China. India has overtaken Japan, becoming the third-ranked power, but its influence does not fully align with its available resources. Meanwhile, Japan is evolving from primarily an economic and cultural power to one that is more active in defense and security.

Southeast Asia is witnessing significant growth, with Indonesia's power increasing more than any other country in the Index since 2018. Australia is also improving its position, making it into the top five, while Russia's relevance is waning, as it has dropped to sixth place due to the impact of its ongoing war in Ukraine. [Lowy Institute]

May retaliate if ASEAN non-trade barriers persist, says India's Piyush Goyal

(lm) India's Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal has warned that India may take retaliatory measures if ASEAN does not address its long-standing concerns regarding non-tariff barriers in the ongoing review of the Free Trade Agreement (FTA), which concludes in 2025. Goyal highlighted India's growing trade deficit with ASEAN, which reached USD 38.5 billion in FY24,

and cited unfair market access for Indian exporters. He noted that one ASEAN country had imposed quotas on Indian automobile exports, emphasizing the need for a fair deal to address the trade imbalance.

The FTA, implemented in 2010, has been criticized by India for not adequately addressing these issues, with imports from ASEAN growing faster than India's exports. Goyal conveyed these concerns at the ASEAN-India Economic Ministers' Meeting. [Business Standard]

India elected to Steering Committee of G-20's GlobE Network for anti-corruption efforts

(rs) India has been elected to the 15-member Steering Committee of the GlobE Network, a global anti-corruption platform formed under the G-20 initiative. The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) and the Enforcement Directorate represent India in this initiative.

The GlobE Network includes 121 member countries and 219 member authorities and was officially launched at a UN General Assembly Special Session against Corruption. It aims to promote collaboration among anti-corruption agencies worldwide through the exchange of best practices, criminal intelligence and strategies. The Steering Committee consists of one chair, one vice-chair, and 13 other members, providing strategic guidance for the organization. [The Hindu]

Global leaders support India’s bid for permanent seat on UN Security Council

(sct/cr) India’s bid for a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has garnered significant global support, with UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer endorsing India’s candidacy on September 26. He joins US President Joe Biden and French President Emmanuel Macron in advocating for India's inclusion, along with Brazil, Japan, and Germany, as permanent members. Starmer highlighted the need for a more representative UNSC. [NDTV]

There is growing momentum for reforming the UNSC, amid long-standing criticism that the body, established in 1945, no longer reflects the current geopolitical landscape. India, which served as a non-permanent member from 2021 to 2022, has consistently argued

that its influence on the global stage merits a permanent seat. Proposed reforms include introducing permanent representation for Africa and expanding the number of elected seats to improve the council's effectiveness. India has been a vocal advocate for institutional reforms to ensure that global governance structures align with the realities of the 21st century, calling for a UN that truly represents an emerging multipolar world.

Currently, the UNSC has only five permanent members: the US, China, Russia, France, and the UK. [Firstpost]

India confirms first case of deadlier mpox strain

(cr) India has confirmed its first case of the more severe clade Ib strain of mpox, detected in a 38-year-old man in Kerala who recently traveled to Dubai. This case has heightened global health concerns as the strain has rapidly spread beyond its initial containment in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak a global health emergency following its expansion to other African countries and locations such as Sweden and Thailand. [CNN]

Maldives President Muizzu strengthens diplomatic ties at UN General Assembly with New Zealand, UAE

(sa) During the 79th United Nations General Assembly in New York, Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu met with the Deputy Prime Ministers of New Zealand and the United Arab Emirates.

In his discussion with Winston Peters, New Zealand's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, President Muizzu explored opportunities for enhancing bilateral cooperation, including trade, investment, and people-to-people connections. They noted the upcoming Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Samoa as a vital platform for addressing global challenges, and Muizzu invited New Zealand investors to consider opportunities in the Maldives' special economic zones.

In a separate meeting with Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the UAE, President Muizzu shared

insights into the Maldives' current situation and sought support in economic development and health sector improvements. The UAE's Deputy Prime Minister reaffirmed the UAE's commitment to assist the Maldives, emphasizing the strong diplomatic ties between the two nations. [the edition]

Maldivian President calls for abolishing veto powers at UN Security Council amid ongoing crisis in Gaza

(sa) During the UN Security Council's (UNSC) open debate on September 26, Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu called for the abolition of veto powers held by the five Permanent Members of the council. He argued that these powers hinder the council's ability to take decisive action against significant global issues, including the ongoing violence in Gaza, which he described as a "genocidal war" against the Palestinian people. [Al Jazeera]

This marked the first address by a Maldivian leader to the UNSC in the country's 59-year membership in the UN. In his speech, President Muizzu expressed the growing mistrust in the multilateral system, emphasizing the council's failure to uphold international law and provide hope to those suffering. He cited recent findings from UN experts and the International Court of Justice regarding the legality of Israel's occupation and urged the council to enforce its own judicial decisions.

Muizzu criticized the unequal representation and accountability within the UNSC, stating that democracy should begin at the council level. He concluded that abolishing the veto is essential for restoring faith in the UNSC, which he believes has allowed Israel to act with impunity and perpetuate violence against innocent civilians. [Sun Online]

Bangladesh, India, Nepal to finalize landmark power trade agreement

(iz/lm) Nepal, India, and Bangladesh are set to sign a tripartite agreement on October 3 to export 40 megawatts of electricity from Nepal to Bangladesh. The agreement is seen as a significant step towards strengthening regional energy cooperation among Nepal, India, and Bangladesh.

The agreement involves the Nepal Electricity Authority (NEA), NTPC Vidyut Vyapar Nigam Limited of India, and the Bangladesh Power Development Board (BPDB). The arrangement requires using Indian transmission lines to deliver the electricity, with the NEA receiving 6.40 US cents per unit. The NEA estimates earning USD 9.216 million annually from this export, which will take place during the rainy season from June 15 to November 15.

Originally planned for July 28, the signing was delayed due to political turmoil in Bangladesh, including widespread protests and the resignation of then-Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Despite these challenges, the interim government assured continued support for the electricity import, leading to the finalization of the agreement. [The Kathmandu Post]

While this initial contract is for importing power, Bangladesh aims to eventually import up to 500 MW of hydroelectricity from Nepal via Indian infrastructure. [Dhaka Tribune 1]

Prior to the expected signing of the agreement, Bangladesh's interim leader Muhammad Yunus and Nepal's Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli met on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly. They discussed enhancing cooperation in business, energy, and transportation, with a focus on the export of 40 MW of hydropower from Nepal to Bangladesh. Additionally, the leaders explored broader collaboration in areas such as tourism, cultural exchanges, and education, acknowledging the strong people-to-people ties between the two nations, including the increasing number of Nepali students studying in Bangladesh. [Dhaka Tribune 2]

IMF approves USD 7 billion loan amid economic crisis, ADB projects growth amid support

(ht/ja) Pakistan's central bank has announced the receipt of USD 1.03 billion as the first tranche of a USD 7 billion bailout from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The approval of this bailout by the IMF board came on September 25, marking a significant effort to stabilize Pakistan's economy. The 37-month bailout aims to address structural challenges and strengthen macroeconomic stability, with conditions requiring Pakistan to implement "sound policies and reforms." The first tranche of funds is set to be reflected in the State Bank of Pakistan's reserves by October 3.

This bailout comes after Pakistan has experienced a prolonged economic crisis, which saw inflation reach its highest levels ever, and the country almost faced a sovereign default in the summer of 2023. For decades, Pakistan has struggled with boom-and-bust economic cycles, leading to a heavy reliance on external funding and bailouts. The current bailout is the 22nd IMF intervention since 1958, highlighting Pakistan's continued dependence on international financial support. As of July 11, Pakistan is the IMF's fifth-largest debtor, owing USD 6.28 billion to the Fund.

Since the approval of the new bailout, there have been some positive developments. Inflation has eased slightly, and Moody's credit rating agency upgraded Pakistan's local and foreign currency issuer and senior unsecured debt ratings from 'Caa3' to 'Caa2'. The upgrade reflects moderately better government liquidity and external positions, as well as improving macroeconomic conditions, aided by the support from the IMF.[BBC] [Dawn News] [Arab News 1]

Meanwhile, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) released its latest Asian Development Outlook, projecting that Pakistan's economy will experience accelerated growth and reduced inflation, largely due to the IMF's support. The ADB reported a growth rebound to 2.4 percent for FY 2023-24, supported by an earlier USD 3 billion IMF loan, which provided short-term economic stability. The recent USD 7 billion IMF package is anticipated to attract further international financial support, providing additional economic stability.

Despite these promising developments, Pakistan's economy remains vulnerable to external risks. The ADB warned that reliance on external financing, delays in multilateral and bilateral inflows, and risks related to policy implementation could pressure the exchange rate and hinder growth. Rising food and oil prices, climate vulnerability, and geopolitical factors also pose challenges to economic recovery. [DAWN.COM] [Arab News 2]

UN rapporteur seeks 'full probe' into death of Pakistani journalist Arshad Sharif in Kenya

(lm) UN Special Rapporteur Irene Khan has called for a "full probe" into the death of Pakistani journalist Arshad Sharif, who was shot dead by police in Kenya in October 2022. Khan urged both Kenyan and Pakistani authorities to intensify their efforts to investigate the case and hold all those responsible accountable. She

expressed concern that neither government had made significant progress in investigating Sharif's killing, noting that none of the officers involved had been arrested. A Kenyan court previously deemed the shooting "unlawful" and ordered compensation of USD 78,000 to Sharif's family. Khan stressed that achieving justice in this case would be a crucial step in combating impunity for violence against journalists. [Anadolu Ajansı]

India could have offered Pakistan more aid than IMF if relations were better, defence minister says

(mra) During an election rally in Indian-administered Kashmir, India's Defence Minister Rajnath Singh stated that New Delhi could have offered Pakistan more financial assistance than the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) recent aid if relations between the two countries were better. He noted that a special development package announced by Prime Minister Modi in 2014-15 for Jammu and Kashmir has amounted to approximately USD 10.74 billion, which exceeds the IMF's $7 billion bailout package for Pakistan.

Singh emphasized that strained relations hinder potential cooperation and accused Pakistan of using financial aid to fund terrorism, impeding its own economic development. He also urged residents of Pakistan-administered Kashmir to consider joining India, claiming that their current situation under Pakistani rule is unfavorable. [WION] [NDTV [India Today]

Thousands of Afghan refugees in Pakistan face uncertain future amid slow resettlement process

(lm) Thousands of Afghan refugees in Pakistan face an uncertain future as they await resettlement to Western countries. Over 40,000 refugees are currently in Pakistan, with the United States providing a list of 25,000 eligible for resettlement. However, the process has been slow, leaving many refugees in limbo.

The refugees, many of whom worked with international forces in Afghanistan, initially moved to Pakistan after the Taliban regained control in 2021, hoping for relocation to Western countries such as the United States or Canada. Despite receiving promises of

relocation, they are now stuck in Pakistan with expired visas, limited access to services, and an increasing fear of deportation as Pakistani authorities crack down on undocumented migrants.

Many refugees have sold all their belongings in Afghanistan, expecting a quick relocation, but have been left without access to sufficient food, healthcare, or basic rights in Pakistan. Negotiations between Pakistan and Western countries to facilitate the relocation of refugees are ongoing, but progress remains slow. Meanwhile, Western authorities, such as Canada's immigration service, cite complex screening processes and challenges related to applicants' locations as reasons for the delays.

The situation for these refugees is dire, as they have few options: they cannot return to Taliban-controlled Afghanistan for fear of persecution, and they face mounting challenges and uncertainty in Pakistan, with no clear path forward. [Arab News]

Several delegations leave Israel Prime Minister Netanyahu's UN General Assembly speech

(ht) During Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's speech at the UN General Assembly on September 27, 2024, several delegations, including the Pakistani and Maldivian delegation, walked out in protest. This action occurred as tensions mounted due to Israel's ongoing military operations in Gaza, which have resulted in over 41,500 Palestinian deaths, and a recent escalation in attacks on Lebanon, where more than 700 people have died.

Netanyahu's address, characterized by claims of Israel's pursuit of peace amidst threats from "savage enemies," was met with chants and disturbances as he began to speak. He condemned Iran as the primary instigator of conflict, emphasizing Israel's defense against multiple threats. Netanyahu also discussed the necessity of normalizing relations with Arab nations, particularly Saudi Arabia, while asserting that Israel would not tolerate threats from Hezbollah in Lebanon. [Middle East Eye] [Middle East Monitor]

OIC Contact Group Rejects Elections in Indian-Administered Kashmir

(mra) The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Contact Group on Kashmir has rejected the elections taking place in Indian-administered Kashmir. In a joint communique issued during a meeting on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly session, the OIC emphasized that the ongoing three-phase Legislative Assembly elections in Indian-administered Kashmir, with over nine million voters participating, cannot substitute the Kashmiri people's right to self-determination as outlined by UN resolutions.

The group also criticized India's unilateral actions of August 5, 2019, which stripped the region of its partial autonomy, and rejected the recent Indian Supreme Court's verdict attempting to undermine the internationally recognized disputed status of Jammu and Kashmir. [Arab News]

In parallel, Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif urged the UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, to implement the relevant UN Security Council resolutions on Indian-administered Kashmir. Speaking on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, Shehbaz emphasized the need to uphold the right of Kashmiris to self-determination and stressed the importance of resolving the Kashmir dispute to ensure lasting peace in South Asia. He called for international action to address the ongoing situation in Jammu & Kashmir and highlighted the broader implications for regional stability.

During the meeting, Secretary-General Guterres acknowledged Pakistan's active engagement at the UN and praised the country's contributions to international peacekeeping efforts. The meeting also addressed other global issues, including calls from Shehbaz for an immediate cessation of violence in Gaza and Lebanon, alongside actions to combat the rising trend of Islamophobia. [Dawn] [Radio Pakistan]

Pakistan removes floor price for rice exports

(lm) Pakistan has removed the minimum export price for rice, effective immediately, as announced by the commerce ministry. This move follows a similar decision by India earlier this month, which aimed to support farmers struggling with debt by boosting exports of basmati rice. India and Pakistan are the only countries that produce basmati rice, and both promote it as a premium product, similar to French Champagne or Darjeeling tea. The floor price for rice exports in Pakistan was last set in November. [Arab News]

Seychelles, regional partners enhance law enforcement skills with U.S. DEA training

(sa) Law enforcement officers from Seychelles, Madagascar, Mauritius, and the Comoros completed a weeklong training program on "Conspiracy and Complex Investigations," led by trainers from the United States Department of Justice's Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). The training covered topics including money laundering, cryptocurrency, intelligence analysis, and interview techniques, aiming to combat organized crime. [Seychelles News Agency]

African Union delegation commends Seychelles' disaster response

(sa) An African Union (AU) delegation, led by Mahlaba Ali Mambathe, Ambassador of Eswatini, visited Seychelles to conduct a humanitarian assessment following severe flooding in December 2023. The heavy rainfall caused extensive damage, including road destruction, landslides, property damage, and three fatalities. The AU delegation commended Seychelles for its disaster preparedness and response. [Seychelles News Agency]

Seychelles strengthens global ties by establishing diplomatic relations with three nations

(sa) Seychelles has established diplomatic ties with Suriname, Antigua and Barbuda, and Uzbekistan during the 79th UN General Assembly in New York. Sylvestre Radegonde, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Tourism, signed Joint Communiqués to formalize these relations. [Seychelles News Agency]

EU reaffirms commitment to supporting Sri Lanka's democratic process

(sa) The European Union has reaffirmed its support for Sri Lanka's ongoing reforms and congratulated President Dissanayake on his election. The EU highlighted the peaceful conduct of the recent presidential elections and acknowledged the

importance of transparency in the electoral process, as observed by their Election Observation Mission.

The EU noted that while fundamental freedoms were broadly respected, there are areas needing improvement, particularly in political finance transparency and increasing women's participation in politics. A comprehensive report with recommendations for future electoral processes is forthcoming. [Colombo Gazette]

Brunei, Indonesia, and Malaysia hold inaugural MABBIM secretariat meeting

(ga) The first secretariat meeting of the Brunei-Indonesia-Malaysia Language Council (MABBIM) was held, hosted by the Language and Literature Bureau of Brunei Darussalam from September 24 to 26. The meeting focused on initiatives to promote the Malay and Indonesian languages as official languages within the member states. [RTB News] [See Hua Daily News 1]

The meeting produced a report signed by delegation heads Anissa (Brunei), Mohammad Fazli (Malaysia), and Hafiz Muksin (Indonesia) during a closing ceremony in Bandar Seri Begawan. The participants exchanged souvenirs and discussed proposals for new programs, which will be presented at the upcoming MABBIM Leaders Forum in 2025.

Key proposals included the establishment of ministerial meetings, the MABBIM International Linguistics Seminar, and initiatives for upgrading linguistic resources, thereby enhancing the council's role and expanding its impact on language promotion across member countries. [See Hua Daily News 2]

Brunei's Islamic Bank commits to sustainable development and regional cooperation

(ga) Bank Islam Brunei Darussalam (BIBD) has reaffirmed its commitment to sustainable development and regional cooperation during the 14th Executive Board Meeting of the China-ASEAN Interbank Association (CAIBA) and the ASEAN Plus Three Interbank Cooperation Mechanism (APTIBCM) on September 26 in Laos.

In a keynote address, BIBD's Head of Government Relations and Special Projects Haji Mohammad Yusri

bin Haji Wahsalfelah highlighted the bank's focus on human resource development, environmental, social, and governance (ESG) initiatives, infrastructure connectivity, and economic development within the ASEAN Plus Three framework.

BIBD's corporate social responsibility program, Advocating Life-Long Learning for an Aspiring Future (ALAF), aims to support underprivileged students, aligning with Brunei Vision 2035 and the UN Sustainable Development Goals. The bank introduced its Sustainability Framework in 2021, emphasizing environmental protection, responsible entrepreneurship, and social impact.

BIBD has pledged BND 2 billion (USD 1.55 billion) for sustainable funding by 2030, actively collaborating with Brunei's National Council on Climate Change to support strategies for reducing carbon emissions and promoting renewable energy. BIBD is also committed to responsible investing and was the first in Brunei to sign the UN Principles for Responsible Investment.

The BIBD further enhances its infrastructure connectivity through digital transformation initiatives like the Olive digital platform, supporting Brunei's transition to a cashless society and fostering economic growth in digital transformation, Islamic finance, and SME development. [Borneo Bulletin]

Cambodia contributes 22 Vehicles to UN Peacekeeping Mission in Central African Republic

(ma) Cambodia has dispatched 22 vehicles to support the United Nations' peacekeeping mission in the Central African Republic (CAR). The fleet includes mine-protected vehicles and various multipurpose transport vehicles, aimed at enhancing the safety and mobility of peacekeepers in the conflict-prone region.

This deployment is part of Cambodia's ongoing contributions to global peacekeeping efforts, particularly through the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), which started in 2014. [United Nations]

Cambodia has been actively involved in peacekeeping since 2006, sending both personnel and equipment to various international missions.

To date, Cambodia has deployed over 9,800 peacekeepers to multiple conflict zones, including CAR,

South Sudan, and Lebanon. This latest contribution reflects the country's dedication to supporting international stability and humanitarian efforts through its peacekeeping missions. [Phnom Penh]

Indonesia officially joins nuclear ban treaty

(mu) Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi submitted the instrument of ratification of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) on the sidelines of 79th session of UN General Assembly in New York on September 24.

The Indonesian House of Representatives ratified the Draft Law on December 20 last year. This treaty prohibits state parties from doing and facilitating other countries of testing, storing, and using nuclear weapons. To date, 93 countries have signed the TPNW and 73 have ratified it.

No nuclear weapon state is party to the treaty. [Jakarta Globe] [Antara]

Indonesia submits request to join CPTPP

(mu) Indonesia has applied to become a member of Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), Coordinating Minister for Economic Affairs, Airlangga Hartarto, stated on September 25. CPTPP is a trans-Pacific trade agreement between eleven member states which was signed since 2018, after Trump withdrew the U.S. from the agreement.

Airlangga also said that the steps, which includes Indonesia's OECD accession process, are aimed to drive structural reform and to open markets for Indonesia's economy. The membership is predicted to also increase Indonesia's export value up to 10 percent. [Jakarta Post] [Antara]

Indonesia runs for UNSC non-permanent seat 2029-2030

(mu) Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi has announced in her addressed to the UN General

Assembly that Indonesia is running for non-permanent member seat of the UN Security Council (UNSC) for 2029-2030.

Her address, furthermore, suggested two steps to be taken for a reform of the UNSC, including a more democratic decision-making mechanism as well as opening up the Council for more voices from the world community.

Previously, Indonesia was a non-permanent member to UNSC in 1974-1975, 1995-1996, 2007-2008 and 2019-2020. [Antara] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Indonesia]

Indonesian TNI troops prepared to assist in evacuations from Lebanon

(ft) The Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has confirmed that the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) peacekeeping troops in the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) are ready to assist in evacuating Indonesians from Lebanon if the situation worsens.

This was discussed in a meeting between the ministry and TNI. Currently, there are 155 Indonesians in Lebanon, primarily students or those married to locals. The situation has become more tense due to Israeli airstrikes targeting Hezbollah, causing significant casualties and displacement.

Approximately 1,000 TNI soldiers are stationed in Lebanon under UNIFIL in various capacities, including land and sea operations. [Antara]

Laos asserts leadership in clean energy at ASEAN Energy Business Forum

(cc) Laos positioned itself as a frontrunner in promoting clean energy transition within the ASEAN region during the recently concluded 24th ASEAN Energy Business Forum (AEBF-24) held in Vientiane.

Leveraging its dual role as host nation and ASEAN Chair for 2024, Laos emphasized its dedication to a sustainable energy future for Southeast Asia. Deputy Director General Soukvisan Khinsamone of the Department of Planning and Cooperation at the Lao Ministry of Energy and Mines highlighted the country's significant achievement stating that 90 percent of its current energy generation comes from renewable

sources including hydroelectricity, solar, and wind power.

AEBF-24 itself functioned as an essential platform fostering regional collaboration in the energy sector. Representatives from across ASEAN member states engaged in discussions on innovative approaches toward clean energy solutions. [The Laotian Times]

Malaysia urges NAM to strengthen support for Palestinian self-determination

(ga) Malaysia has called on Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) member states to strengthen their support for the Palestinian people's right to self-determination. Speaking at the NAM Ministerial Committee Meeting on Palestine, Foreign Minister Mohamad Hasan urged member nations to unite in upholding the movement's core values of independence, statehood, and sovereignty.

He emphasized the importance of fully backing the implementation of UN Resolution ES-10/24, which sets a 12-month timeline for Israel to end its occupation of the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT). Malaysia also advocated for halting trade with individuals and entities in the OPT, sanctions on settler communities, and a cessation of arms supply to Israel.

Mohamad further reiterated support for establishing a free and independent Palestinian state based on pre-1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital and for Palestine's full membership in the United Nations. [The Sun Malaysia]

Malaysia re-elected to ASOSAI governing board for 2024-2027 term

(ga) The National Audit Department of Malaysia (NAD) has been re-elected to the Governing Board of the Asian Organization of Supreme Audit Institutions (ASOSAI) for the 2024 to 2027 term. The election occurred on September 27 during the 16th ASOSAI Assembly in New Delhi where Malaysia garnered 34 votes, the highest among the 48 ASOSAI members, securing one of the seven contested seats.

Other newly elected members include the Republic of Korea, the United Arab Emirates, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, and the Philippines. As a founding member, NAD is dedicated to improving the quality and effectiveness of public sector auditing on

both regional and global levels. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Malaysia]

NAD further presented a paper at this year's symposium on the topic of digital auditing, focusing on the Service Digitalisation Project aimed at improving audit services. The assembly, which convenes every three years, gathers 48 Supreme Audit Institutions to discuss policy matters and development opportunities. [The Sun Malaysia]

Malaysia urges enhanced global south engagement

(ga) Malaysia's Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Mohamad Hasan called for increased involvement of Global South nations in global governance, development financing, and climate action during the 79th United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) on September 29 in New York. He emphasized that the voices of developing countries must not be overlooked, highlighting their marginalization in crucial areas such as socioeconomic development, climate mitigation, education, health, and infrastructure.

Foreign Minister Mohamad pointed out that existing international mechanisms often fail to address the realities faced by these nations, which struggle with inadequate infrastructure and technology, hindering their participation in global initiatives. He urged for innovative financing models to support sustainability and the achievement of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), noting that climate crises are no longer distant threats but pressing realities affecting communities across borders.

The Minister further asserted that national efforts alone are insufficient, and a global response is necessary, including climate financing, technology transfer, and capacity building for developing countries. He reiterated Malaysia's commitment to strengthening solidarity among Global South nations, emphasizing the importance of ensuring that their needs and aspirations are recognized in the global arena. [Astro Awani]

Southeast Asian leaders voice concerns over Myanmar at UNGA

(sc) At the 79th United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in New York, leaders from Southeast Asian

countries, including Thailand, Cambodia, Malaysia, and Laos, raised alarms over the escalating crisis in Myanmar.

Thai Foreign Minister Maris Sangiampongssa highlighted Thailand's commitment to a "Myanmar-led, Myanmar-owned solution" and stressed the importance of peace in the region. He reiterated Thailand's readiness to support Myanmar through humanitarian assistance, calling for sustainable solutions in line with UN reforms to address global conflicts. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Kingdom of Thailand]

In his statement, Cambodian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sok Chenda Sophea reaffirmed Cambodia's adherence to the ASEAN Five-Point Consensus as a roadmap for resolving Myanmar's political turmoil. He stressed the need for "an inclusive dialogue and ceasefire negotiations", while also highlighting the bloc's support for Myanmar's peace and reconciliation efforts. Cambodia further emphasized humanitarian relief, and the necessity of a political process owned by the Myanmar people. [Asia News Network]

Malaysian Foreign Minister Mohamad Hasan, during a bilateral meeting with UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, urged the UN to act swiftly on Myanmar's crisis. "I have voiced our concerns and urged the UN to take drastic action to ensure peace for the people of Myanmar," he stated, emphasizing the deepening humanitarian crisis affecting civilians. Malaysia called for intensified UN efforts to restore stability in Myanmar, aligning with Malaysia's upcoming ASEAN chairmanship in 2025. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Malaysia]

Lao Prime Minister Sonexay Siphandone, representing the ASEAN Chair, reiterated ASEAN's commitment to assisting Myanmar, stating that "Lao PDR will continue to engage with stakeholders to implement the Five-Point Consensus." He stressed the need for inclusive national dialogue and humanitarian assistance to create an environment conducive to peace, urging for sustained efforts to address Myanmar's conflict under ASEAN's guiding principles. [United Nations]

Before the coup, during the National League for Democracy (NLD) government, Aung San Suu Kyi was permitted to attend the UN General Assembly as the head of government of Myanmar. However, since the military coup in 2021, Myanmar has been barred from addressing the assembly. Ambassador U Kyaw Moe Tun, who represents the National Unity Government (NUG) and has retained Myanmar's seat at the United

Nations, is allowed to attend, but has been banned from addressing the Assembly.

Myanmar junta accuses NUG of US ties and anti-China plot

(sc) Myanmar's military junta issued a statement accusing the National Unity Government (NUG) of forming an alliance with rebel groups Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) and Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), allegedly receiving USD 200 million annually from the United States. The junta claimed that US officials, including State Department Counselor Tom Sullivan and USAID Assistant Administrator Michael Schiffer, held online meetings with NUG leaders to discuss efforts to destabilize Myanmar. Additionally, the junta suggested that US financial support was motivated by a desire to undermine China, which has significant interests in Myanmar. [BBC Burmese]

The junta further asserted that China, a "true friend" of Myanmar, has pressured the MNDAA and TNLA, including closing border gates, to help stabilize the country.

In response, NUG Foreign Minister Daw Zin Mar Aung dismissed the accusations as false propaganda, suggesting instead that the junta is stirring anti-China sentiment while falsely portraying the NUG as aligned with Western powers. The junta's claims, though not directly sourced from state-controlled media, have been spread by pro-military outlets and BBC Burmese, intensifying the debate over foreign involvement in Myanmar's conflict. [BBC Burmese]

Myanmar Chin refugees in Malaysia accuse UNHCR of neglect and abuse

(sc) Hundreds of ethnic Chin refugees from Myanmar protested outside the UNHCR office in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, accusing the agency of failing to provide adequate protection and allowing abuse. Led by James Bawl Thang Bik, chairman of the Alliance of Chin Refugees (ACR), the demonstrators highlighted the slow asylum-seeker registration process, leaving many unregistered and vulnerable to arrest or exploitation. Thang Bik emphasized the plight of ethnic Chin soldiers and police officers who fled Myanmar after the 2021 coup, stating, "If these former soldiers and

policemen get sent back to Myanmar, their lives could be in danger." [Alliance of Chin Refugees]

The UNHCR responded with a statement recognizing the difficult conditions faced by refugees in Malaysia, a country that does not officially recognize them, adding it prioritizes protection for vulnerable individuals. However, the alliance also reported incidents of security personnel abusing ethnic Chin refugees, allegations that UNHCR denied, stating they had not received any such reports. Thang Bik rejected this response, claiming the agency has ignored repeated complaints of mistreatment. [Voice of America]

Thailand plans to legalize undocumented workers and children from Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam

(tl) The Thai government agreed to register undocumented citizens of Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam as new workers and allow their children under 18 to stay legally in the kingdom. The requests have been made by the Foreign Workers Management Committee to the Thai Cabinet in meeting on September 24.

The new government of Thailand led by Paetongtarn Shinawatra will extend the foreign worker's duration of residence and work permits twice from two years to four years and increase the period for changing jobs from one month to two months.

However, the committee said that the work permit period of seasonal migrant workers in the border areas and other requests were not successful. The new identity registration system and the registration process will be known only after Thai Royal Palace approval and official announcements. Currently, Thai law enforcement officials are conducting random entry checks on Myanmar nationals who entered the country illegally. [The Nation] [Reuters]

Bangladesh seeks justice for Rohingya refugees from Myanmar

(tl) Chief Adviser of the interim government of Bangladesh Muhammad Yunus emphasized the need for international humanitarian aid and justice for the Rohingya refugees from Myanmar who have been forcibly expelled from their country, in his speech to

the 79th session of the United Nations General Assembly on September 24.

He stated that the government would continue to provide aid and implement long-term repatriation plans for the refugees, while also pursuing justice for the human rights violations faced by the Rohingya through international courts, such as the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the International Criminal Court (ICC). [Prothom Alo - English][VOA in Burmese]

Yunus, a 2006 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, was appointed chief adviser to Bangladesh's interim government after student protests led to the resignation of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

Philippines conducts joint South China Sea patrol with US, Japan, Australia, New Zealand

(rv/rr) On September 28, the Philippines conducted a joint patrol in the South China Sea involving naval forces from Japan, Australia, the United States, and New Zealand. This marked the fourth multilateral maritime cooperative activity in the region.

The patrol, which focused on maritime domain awareness and replenishment at sea, took place near the Philippine exclusive economic zone off Luzon. Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force participated for the first time by transiting the Taiwan Strait, provoking a formal protest from China, which views the Taiwan issue as critical to its sovereignty.

On the same day, China announced military drills around Scarborough Shoal, which it has controlled since a standoff with the Philippines in 2012. The joint patrol follows recent tensions at Sabina Shoal, where the Philippine Coast Guard flagship had to withdraw due to low supplies and damage from a Chinese ramming incident. However, the Philippines successfully resupplied its Marine outpost at Second Thomas Shoal earlier in the week, utilizing a civilian boat for the mission. [Anadolu Ajansı] [US Naval Institute News]

Days before the joint patrol, on September 23, a Chinese navy helicopter shadowed and approached a Philippines' fisheries bureau aircraft while it was on patrol near the Scarborough Shoal. Although the aircraft was still able to complete its mission, the Philippine National Security Council said China's actions violated air safety regulations. [CNA]

In related updates, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi has criticized the recent US deployment of intermediate-range missiles in the Philippines, claiming it undermines regional peace and stability. He made these remarks during a meeting with South Korean Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul in New York.

The US has deployed the Typhon system, capable of striking Chinese targets, which has raised concerns in China and led to calls for its removal. Wang emphasized that this deployment does not serve the interests of regional countries and noted that the Philippines plays a crucial role in US military strategy in Asia, particularly regarding Taiwan. [Rappler]

South Korea, Japan, US launch USD 28.8 million partnership to boost healthcare in BARMM

(rr) The United States, South Korea, and Japan have launched a PHP1.6 billion (USD 28.8 million) partnership to enhance healthcare in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) over the next six years. This collaboration involves the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

The agreement, signed in Pasay City, aims to strengthen maternal and newborn healthcare, improve nutrition, and increase PhilHealth enrollment. It will also focus on health security, digital infrastructure, and emergency preparedness through training.

This marks the first health-focused collaboration in Asia among the development agencies of these three countries, with a focus on training local governments and expanding healthcare outreach to vulnerable groups, including indigenous populations. [Philippine News Agency]

Singaporeans view China's influence slightly more favorably than that of United States

(fi) The Asian Barometers Survey conducted by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) found that Singaporeans perceive China’s influence in Asia and the world slightly more positively compared to the

United States. The survey, which included around 1,000 citizens aged 21 and above, revealed that while both countries are seen as having a similar influence over the city-state itself, China is perceived to have a significantly greater influence across Asia, and this influence is expected to grow further over the next decade.

Specifically, 57.5 percent of respondents viewed China's influence on Singapore positively, compared to 50 percent for the U.S. Regarding influence over Asia, 28.2 percent more respondents identified China as having the most influence today, with this gap predicted to widen in ten years. About 59.1 percent of respondents believed that China would dominate regional influence in a decade, compared to just 6.9 percent for the U.S.

The survey also noted a decline in positive perceptions of China's influence compared to the previous 2020 survey, with a significant drop in respondents who believe China has the most influence in Asia today. IPS attributed this to China's economic struggles, such as the real estate crisis and rising youth unemployment.

In separate instances, the Ministry of Digital Development and Information (MDDI) conducted a demographically representative telephone poll in June and discovered that Singaporeans believed the Republic's relations with the US and China had improved in recent years. 6 out of 10 Singaporeans regard its relationship with both countries as very or very good, and they believe it ought to remain close to the US and China. 8 out of 10 people surveyed feel that Singapore should prioritize its interests above taking sides. [The Straits Times] [MDDI]

Singapore calls for UN Security Council reform to limit veto powers of Permanent Members

(fi) Singapore has called for reform of the United Nations Security Council, particularly to limit the veto powers of its five permanent members: China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. During a recent debate, Foreign Affairs Minister Vivian Balakrishnan emphasized that the UN is at an "inflection point" and that reforms are urgently needed to address current global challenges. He noted that the increasing use of vetoes undermines the Council's ability to maintain international peace and security.

Balakrishnan urged all permanent members to focus on broader goals and suggested that a consensus on

how the veto is exercised must be established. He also advocated for empowering the elected non-permanent members of the Security Council, allowing them a greater role in decision-making, especially in regional issues. The Minister stressed the importance of the Council's proactive role in conflict prevention and effective cooperation with other UN bodies to facilitate early warnings and responses to crises. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs] [South China Morning Post]

Since 1946, the permanent members have used their veto powers nearly 300 times. In recent years, the United States, Russia, and China have used the veto to block action and conversation on a variety of issues, including Russia's invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea, as well as Israel and the Middle East. [Research UN]

Global coalition calls for enhanced security, resilience of undersea cables

(fi) a joint statement was recently released by a coalition of countries, including Singapore, Australia, Canada, Japan, and the United States, emphasizing the critical importance of undersea cables in maintaining global communications and economic growth. These cables are responsible for carrying 95 percent of global data traffic and are essential for ensuring seamless connectivity across various sectors of the global economy.

Key principles outlined in the statement include designing cable infrastructure with cybersecurity in mind, promoting international cooperation to select secure providers, and enhancing government and industry coordination. The statement also highlighted the need for careful planning of cable routes to protect them from potential hazards and emphasized the importance of transparent ownership and governance structures among service providers. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs]

Thailand drops further in Ease of Doing Business ranking; Singapore top

(msz) Thailand's ease of doing business ranking fell to 12th place among 13 Asia-Pacific economies in 2023, dropping from 9th place in 2022, according to a survey by the Asia Securities Industry and Financial Markets Association (ASIFMA). This places Thailand just above

Vietnam, while Singapore retained its top spot, followed by Hong Kong, Australia, and Taiwan.

The ASIFMA survey evaluates market development, operating environment, and regulatory aspects. Thailand's strengths in market development were found in its payment infrastructure, while the competitive landscape and cost of doing business were highlighted in its operating environment. In the regulatory aspect, low restrictions on products and services were noted.

Thailand's ranking has been declining since 2021, when it was in 5th place. ASIFMA reported a decrease in business expansion intentions in the Asia-Pacific, with only 40 percent of respondents planning to expand, down by 24 percent from the previous year. [The Nation Thailand]

Danish government eyes pharmaceutical imports from Asia

(bk) The Danish government has proposed importing medication from Asian countries, including Thailand, India, and China, to provide citizens with a broader range of medications at potentially lower prices. This initiative has sparked significant debate within Denmark and beyond.

The Danish Pharmacy Association and the Danish Medicines Agency have raised concerns that the proposal could compromise consumer safety, as it may lead to easier online purchases of medications without strict quality control measures. Critics stress the importance of rigorous quality checks to ensure the efficacy of medications, despite many Asian manufacturers following international standards.

India and China are major players in the global pharmaceutical industry, producing a large share of the world's generic medicines, while Thailand's pharmaceutical sector is expanding its international reach. [The Nation]

Timor-Leste reiterates strong commitment to complete elimination of nuclear weapons

(ft) On September 26, Timor-Leste's Vice-Minister for ASEAN Affairs, Milena Maria da Costa Rangel, reaffirmed the country's commitment to the total

elimination of nuclear weapons during a high-level meeting at the United Nations. She called for constructive international dialogue to foster peace and highlighted the severe consequences of nuclear testing on human health and the environment.

Timor-Leste, a signatory of the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, urged all states, especially nuclear-armed nations, to fulfill their obligations under disarmament treaties and promote global security through diplomatic negotiations. [Government of Timor Leste]

Timor-Leste honors UN Secretary-General, calls for global reforms

(mu) At the 79th United Nations General Assembly on September 24, Timor-Leste's Prime Minister Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão granted UN Secretary-General António Guterres Timorese citizenship, recognizing his support for Timor-Leste's independence. Guterres, as former Prime Minister of Portugal, played a key role in the 1999 referendum that led to independence. [Government of Timor-Leste 1]

In New York, Gusmão also called for reforms to make the UN Security Council more representative, emphasizing peace, reconciliation, and global cooperation. He highlighted the climate crisis, urging rich nations to fulfill their commitments and emphasized Timor-Leste's focus on agricultural and blue economy diversification. Gusmão also urged peaceful solutions for conflicts in Israel-Palestine and Ukraine and advocated for Western Sahara's self-determination and ending the embargo on Cuba. [Government of Timor-Leste 2]

Vietnam’s deputy prime minister attends 4P meeting in Paris

(cc) Vietnam's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Bui Thanh Son attended the leaders' meeting on the Paris Pact for People and the Planet (4P) in Paris on September 25, at the invitation of French President Emmanuel Macron and Special Envoy Macky Sall.

The meeting included leaders from various nations and international organizations like the United Nations and the International Monetary Fund. Discussions focused on multilateralism, trust-building, and addressing

global challenges, particularly enhancing the role of developing countries and managing debt burdens.

The 4P initiative, launched by France in 2023, aims to support sustainable development, with Vietnam among the 60 countries endorsing it. [Vietnam News] [Vietnam Plus]

Vietnam's President To Lam meets with US counterpart Biden, travels to Cuba

(wn) Vietnamese President and Communist Party Chief To Lam met with United States President Joe Biden on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York last week, praising the growing bilateral ties between their nations. The meeting, which follows Lam's recent appointment to the country's top political role, highlighted the rapid development of relations nearly 50 years after the Vietnam War, with discussions on economic investments and cooperation in cybersecurity and supply chains. Biden emphasized the "unprecedented cooperation" between the two countries, particularly in building an open and secure Indo-Pacific region.

In addition to Biden, Lam met with UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. He also engaged with US business leaders, leading to agreements, including a partnership with Meta to manufacture Metaverse products in Vietnam and Apple's plan to establish a research and development center in Hanoi. Other significant deals included a USD 1.1 billion agreement between Vietjet and Honeywell Aerospace for aviation services. [Radio Free Asia] [Reuters]

Lam's trip concluded with a visit to Cuba, where he met with Cuban President Miguel Diaz-Canel. The two leaders signed multiple bilateral agreements, particularly in health and agriculture. During the visit, they toured the Mariel commercial port—where several Vietnamese companies operate—and announced a rice production program using hybrid seeds from Vietnam.

Bilateral trade between Vietnam and Cuba is valued at around USD 340 million, with Vietnam exporting rice, coal, and electronics, and importing pharmaceuticals. [Digital Journal]

China keen to invest in solar panel manufacturing, deepen ties with Bangladesh

(lm) Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi expressed Beijing's interest in investing in solar panel manufacturing in Bangladesh during a meeting with Muhammad Yunus, the de fact leader of the interim government, on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly. Wang Yi also emphasized deepening trade and economic ties through a "comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership" between the two nations.

Additionally, China will support further cooperation between companies from both countries and provide zero-tariff access to goods from Least Developed Countries, which will benefit Bangladesh. [Dhaka Tribune 1]

Moreover, Bangladesh is considering bringing in Chinese medical experts or sending severely injured students abroad for treatment following the violent crackdown by the now-ousted administration on widespread protests during July and August. This decision follows an assessment by a Chinese medical team, which reviewed the treatment of 160 injured individuals, including 105 with critical injuries. [Dhaka Tribune 2]

Bangladesh's situation cannot improve without India, says Tripura chief minister

(lm) Manik Saha, the Chief Minister of Tripura, India, recently asserted that Bangladesh's situation cannot improve without India's involvement. During a government event on World Tourism Day, he highlighted the critical role India played in Bangladesh's independence, emphasizing the sacrifices made by the Indian Army and the support from the people of Tripura during the liberation struggle. [The Hindu]

The remarks made by Tripura Chief Minister Saha about the importance of India to Bangladesh's stability come against the backdrop of tensions in bilateral relations between New Delhi and Dhaka, most notably over the ousting of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who has found refuge in India since her forced departure on August 5.

Compounding these tensions is the financial strain on Indian power suppliers to Bangladesh, which are grappling with over USD 1 billion in unpaid dues for

electricity. Payment delays have prompted suppliers, including SEIL Energy India and PTC, to consider invoking the sovereign guarantee commitment made by the Bangladesh Power Development Board (BPDB) during the signing of power agreements. [The Hindu Businessline]

Bangladesh seeks strategic partnership with Saudi Arabia

(lm) Bangladesh is actively seeking a strategic partnership with Saudi Arabia, as highlighted by foreign adviser Md Touhid Hossain during the 94th National Day celebration of Saudi Arabia. He emphasized the historical and cultural ties between the two nations, marking the upcoming Golden Jubilee of diplomatic relations next year. Hossain expressed anticipation for Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's visit to Bangladesh in November, which is expected to enhance bilateral relations.

The partnership has grown significantly since its formal establishment in 1975, with cooperation spanning trade, investment, energy, and labor issues. The two-way trade has recently exceeded USD 2 billion, and Saudi Arabia is a key partner in Bangladesh's development, notably through the Saudi Fund for Development, which has financed several infrastructure projects.

Bangladesh benefits from the employment of around 3 million of its workers in Saudi Arabia, and both nations are looking to establish a Joint Task Force on labor issues to protect workers' rights. Additionally, there is increasing interest from Saudi investors in Bangladesh, particularly in renewable energy, logistics, and infrastructure, alongside Bangladeshi businesses exploring opportunities in Saudi sectors like pharmaceuticals and fertilizers. [Dhaka Tribune]

Police in India rescue kidnapped Bhutanese businessman

(lm) A Bhutanese businessman was kidnapped by four unidentified men in Jaigaon, India, on the evening of September 25. The kidnappers accused the victim of being a drug dealer, posing as police officers, and demanded an initial ransom of NPR 1 million (approximately USD 12,000), which was later reduced to NPR 400,000 (approximately USD 4,800). The victim's friend informed the Jaigaon police, who arrived

at the designated location in plain clothes. One suspect was apprehended, while the other three accomplices fled. [Kuensel]

Brunei and Singapore judiciaries host inaugural webinar for young judicial officers

(ga) Brunei and Singapore judiciaries have jointly organized the inaugural webinar for young judicial officers. A total of 32 participants with less than seven years of experience attended the September 24 event, which focused on topics like courtroom control, communication, decision-making, and judgment writing. The webinar was initiated following a Memorandum of Understanding signed between the two countries in July 2023. [Supreme Court of Brunei Darussalam]

Cambodian exiled opposition politician decries China's growing influence in Cambodia

(ma) Mu Sochua, an exiled Cambodian opposition politcian and president of the US-registered Khmer Movement for Democracy, launched in March, has strongly condemned China's increasing influence in Cambodia, describing it as a threat to the nation's sovereignty and democratic integrity. Speaking to *Asia Times*, she argued that under the leadership of Prime Minister Hun Manet, Cambodia has become overly dependent on China's loans and investments through the Belt and Road Initiative.

Sochua highlighted concerns over the growing presence of Chinese military and economic projects, warning that this relationship undermines Cambodia's independence and could destabilize the region. She urged the international community to apply pressure on Cambodia to safeguard its democratic values and maintain autonomy from Beijing's influence.

Sochua also criticized the Cambodian government for using its close ties with China to suppress dissent, limit freedom of speech, and erode the rule of law, adding that unchecked Chinese influence threatens not only Cambodia's internal stability but also poses risks for the broader Southeast Asian region. [Asia Times]

Cambodia and China deepen parliamentary cooperation

(ma) Cambodia and China have further strengthened their parliamentary cooperation and ties with the signing of two key cooperation agreements during Cambodian National Assembly (NA) President Khuon Sudary's five-day visit to China that concluded on September 26. The agreements were signed after Khuon Sudary's meeting with Zhao Leji, chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, China's national legislature.

In their talks, both sides reaffirmed their commitment to building a stronger bilateral partnership through enhanced legislative cooperation and broader regional initiatives, such as the Belt and Road Initiative, and align them with phase one of Cambodia's Pentagonal Strategy. [Phnom Penh]

UK Warship HMS Spey conducts joint training exercises with Cambodian Navy

(ma) The UK Royal Navy's HMS Spey has engaged in joint training exercises with the Royal Cambodian Navy (RCN), after arriving in Cambodia's Sihanoukville Autonomous Port. This marked the second visit of HMS Spey to Cambodia, focusing on improving military skills such as navigation, firefighting, and search and rescue techniques. The exercises, conducted on September 25-26, were designed to enhance operational capabilities and strengthen the partnership between the two nations' naval forces.

The visit of HMS Spey is part of the UK's broader commitment to regional security and stability in Southeast Asia. [Phnom Penh]

Progressive talks between China and the US

(to) Chinese State Councilor and Minister of Public Security Wang Xiaohong held a virtual meeting with US Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas to discuss law enforcement cooperation between China and the United States. Both sides emphasized the importance of maintaining open channels of communication on critical issues like drug control, immigration, and specific criminal cases.

Wang highlighted the progress made in areas such as drug enforcement and the repatriation of illegal immigrants, stating that China is committed to upholding mutual respect and cooperation despite ongoing disputes. He urged the US to address China's concerns with sincerity and remove barriers to deeper cooperation. Both sides agreed to stay in communication on key law enforcement matters to ensure stability and long-term collaboration. [State Council, China]

Meanwhile, the United States and China are reportedly making significant progress on international climate finance, raising hope for a breakthrough at the upcoming COP29 climate conference in Azerbaijan. The news was shared by Yalchin Rafiyev, Azerbaijan's chief negotiator for the event, following high-level talks between the two nations. Both nations have softened their stances on contentious issues, according to Rafiyev, who is leading negotiations between world leaders.

The narrowing divide between the world's largest economies, often seen as representatives of the Global North and South, is a positive sign for the climate summit, scheduled for November 2024. Although Rafiyev did not provide specific details, he expressed optimism that the talks could result in meaningful agreements on climate finance and international cooperation. [South China Morning Post]

US eases rules for AI chip shipments to Middle East amid concerns over China's access to technology

(to) The US Commerce Department has announced a new rule that could make it easier to export AI chips, like those from Nvidia Corp to data centers in the Middle East. This September 30 regulation allows foreign data centers to apply for "Validated End User" status, streamlining the process for receiving AI chips without requiring US companies to apply for individual export licenses.

The move addresses concerns that countries like the UAE, where AI companies like G42 operate, may become intermediaries for China to acquire advanced US technology. Nvidia, the world's leading supplier of AI chips, declined to comment on the rule, while US officials stated the government will work closely with host countries to ensure the technology is used securely.

This rule change follows growing scrutiny of chip exports in the midst of the ongoing US-China tech competition, especially with AI capabilities becoming a focal point in national security. Companies applying for this program will undergo careful reviews to ensure compliance with US national security measures. [Reuters]

China launches probe into Canada's tariffs

(alk) China has announced it has launched an anti-discriminatory investigation into Canada's tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles, steel, and aluminum. The probe, typically lasting three months, could be extended. [State Council, China]

This comes after Canada joined the US and EU in imposing a 100 percent tariff on Chinese EVs and 25 percent on aluminum and steel. China, a major importer of Canadian canola, also plans to investigate Canadian canola imports.

Beijing condemned Canada's "discriminatory" measures and has requested WTO talks. Tensions escalated further as Canada considers banning Chinese-made software in EVs, citing security concerns and overcapacity. [Reuters]

Canada considers ban on Chines vehicle software and hardware

(alk) Canadian Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland stated that Canada is "absolutely" considering a ban on vehicle hardware and software from China (and Russia), following a similar move by the US.

Freeland emphasized the government's concern about Chinese overcapacity and the security threat from China. This comes after the US Department of Commerce's Bureau of Industry and Security announced plans to ban hardware and software in connected vehicles linked to China or Russia, citing risks to national security and infrastructure.

Freeland did not provide specific details but noted that discussions were ongoing with Canadian industry and labor groups. The US ban, aimed at protecting national security and driver safety, would apply to connected vehicles with autonomous driving capabilities and external connectivity, beginning with the 2027 model year for software and 2030 for hardware. [CBC]

This potential move aligns with Canada's recent trade actions, including a 100 percent tariff on Chinese-made electric vehicles (EVs) starting October 1, following a similar U.S. decision. Canada will also impose a 25 percent surtax on Chinese steel and aluminum imports starting October 15. These tariffs have prompted China to file a complaint with the World Trade Organization (WTO).

Ontario Premier Doug Ford has urged the federal government to follow the US in banning vehicle technologies from China and Russia, citing the need to protect national security, strengthen North American supply chains, and preserve jobs on both sides of the border. [Global News]

Russia said to have developed secret drone program in China

(to) Russia has secretly established a program in China to develop and produce long-range military drones for its war effort in Ukraine, according to European intelligence sources. Documents reviewed by *Reuters* show that IEMZ Kupol, a subsidiary of Russian state-owned arms company Almaz-Antey, has been working with Chinese specialists to design and test the new Garpiya-3 (G3) long-range military drone model, an Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV). The drones are reportedly being manufactured at a facility in China and delivered to Russia for deployment in Ukraine.

The Chinese government has denied knowledge of the program, while Western intelligence officials are concerned that this collaboration may breach international sanctions on Russia. The US. and NATO are closely monitoring the situation, with warnings that China's involvement could lead to further sanctions. [Reuters]

China accuses New Zealand of harassment and intimidation in espionage investigations

(to) China's Ministry of State Security (MSS) has accused New Zealand of harassing and intimidating Chinese nationals in response to an annual security threat report released by New Zealand's Security Intelligence Service (NZSIS). The report, published on early September, labeled China as a "complex intelligence concern" and highlighted the risks of foreign interference from Chinese actors. [NZSIS]

It accused China of using deceptive front organizations to manipulate viewpoints within New Zealand's Chinese communities, while spreading narratives through a Chinese-language news outlet believed to be under Beijing's influence.

In a September 26 statement the MSS condemned New Zealand's actions, calling the allegations of Chinese espionage unfounded and reflective of an outdated "Cold War mentality."

The ministry warned that such accusations were damaging the diplomatic relationship between the two countries. Beijing has already lodged a formal diplomatic complaint with New Zealand's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade earlier in the month. [South China Morning Post]

Taiwan reports growing Chinese naval activity

(to) Taiwan's defense ministry reported growing military activity around its island, including the detection of 29 Chinese military aircraft and drones September 25, just a day after a previous surge, when 43 Chinese military aircrafts operated around the island. This increased presence was accompanied by the first-time passage of a Japanese warship through the Taiwan Strait. Vessels from New Zealand and Australia sailed through the strait the day before, stating freedom of navigation in a region filled with tensions. [France24]

Meanwhile, both the United States and China have deployed aircraft carriers in the Pacific Ocean last week, indicating growing military presence in the region. The US Navy's USS Theodore Roosevelt, stationed in Guam, is finishing its Western Pacific deployment after participating in joint exercises, while China's aircraft carrier CNS Liaoning continues its operations in the wider Pacific, with speculation that it is supporting recent missile tests.

A map released by military officials shows the locations of nine aircraft carriers in the Indo-Pacific region, with carriers from the US, China, and Italy all active. Italy's ITS Cavour, a NATO member's carrier, is currently heading towards the Indian Ocean after port calls in the contested South China Sea. [Newsweek]

Furthermore, Japan's Ministry of Defense announced that it has spotted the Chinese aircraft carrier Liaoning for the past seven days as it operated in the Pacific Ocean. The Liaoning, along with several accompanying

Chinese Navy vessels, was observed conducting aircraft landing drills approximately 280 to 1,020 kilometers southwest of Japan's Okinotori Island. [Reuters]

EU tightens trade restrictions on China

(alk) The European Union is tightening regulations to reduce dependence on China in both hydrogen production and fast fashion sectors.

Restrictions on usage of Chinese-made parts in hydrogen project

The EU has announced new rules for its hydrogen project auctions to limit the use of Chinese-made parts. Starting in December, hydrogen projects receiving EU grants cannot use more than 25 percent Chinese components, aiming to prevent reliance on China, which currently dominates global renewable energy supply chains. This comes as concerns grow over China's influence in industries like solar and electric vehicles, with potential tariffs on Chinese EVs also under consideration.

The EU's Hydrogen Bank plans to allocate EUR 1.2 billion in its upcoming auction after earlier grants sparked worries about over-reliance on cheaper Chinese materials. European leaders, including Mario Draghi, have warned that failing to nurture local industries could lead to economic decline, urging a focus on areas where Europe maintains a competitive edge. Hydrogen Europe's CEO called the new rules a "pivotal moment" for strengthening Europe's supply chain and reducing bureaucratic barriers, which have slowed the continent's green expansion. [Reuters]

Customs duties on items valued below EU 150 under consideration

At the same time, EU authorities are scrutinizing Chinese fast fashion giants like Shein and Temu, whose low-cost products have flooded the European market. The European Commission is considering introducing customs duties on items valued below EU 150, which are currently exempt from import taxes. Additionally, the EU may take action against Chinese companies' transport subsidies, which allow for cheap, rapid shipping.

These measures aim to curb the surge of low-value Chinese imports that have gained popularity across the EU's 27 member states through aggressive online marketing. [South China Morning Post]

China-based CEIG, Serbia sign memorandum on energy storage

(alk) Serbia and China Energy International Group (CEIG) have signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) to enhance strategic cooperation in the energy sector. The agreement was signed by Serbia's Minister of Mining and Energy, Dubravka Đedović Handanović, and Wang Bo, CEIG's Vice President for South Asia and Central and Eastern Europe.

This partnership aims to increase Serbia's energy storage capacity using advanced technologies, which will support the integration of renewable energy. Serbia has committed to producing nearly half of its electricity from clean sources by 2030, making energy storage crucial, according to Đedović Handanović.

She highlighted that Chinese companies have developed compressed air energy storage technology, already in use in the UK, which Serbia can now adopt through foreign direct investment. The projects will be transferred to Serbia's state-owned power utility, Elektroprivreda Srbije (EPS).

China's Ambassador to Serbia, Li Ming, emphasized the need for renewable energy to support Serbia's rapid economic growth, noting that Chinese firms are leading in this sector. He expressed hope for quick progress in the cooperation, benefiting Serbia's development and its people. [Balkan Green Energy News]

China, Malaysia sign cooperation agreements worth USD 2.1 billion

(alk) Cooperation agreements worth 14.6 billion yuan ($2.1 billion) were signed to boost a China-Malaysia industrial park project and facilitate commodity trading between China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The deals were made during a trade conference held alongside the 21st China-ASEAN Expo in Nanning, Guangxi, on September 25.

The agreements focus on 15 industrial projects, 15 bulk commodity trading projects, and six financial innovation projects. A key highlight is the "Two Countries, Twin Parks" project, which includes the China-Malaysia Qinzhou Industrial Park (CMQIP) in Guangxi, launched in 2012, and its sister park, the Malaysia-China Kuantan Industrial Park (MCKIP),

established in 2013 in Malaysia's Pahang state. [State Council, China]

China's WeRide partner, Uber to bring robotaxi services to UAE

(alk) WeRide, a Chinese autonomous driving company, has partnered with Uber to bring WeRide's autonomous vehicles to the Uber platform, starting in the UAE.

The robotaxi service is expected to launch in Abu Dhabi later this year, allowing Uber users to select WeRide autonomous vehicles for their rides. WeRide, a leader in autonomous driving, offers solutions from L2 to L4 automation, serving the mobility, logistics, and sanitation sectors.

WeRide already operates the largest robotaxi fleet in the UAE via the TXAI app and holds the UAE's first national license for self-driving vehicles, allowing it to operate across the country. Uber has also expanded its autonomous vehicle partnerships with Waymo in the US and Cruise, General Motors' robotaxi unit, with plans to roll out more services next year.

Both companies aim to provide affordable, sustainable, and safe mobility through their collaboration. [Middle East Economy]

India to maintain LAC troop deployment as trust deficit with China remains

(sds/lm) India is preparing for a fifth consecutive winter of troop deployment along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in eastern Ladakh, Arunachal Pradesh, and Sikkim due to ongoing distrust with China. Despite signs of progress in political and diplomatic talks, including recent meetings of the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination on India-China Border Affairs (WMCC) and discussions between India's National Security Advisor and China's Foreign Minister, a significant "trust deficit" remains on the ground.

China's continued strengthening of forward military positions and infrastructure along the 3,488-kilometer LAC indicates that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has no intention of returning to peacetime locations soon. As India transitions its Army from summer to winter posture, with large-scale "winter stocking" for forward-deployed troops, General Upendra Dwivedi

and other senior commanders will review the operational situation in Sikkim in early October.

While earlier troop disengagements have created buffer zones at locations such as Galwan Valley, Pangong Tso-Kailash Range, and Gogra-Hot Springs, the situation remains tense at the Depsang Plains and Demchok. The disengagement, if it occurs, will be only a first step toward broader de-escalation and de-induction of troops. Currently, the creation of buffer zones has restricted Indian troops from accessing 26 of the 65 patrolling points (PPs) in eastern Ladakh.

India's defense officials have emphasized that the buffer zones were intended as temporary measures, and that China continues to make unreasonable demands while playing a long-term strategic game. They stress the need for caution to avoid falling into what they perceive as a "trap" by China. The Indian Army remains on high alert, with a high level of operational preparedness and adjustments in troop deployment to maintain adequate reserves and logistics in each sector of the LAC. [The Hindu] [The Times of India]

India, United States to discuss critical minerals collaboration during Piyush Goyal's Washington visit

(lm) Piyush Goyal, India's Minister for Commerce and Industry, arrived in the United States on September 30 to discuss a potential agreement aimed at enhancing collaboration in critical minerals between New Delhi and Washington. This visit comes at the invitation of U.S. Secretary of Commerce Gina Raimondo. During his trip, Goyal will co-chair the India-USA CEO Forum on October 2 and the 6th India-USA Commercial Dialogue on October 3.

The discussions will focus on expanding and diversifying supply chains for critical minerals such as cobalt, lithium, and nickel, which are essential for clean energy technologies and electric vehicle batteries. Goyal will also meet with U.S. Trade Representative Katherine Tai to explore ways to enhance bilateral trade, which amounted to USD 120 billion in 2023-24. [The Hindu]

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz to visit India by end of October

(rs) German Ambassador to India Philipp Ackermann announced that German Chancellor Olaf Scholz will visit India by the end of October for Inter-Governmental Consultations (IGC). He said that these consultations occur biennially, with this meeting in Delhi. The last meeting was in spring 2022 when Prime Minister Modi visited Berlin.

The ambassador emphasized that the upcoming visit will include a comprehensive agenda, with ministers engaging in bilateral talks and the Chancellor meeting with the Prime Minister to outline a roadmap for the next two years.

In May 2022, during the 6th Indo-German IGC, both leaders recognized digital transformation as vital for progress and signed a Joint Declaration of Intent, establishing a Green and Sustainable Development Partnership. Germany committed at least EUR 10 billion by 2030 to support R&D and attract private investment, highlighting the importance of commitments between them.

Chancellor Scholz emphasized Germany's readiness to deepen cooperation with India on global issues, reflecting over seven decades of diplomatic relations focused on multilateral collaboration and a sustainable digital economy. [The Hindu]

India will not buy LNG from Russia's Arctic LNG 2 project

(lm) India has decided not to purchase liquefied natural gas (LNG) from Russia's Arctic LNG 2 project, which is subject to Western sanctions due to Russia's involvement in the war with Ukraine. Oil Secretary Pankaj Jain confirmed that India will avoid buying any commodities under broad-based sanctions.

The Arctic LNG 2 project, developed by Russian company Novatek, faces sanctions from the United States, which also targets entities and individuals supporting the project. Novatek denied media claims of managing a "shadow fleet" for the LNG shipments. [The Hindu] [Reuters]

Indonesia, Portugal explore economic ties in renewable energy and other sectors

(mu) Indonesian Deputy Minister of Trade Jerry Sambuaga held a bilateral meeting with Portugal's Secretary of State for Economy Joao Rui Ferreira in

Lisbon on September 20. The meeting discussed efforts to intensify economic and trade cooperation in several sectors such as renewable energy, tourism, digital technology, defense, agriculture, and pharmaceuticals. [Ministry of Trade, Indonesia]

Indonesia, Papua New Guinea sign MoU on parliamentary cooperation

(ft) Indonesia's House of Representatives Speaker, Puan Maharani, and her Papua New Guinean counterpart, Job Pomat, signed an MoU on bilateral parliamentary cooperation in Jakarta, on September 26. Under the agreement both sides agree to promote political dialogue on issues like parliamentary, economic, and border cooperation between the neighboring countries. [Antara]

Indonesia, Malaysia conduct joint exercise simulating flood evacuation

(ft) The Indonesian Air Force (TNI-AU) and the Royal Malaysian Air Force (RMAF) conducted a flood evacuation simulation during the 24th Elang Malindo Joint Exercise in Pontianak, West Kalimantan. The ecxercise involved rescuing victims trapped by flash floods, with TNI-AU deploying a CN-235 aircraft and an NAS-332 Super Puma helicopter, while the RMAF sent its EC-725 Caracal aircraft. Rescue operations involved rappelling and water rescue techniques. [Antara]

Japanese destroyer sails through Taiwan strait for first time

(sw/hs) Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force destroyer Sazanami, alongside Australian and New Zealand vessels, passed through the Taiwan Strait, marking Japan's first known transit in the area. The operation is seen as a direct challenge to China’s increasing military assertiveness in the region.

The transit follows a series of Chinese military activities near Japan, including a spy plane violating Japanese airspace in August and a Chinese aircraft carrier sailing through Japan’s contiguous zone earlier in September (see AiR No. 39, September/2024, 4).

The Sazanami and accompanying vessels headed to the South China Sea for joint exercises. Five countries –

Australia, New Zealand, the US, Japan, and the Philippines – conducted what they called a Maritime Cooperative Activity, stating that it demonstrated support to a free and open Indo- Pacific. [Mainichi]

The Taiwan Strait is a strategic waterway frequently patrolled by US warships asserting freedom of navigation, with allied nations such as the UK and Australia also making similar transits. China regards Taiwan as a renegade province to be reunified with the mainland, by force if necessary. [Kyodo News]

Arbitrators rule in favor of US Steel-Nippon deal

(sw) A board of arbitrators has ruled that the sale of US Steel to Japan's Nippon Steel can proceed, a decision the United Steelworkers union strongly opposes. The arbitration board, selected by both US Steel and the union, determined that Nippon Steel met the conditions of the successorship clause in the labor agreement. This includes recognizing the United Steelworkers as the bargaining representative and assuming all agreements related to union employees.

Nippon Steel has also provided assurances of its ability to honor US Steel's commitments to the workforce. US Steel CEO David Burritt welcomed the decision, indicating no further steps are required to finalize the sale. However, the merger faces security concerns and opposition from President Joe Biden, who may block the deal once the Committee on Foreign Investment issues its decision (see AiR No. 38, September/2024, 3).

US Steel has warned that thousands of jobs could be at risk if the deal is blocked, potentially prompting the company to reconsider keeping its headquarters in Pittsburgh. [CBS News]

Japan urges Israel's restraint in fight against Hezbollah

(hs) Japan expressed "serious concern" over Israel's ground incursion against Hezbollah in southern Lebanon, urging restraint to prevent further escalation. Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshimasa Hayashi called for an immediate ceasefire, emphasizing the need to protect civilians and pursue a diplomatic solution.

Hayashi confirmed that Japan was working to safeguard around 50 nationals in Lebanon. His comments followed Israel's announcement of localized

ground operations, the first since 2006, which came after airstrikes on Hezbollah's Beirut headquarters and the assassination of party leader Hassan Nasrallah.

Japan's stance reflects its delicate balancing act between Middle Eastern oil dependency and its security alliance with the U.S., which heavily supports Israel. This latest development underscores the challenges Japan faces in maintaining its balanced diplomacy. [Kyodo]

Laos, Russia strengthen military cooperation through joint exercise "Laros-2024"

(cc) Laos and Russia have commenced a joint military training exercise codenamed "Laros-2024" at the Sergeyevsky training ground in Russia's Primorsky Krai.

The primary objective of the two-day "Laros-2024" exercise, kicked off on September 25, aimed to enhance joint operational readiness and combat skills. The exercise focused on simulated scenarios involving countering illegal armed groups and utilizing reconnaissance and attack drones.

Contingents from both sides participated in the training. Lao personnel will have the opportunity to train alongside experienced troops from the Russian Eastern Military District. The exercise itself was divided into two phases: an initial knowledge exchange session followed by a series of tactical drills.

This joint training exercise builds upon a history of military cooperation between Laos and Russia. Previous exercises have fostered interoperability and communication skills between the two armies. [The Laotian Times]

Lao and Thai provinces boost connectivity with water transport deal

(cc) Laos' Salavan province and Thailand's Ubon Ratchathani province have inked two MOUs paving the way for smoother cross-border water transport. This strategic move aims to enhance regional connectivity by facilitating the movement of goods and people across the Mekong River.

The agreements, signed on September 23, cover operational procedures for water transport, entry/exit

regulations for vessels, and the establishment of joint ports on both sides.

The improved water transport is expected to benefit not only Laos and Thailand but also Vietnam due to its position along the Mekong trade route. [The Laotian Times]

Laos: StarExpress tourist train debuts, linking Kunming to Vientiane

(cc) The StarExpress, a new tourist train, launched its maiden voyage on September 24, connecting Kunming, China to Vientiane, Laos. This China Tourism Group initiative marks a significant step for China-Laos tourism exchange. [The Laotian Times]

Malaysia and Indonesia renew currency swap agreement

(ga) Malaysia and Indonesia's central bank held a high-level bilateral meeting on September 27 to exchange information on macroeconomic and financial developments, payment system digitalization, and Islamic finance strategies. The meeting includes a renewed Bilateral Currency Swap Agreement (BCSA), allowing the exchange of up to RM 24 billion or IDR 82 trillion in local currencies between Bank Negara Malaysia (BNM) and Bank Indonesia (BI) for the next five years.

This renewal follows the initial agreement in 2019, which was renewed in 2022. The BCSA aims to strengthen the financial resilience of both nations and promote the use of local currencies in trade and investment.

BNM Governor Datuk Seri Abdul Rasheed Ghaffour emphasized the agreement's role in supporting the Local Currency Settlement Framework (LCSF), which facilitates local currency transactions. BI Governor Perry Warjiyo noted that the improved BCSA reflects the importance of international cooperation and supports BI's monetary, macroprudential, and payment system policies. [Astro Awani] [Tempo]

Maldives President Muizzu denies 'India Out' agenda, emphasizes concerns over foreign military presence

(sa) Maldives President Mohamed Muizzu has publicly denied the existence of an "India Out" agenda, stating that the island nation is primarily concerned about the presence of foreign military forces on its soil. During a discussion at Princeton University while attending the 79th Session of the UN General Assembly, he emphasized that the Maldives does not harbor animosity toward any specific country.

This statement comes amid strained relations between India and the Maldives, particularly since Muizzu assumed office in November 2023. Under former President Abdulla Yameen, there was significant Indian military presence in the Maldives, which was viewed favorably by some but led to opposition from factions within the country who perceived it as an infringement on Maldivian sovereignty.

Muizzu's administration has sought to distance itself from that period, reflecting a broader nationalist sentiment that resists foreign military presence. Following a request by the Muizzu administration, India replaced its military personnel with civilian operators by May 10.

In addition to his remarks on foreign military presence, Muizzu also addressed internal governance issues, specifically regarding deputy ministers in the Maldives' youth ministry who faced backlash for insulting Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on social media. He condemned their actions, stating that he had taken disciplinary measures against them. He insisted on maintaining respect for all individuals, regardless of their status, and expressed that insults towards any leader or person would not be tolerated. [the edition] [The Hindu]

Vietnamese president pays official visit to Mongolia

(fs) A Vietnamese delegation led by the President of Vietnam Tô Lâm paid a diplomatic visit to Mongolia from September 30 to October 1. During the meeting, both countries signed a substantial number of Memorandums of Understanding (MoU).

Minister of Justice and Internal Affairs of Mongolia Altangerel Oyunsaikhan and Minister of Justice of Vietnam Nguyen Hai Ninh signed the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Cooperation in the Legal Sector. Under the MoU, the parties will improve the central system of legal information, carry out exploratory research for the purpose of crafting draft

legislation, and collaborate on citizen registration, legal aid, and legal advertising.

Another MoU seeks to promote investments in the road, air, rail, and sea transportation sectors of both nations, offer reciprocal assistance, and create an international network of logistics and transportation to enable the facilitation of favorable conditions for cargo transiting through their respective borders.

Other MoUs were signed to deepen cooperation in the tourism industry and encourage collaboration between private sector tourism organizations; to strengthen collaboration in the areas of critical infrastructure protection, cybersecurity, and information sharing; to expand cooperation and relations in several sectors such as trade, economy, culture, education, and tourism; to strengthen their cooperation by holding joint conferences and seminars, exchanging research personnel, and exchanging scientific data, information, and research findings.

A MoU between the Mongolian University of Science and Technology Namnan Tumurpurev and the Vietnam National University was signed to arrange cooperative training sessions and programs, share expertise, carry out cooperative science and technology research, and train scientists, researchers, and exchange students. [Montsame] [Sonin]

United States to provide new aid fund to Rohingya refugees

(tl) The US is set to provide USD 119 million in humanitarian aid to Rohingya refugees and communities in Bangladesh and other host countries, announced at 79th session of UN General Assembly meeting.

It will also be used to improve access to education and skill development, safeguard refugees and host communities during disasters, and get them ready for their possible return home when circumstances permit. Since August 2017, the US government has donated USD 2.5 billion to the Rohingya refugees. [VOA in Burmese]

Myanmar junta receives new batch of Chinese fighter jets

(sc) Six more FTC-2000G fighter jets purchased from China arrived in Myanmar in August, as the junta intensifies its aerial bombardment of ethnic-controlled towns. The warplanes, part of a 2020 order delayed by COVID-19, follow a previous batch delivered in November 2022. These jets have been stationed at Namhsan airbase in Shan State, where pilots are undergoing training. The FTC-2000G, a multi-role trainer and combat aircraft, is primarily designed for ground attacks and can carry up to 3 tonnes of weapons. However, its vulnerability to surface-to-air missiles has raised concerns. [The Irrawaddy] [BBC Burmese]

The delivery marks another step in deepening military ties between Myanmar's junta and China. Chinese engineers are reportedly assisting the regime with aircraft maintenance, while Beijing continues to provide military support, including the recent warplane shipment. Since the visit of Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi to Naypyitaw in August, Myanmar's military has ramped up airstrikes, targeting civilian areas such as schools and hospitals, resulting in at least 180 deaths, including many children. Ethnic armed groups, such as the Kachin Independence Army, have shot down junta jets, signaling the ongoing conflict's intensity. [The Irrawaddy]

China-Myanmar joint-crackdown on illegal online activities in northern Shan State

(tl) China has extradited 20 Chinese nationals suspected of involvement in telecom and internet fraud gangs from Myanmar. China's Ministry of Public Security said that the arrests were made during a joint operation between the Myanmar and China's authorities.

The move follows a recent raid on an online money-laundering gang in Muse, Northern Shan State of Myanmar on September 23, which resulted in the arrest of 194 Chinese nationals and 355 Myanmar nationals. [Xinhua News Agency][VOA in Burmese]

Japan to downgrade diplomatic relations with Myanmar regime

(tl) According to sources familiar with the situation, Japan has become the latest nation to downgrade diplomatic relations with Myanmar's military

administration, planning to replace its ambassador with a Chargé d'Affaires.

Following Myanmar's 2021 military coup, Western governments reduced their diplomatic representation to Chargé d'Affaires, signaling their unwillingness to recognize a military regime that violates human rights. Japan has joined other democratic nations in urging the regime to end violence, release political prisoners, and restore democracy in Myanmar.

In March 2021, Japan's Ambassador Ichiro Maruyama met Myanmar junta's foreign minister, Wanna Maung Lwin, to call for an end to the killings and the release of political detainees. On the coup's third anniversary, Japanese Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa condemned the junta for repeatedly extending the state of emergency without working towards a peaceful resolution, while continuing airstrikes that kill and injure innocent civilians daily. In May 2024, Japan invited representatives from Myanmar's anti-regime ethnic armed groups, the pro-democracy National Unity Government, and other stakeholders to discuss securing urgent humanitarian aid for Myanmar. [The Diplomat] [The Irrawaddy]

Thai lawmaker calls for urgent reforms to support Myanmar refugees

(sc) As Thailand faces a surge of refugees fleeing the Myanmar military regime, Thai Member of Parliament Rangsiman Rome, chair of the Thai House Committee on National Security, has emphasized the need for immediate reforms to address the refugee crisis.

Speaking to *VOA*, Rome urged the Thai government to register the six million Myanmar refugees, providing them legal status, access to education, work opportunities, and the responsibility to pay taxes. He criticized current policies for fostering corruption and leaving refugees vulnerable, stressing that formal recognition could reduce exploitation and contribute to Thailand's economy.

Rome also called on ASEAN to pressure Myanmar's junta, the State Administration Council (SAC), to support peace and democracy. [Voice of America]

Rome highlighted challenges in managing refugee-related issues, such as the lack of coordination between government ministries and Thailand's restrictive education policies. He expressed frustration with the barriers that prevent Myanmar children from accessing Thai education and called for policy changes

to allow them entry into the system, citing the benefits to both Thai society and the refugees.

Additionally, Rome pointed out that Thailand's aging society has space for more students, which could help address declining school enrollments. He emphasized that real change requires not only managing refugees in Thailand but addressing the root cause of the crisis in Myanmar. [Voice of America]

Pope Francis urges release of Aung San Suu Kyi release, offers refuge

(tl) Pope Francis has called for the release of Myanmar's detained leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and offered her refuge in Vatican City. The pope met with Suu Kyi's son Kim Aris in Rome who proposed to the Vatican to provide shelter on Vatican territory.

Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is serving a 27-year prison sentence on accusations ranging from corruption to violating COVID19 restrictions. According to rights groups, her closed-door trial was a fraud intended to remove her from politics. [South China Morning Posts] [The Irrawaddy][France 24]

North Korea condemns Ukrainian accusations of being Russia's accomplice

(dql) North Korea is expected to increase its military support for Russia following a strong response to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's recent accusation at a UN Security Council meeting that Pyongyang is acting as a "de facto accomplice" in Russia's "criminal war."

Kim Yo-jong, sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, dismissed Zelensky's remarks as "absurd," labeling them a "reckless political provocation." She argued that if North Korea's actions make it an accomplice, the US and the West, which have supplied the most weapons to Ukraine, should also be considered accomplices.

Zelensky's accusation was echoed by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who accused North Korea of sending weapons, including ballistic missiles and artillery, to Russia. In response, Kim Yo-jong criticized the recent US decision to provide USD 7.9 billion in aid to Ukraine, suggesting that it would only prolong the conflict. She warned that continued confrontation with

a nuclear superpower like Russia could have serious consequences. [South China Morning Post]

North Korean government linked hacking group accused of attack on German defense manufacturer

(dql) A North Korean government-linked hacking group, Kimsuky (also known as APT43), has reportedly breached German defense manufacturer Diehl Defence, which produces Iris-T air defense systems. Kimsuky specializes in intelligence gathering in support of North Korea's nuclear and strategic programs.

The attackers allegedly used spear-phishing tactics, including fake job offers from American defense contractors and booby-trapped PDFs.

The hackers conducted detailed reconnaissance on Diehl Defence before the attack and hid their server behind a reference to Diehl's location in Überlingen, Germany. The server also hosted fake login pages mimicking German services like Telekom and GMX to collect user credentials. [Security Week]

China, Pakistan strengthen ties through high-level meetings, automotive sector cooperation

(ht) On September 25, China's Ambassador to Pakistan, Jiang Zaidong, met with Nawaz Sharif, leader of the Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N) and elder brother of Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, as well as Punjab Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz, Nawaz's niece, to discuss opportunities for enhancing cooperation between China and Pakistan.

The discussions centered on expanding collaboration in technology, business, and investment. Nawaz Sharif proposed establishing "Chinese Economic Zones" to encourage investment by Chinese businesses and highlighted the potential for an "economic revolution" in Pakistan through strengthened partnerships with China. Ambassador Zaidong also expressed interest in Punjab's agricultural sector and announced plans for China to train 1,000 Pakistani farmers in modern agricultural techniques, further deepening ties between the two countries. [Pakistan Today]

The following day, on September 26, Pakistan and China agreed to enhance their bilateral relations with a

special emphasis on the automotive industry. This announcement was made during the Taizhou International Automobile Industry Expo 2024, where Pakistan's Consul General in Shanghai, Shehzad Ahmad Khan, praised Taizhou's contributions to the international automotive market through innovation and technology. Khan highlighted the importance of joint ventures in the automotive sector, which would bolster the already strong bilateral relations between China and Pakistan.

Taizhou, known as the "First City of Private Automobile Manufacturing in China," hosts over 6,000 automobile parts enterprises and comprises five national automobile industry bases. During the expo, an Electric Vehicle (EV) investment conference was organized, attended by stakeholders from both countries, where discussions focused on the potential for EV manufacturing and development. This cooperation follows an earlier announcement by Chinese electric vehicle giant BYD, which in August revealed plans to open a car production plant in Karachi, Pakistan. [Dawn News]

Additionally, Pakistan and China have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for the development of shale and tight gas resources, marking another significant step in energy cooperation. Pakistan's Oil and Gas Development Company Limited (OGDCL) and China's Central Depository and Clearing Company (CCDC) will collaborate to tap into Pakistan's shale and tight gas potential. The MoU was signed in Xi'an, Shaanxi Province, during the 8th Silk Road International Expo for investment and trade. [The Express Tribune]

Malaysian Prime Minister to arrive in Pakistan on October 2 for three-day visit

(lm) Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim will arrive in Pakistan for a three-day official visit from October 2 to 4 at the invitation of Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif. During the visit, Prime Minister Ibrahim, accompanied by a high-level delegation, will hold meetings with Prime Minister Sharif and other leaders to discuss strengthening Pakistan-Malaysia relations in areas such as trade, connectivity, energy, agriculture, tourism, and cultural exchanges. They will also address regional and global issues.

Last month, Malaysia's Deputy Head of Mission, Syafik Firdaus Hasbullah, emphasized the need for increased cooperation between Pakistan and Malaysia, particularly in industrial cooperation, defence,

renewable energy, and education. Hasbullah noted that the Malaysian government is willing to assist Pakistan in improving product quality and provide training through the Malaysian Technological Cooperation Program (MTCP), which has already benefitted over 700 Pakistanis since 1980.

Both countries currently have a trade volume of USD 1.78 billion, and efforts are underway to enhance cooperation in high-tech industries. [Geo News]

Pakistani Premier Shehbaz seeks US investment to stabilize economy

(tj/ja/mra) During a reception hosted by US President Joe Biden on the sidelines of the 79th United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Biden reaffirmed their shared desire to enhance cooperation in areas such as trade, investment, technology, and climate action. This was Prime Minister Shehbaz's second meeting with Biden as prime minister, following a previous encounter at a reception during the 77th UN General Assembly session. [Geo News]

As part of his economic diplomacy efforts in New York, Prime Minister Shehbaz also met with the U.S.-Pakistan Business Council (USPBC) and representatives from top American banks, including JP Morgan and Goldman Sachs. He introduced the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC), a high-level agency designed to attract foreign investments in sectors like agriculture, IT, energy, and mining. During his discussions, Shehbaz invited American banks to invest in Pakistan's infrastructure, technology, and agriculture sectors to promote sustainable external financing. He highlighted initiatives to improve the macroeconomic environment, such as expanding the tax base, enhancing the ease of doing business, reforming state-owned enterprises, and establishing a Sustainable Finance Framework. [Arab News 1] [Arab News 2]

U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia, Donald Lu, praised Pakistan's ongoing economic recovery and the strong relationship between the United States and Pakistan under Prime Minister Shehbaz's leadership. He acknowledged Pakistan's economic reforms as crucial for long-term stability and emphasized U.S. support for Pakistan's counter-terrorism efforts. Lu reiterated the U.S. commitment to Pakistan's success, stating that the partnership would benefit all segments of society, especially the youth. [Dawn] [The Nation] [The Express Tribune]

These diplomatic engagements and economic initiatives come amid Pakistan's efforts to stabilize its economy, supported by a USD 7 billion International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan and backing from China, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. Bilateral trade between the US and Pakistan currently totals USD 12 billion, and both sides are pushing for further investments to foster sustainable growth and enhance cooperation across multiple sectors.

Pakistan sells JF-17 Block-III fighter jets to Azerbaijan

(tj) Pakistan has signed a contract to sell JF-17 Block-III fighter jets to Azerbaijan, aiming to enhance Azerbaijan's airpower capabilities and strengthen military ties between the two nations. The JF-17 Block-III is a 4.5 generation multi-role fighter suitable for a variety of combat missions. Details such as the number of jets and price were not disclosed.

The deal follows a visit by Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev to Pakistan in July, during which he was briefed on the fighter jet's capabilities. A Pakistan Air Force (PAF) contingent also showcased the JF-17 at the ADEX-2024 exhibition in Baku, demonstrating its aerial prowess and refueling capabilities. [Geo News] [Arab News] [The Express Tribune]

Pakistan, Turkiye agree to strengthen bilateral ties

(ht) Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif met on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in New York, where they reaffirmed their commitment to deepening ties between their countries, particularly in the defence industry and economic cooperation. The leaders also discussed bilateral relations, regional matters, and global peace efforts, with Erdogan stressing Türkiye's ongoing initiatives for a ceasefire and humanitarian aid in Gaza. Both countries have a longstanding partnership focused on trade, investment, and defence, exemplified by agreements such as the Preferential Trade Agreement signed in 2022. [Dawn News] [The Express Tribune]

Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif meets UK Prime Minister Starmer

(ja) Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer met on the sidelines of the 79th United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) session, agreeing to enhance bilateral ties, especially in trade and investment. PM Shehbaz discussed Pakistan's economic growth measures, challenges from climate change, and the country's sacrifices in the fight against terrorism. He highlighted the UK's role as the third-largest investor in Pakistan and the significant contribution of the Pakistani diaspora in the UK. [Geo News]

Pakistani officials visit Dubai immigration center, observe measures for resolving residency issues 'swiftly'

(lm) A team from Pakistan's Consulate General in Dubai visited the Al-Awir Immigration Center to review the services offered under the United Arab Emirates' (UAE) two-month amnesty scheme for visa violators, running from September 1 to October 31. The amnesty allows visa violators, mostly from South Asia, to regularize their status or leave the country without penalties, aiming to enhance social stability by reducing the number of undocumented residents.

The UAE hosts over 1.5 million Pakistani expatriates and is Pakistan's third-largest trading partner and a significant source of workers' remittances. [Arab News]

Pakistan, Iran prime ministers agree to enhance bilateral trade, connectivity, cultural ties

(ja) Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif met with Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian on the sidelines of the 79th United Nations General Assembly session in New York. In the meeting, Sharif emphasized the importance of enhancing bilateral trade, investment, connectivity, and cultural ties. Both sides reiterated the need to strengthen good neighborly relations and discussed opportunities for mutually beneficial cooperation. The prime minister also reiterated Pakistan's stance on Palestine, calling for a ceasefire in Gaza and an end to aggression against Palestine and Lebanon. [ARY News]

Singapore senior official visits SAF's artillery live-firing exercise in United

States

(lm) Singapore's Senior Minister of State for Defence Heng Chee How visited Exercise Daring Warrior (XDW) 2024, a joint military exercise between the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) and the U.S. Army, held at Fort Sill, Oklahoma from September 6 to 24. The exercise involved approximately 150 SAF and 35 U.S. Army personnel, featuring a combined live-firing drill showcasing the High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) and the Multiple Launch Rocket System (MLRS).

This year's Exercise Daring Warrior, first held in 2010, marks its 10th edition and underscores the strong defense ties between Singapore and the US. [MINDEF Singapore]

Twelve Singaporean soldiers injured as armored vehicles collide during joint military exercise with Australia

(lm) Twelve Singaporean soldiers were injured when two armored vehicles collided during a joint military training exercise in Central Queensland, Australia. The incident occurred at the Shoalwater Bay training area, as part of Exercise Wallaby, the Singapore Armed Forces' (SAF) largest overseas training exercise. The Australian Defence Forces (ADF) were not involved in the incident.

Exercise Wallaby began on September 8 and will conclude on November 3, marking its 34th anniversary. [abc news]

South Korea and UK to launch dialogue on economic and financial cooperation

(ac) South Korea and Britain have established launched a high-level dialogue channel aimed at enhancing cooperation on various economic and financial issues. The inaugural meeting of this bilateral economic and financial dialogue took place on September 26 in London, attended by South Korean Deputy Finance Minister Choi Ji-young and Lindsey Whyte, the director general of Britain's HM Treasury.

The dialogue was established following an agreement reached during a summit between South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol and then British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak in November 2023. During the

meeting, the two sides explored ways to strengthen cooperation on supply chains, economic security, multilateral economic collaboration, and responses to climate change. [Yonhap News]

South Korea, Slovakia discuss nuclear power project

(ac) South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol and Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico have agreed to enhance bilateral relations and collaborate in carbon-free energy industries during Fico's official visit to South Korea. It was second visit to the Eats Asian country following the first in 2007.

The leaders issued a statement to establish a strategic partnership covering security, defense, economy, trade, energy, and technology. A memorandum of understanding (MOU) was signed for comprehensive energy cooperation, focusing on carbon-free sources like nuclear power, renewable energy, and hydrogen.

The agreement comes as Slovakia plans to build a new nuclear power unit. Slovakia has five nuclear reactors that generate half of its electricity, with another reactor under construction. South Korea's Korea Hydro & Nuclear Power has expressed interest in the Slovak project, following its selection as the preferred bidder for a similar project in the Czech Republic.

In addition, the countries signed an MOU on Trade and Investment Promotion to facilitate economic collaboration and deepen defense industry cooperation. Bilateral trade reached some USD 4 billion in 2023, largely in vehicles and auto parts.

During their talks, both leaders also voiced concerns about increasing military cooperation and arms trade between North Korea and Russia, which they described as violations of U.N. Security Council resolutions. [Yonhap News]

In an exclusive interview with *Korea JoongAng Daily*, Fico emphasized the potential for improving South Korean-Slovak bilateral relations, citing shared security challenges and mutual economic interests. With the goal of improving energy security and meeting low-carbon goals, Fico reaffirmed Slovakia's commitment to developing cultural exchanges, research and development, new technologies, and potentially nuclear energy with South Korea. [Korea JoongAng Daily]

Japan to resume developmental projects in Sri Lanka

(sa) In a significant development for Sri Lanka, the Japanese government has pledged to resume work on 11 major projects that had been stalled for various reasons, including bureaucratic delays and funding issues. This commitment was announced during a meeting between Ambassador Mizukoshi and Secretary to the President Dr. Nandika Sanath Kumanayake at the Presidential Secretariat.

The projects slated for revival include critical infrastructure initiatives such as the Kandy City Water Management Project and Phase II of the Bandaranaike International Airport Development Project. The ambassador expressed optimism about the renewed collaboration, stating that Japan will fully support the new government's development program. [Daily Mirror]

South Korea pledges loan support for anti-corruption projects in Sri Lanka

(aa) The South Korean government has committed to supporting Sri Lanka's transparency agenda by providing loan assistance for initiatives focused on combating fraud and corruption. This commitment was made during a meeting at the Presidential Secretariat between a delegation from the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) and Secretary to the President, Dr. Nandika Sanath Kumanayake. The meeting was also attended by key figures, including South Korean Ambassador Miyon Lee and KOICA's Sri Lanka Country Director Kim Myungjin, among others. [Daily Mirror]

US to provide USD 567 million in military support to Taiwan

(am/hs) US President Joe Biden has approved USD 567 million in military support for Taiwan, marking the latest effort by Washington to bolster the self-governed island's defenses amid rising tensions with China.

The White House stated on September 30 that Biden approved "the drawdown of up to USD 567 million In defense articles and services of the Department of Defence, and military education and training, to provide assistance to Taiwan."

The announcement was made on the eve of China's Nation on October 1. It follows a series of U.S. military aid packages for Taiwan, including billions in April 2024, as China intensifies military and political pressure on the island.

Beijing views U.S. support as interference in its internal affairs, while Taipei has expressed frustration over delayed arms deliveries, particularly for upgraded F-14 fighter jets. [Al Jazeera]

Taiwan US drone manufacturing meeting

(hs) A delegation of 26 US drone manufacturers, including AeroVironment, which produces Switchblade drones, and Dedrone, a counter-drone system provider, visited Taiwan from September 22 to 25. The mission, supported by officials from the US Department of Commerce and the Pentagon's Defense Innovation Unit, aimed to secure supply chain partnerships and reduce reliance on mainland China.

The US Defense Innovation Unit[DQL1] , which specializes in accelerating the adoption of emerging technologies for the military, played a key role in exploring how Taiwanese companies could contribute to the US defense supply chain. Northrop Grumman, another participant, expressed interest in expanding into the Taiwanese market.

Wellington Koo, Taiwan's Defence Minister, emphasized that the visit was a critical opportunity for Taiwanese companies to integrate into US defense supply chains, particularly as the US seeks to move manufacturing away from China's "red supply chain." Taiwan's strategic role in the global technology landscape is reinforced by its government's ambitious plan to increase drone production to 15,000 units per month by 2028 – ten times its current capacity – as part of its asymmetric defense strategy to counter Beijing's military threats.

During the visit, the delegation assessed Taiwan's manufacturing capabilities and explored co-production opportunities. These efforts align with broader US objectives to "de-risk" supply chains, particularly for dual-use technologies like drones, which have both civilian and military applications. The push to diversify is driven by concerns over China's dominance in the global drone industry and the need for reliable partners like Taiwan in safeguarding critical infrastructure and defense systems. [Financial Times] [South China Morning Post]

In an interview, Raymond Greene, the new director of the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) – the US de-facto embassy in Taiwan, emphasized that US-Taiwan cooperation in drone production, especially with the integration of artificial intelligence (AI), is a strategic advantage. With both nations excelling in AI and semiconductors, they are well-positioned to lead advancements in drone technology. He also stressed the importance of diversifying away from China's dominance, which holds 90 percent of the world's consumer drone's production, making the shift crucial for securing global supply chains.

Addressing concerns raised by former US President Trump, who criticized Taiwan for "taking away" US chip business, Greene reassured that the US-Taiwan semiconductor partnership is mutually beneficial and not a "zero-sum game." Taiwan's capacity limitations, such as land and resources, will naturally lead to more manufacturing shifting to the US, ultimately enhancing the resilience of the supply chain. [Focus Taiwan]

Taiwanese troops train in US

(am) A former US diplomat has disclosed that Taiwanese troops have been training at Camp Grayling in Michigan. Joseph Cella, who is the former US Ambassador to Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Tonga and Tuvalu, confirmed this during a House Committee hearing on September 24 [Focus Taiwan].

Cella stated Camp Grayling trains both American and allied troops, including Taiwan, "in strategic and tactical battle operations".

Taiwan condemns China over UN address

(am) The Taiwanese Government has condemned Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's speech at the UN General Assembly. The address was labelled as one that "distorted" the effects of Resolution 2758. This is the resolution adopted by the 26th UN General Assembly in 1971 that confirms the Beijing Government is the sole legitimate representative of China. [Focus Taiwan]

The Taiwanese Government reiterated that the Resolution did not alter Taiwan's status as a sovereign and independent nation. It also rejected the Beijing's right to represent the people living in Taiwan.

“Only the democratically elected government of Taiwan has the right to represent the Taiwanese people in the UN System and the international arena”, it said.

President of Palau visits Taiwan

(am) The President of Palau Surangel Whipps Jr. visited Taiwan on a two-day diplomatic trip that ended on September 28.

President Whipps was welcomed by Taiwan’s President Lai Ching-te at the annual meeting of the World Taiwanese Chambers of Commerce (WTCC). Lai encouraged WTCCC members to invest into Palau and thanked the nation for maintaining its formal diplomatic relations with Taiwan.

Lai’s praise was made in response to Palau Vice President Uduch Sengebau Sr.’s remarks made during the 79th UN General Assembly. During the general debate she called for allowing Taiwan’s participation in international organizations.

President Whipps later signed a joint declaration with the WTCC that aims to promote tourism and business investment in Palau. Palau will in return provide policy support to Taiwan. [Focus Taiwan]

Palau is currently one of only 11 UN member states which continue to have formal diplomatic relations with Taiwan.

Indonesia, Timor-Leste intensify cooperation in infrastructure planning and development

(mu) Timor-Leste's Minister of Planning and Strategic Investment, Gastão Francisco de Sousa, met with Indonesia's Minister of National Development Planning, Suharso Monoarfa, on September 18 in Jakarta to strengthen bilateral cooperation in infrastructure planning and development. The meeting focused on establishing a learning and exchange network to address common challenges, with an emphasis on infrastructure planning, economic development, and resource specialization. A Memorandum of Understanding will soon be signed to formalize this cooperation. [Government of Timor-Leste]

China, Vietnam hold 13th ECC meeting

(cc) Vietnam and China held the 13th session of the Economic and Trade Cooperation Committee on September 29, co-chaired by Vietnam's Minister of Industry and Trade Nguyen Hong Dien and China's Minister of Commerce Wang Wentao. Discussions focused on enhancing cooperation in investment, supply chains, border trade facilitation, market access, and e-commerce.

Minister Dien highlighted Vietnam's emphasis on digital and green economies, electric vehicle development, and cooperation in industrial parks. He also urged China to open its market to more Vietnamese agricultural products and improve border gate infrastructure. Minister Wang called for policies to support energy projects and proposed boosting trade and cooperation in e-commerce. [Sài Gòn Giải Phóng] [Vietnam News]

Vietnam reaffirms strong ties with Laos during ambassador's credential presentation

(cc) Vietnam reaffirmed its commitment to strengthening ties with Laos on September 30, as newly appointed Ambassador Nguyen Minh Tam presented his credentials to Lao Party General Secretary and President Thongloun Sisoulith in Vientiane. President Sisoulith emphasized the importance of deepening the relationship, while Ambassador Tam reiterated Vietnam's dedication to their "great friendship, special solidarity, and comprehensive cooperation." [Vietnam News] [Nhân Dân]

Mongolia, Vietnam aim to double trade

(cc) Vietnam and Mongolia aim to double their bilateral trade, currently at USD 75 million, following a visit by Mongolian President Ukhnaagiin Khurelsukh. Key strategies include revitalizing the economic cooperation committee, fostering business partnerships, and enhancing cooperation in the mining sector. Both countries also plan to eliminate logistical hurdles and use existing legal frameworks to create a favorable trade environment. [Vietnam News] [Vietnam Economic News]

Thai court orders extradition of Vietnamese activist despite safety concerns raised by rights groups

(wn) A Thai court has approved the extradition of human rights activist Y Quynh Bdap to Vietnam, where he faces a high risk of torture and an unfair trial. Bdap, co-founder of Montagnards Stand for Justice, fled Vietnam in 2018 to avoid arrest for his advocacy on behalf of the Montagnards, an ethnic minority group. He was arrested in Bangkok in June 2024 at Vietnam's request and sentenced in absentia to 10 years in prison for alleged involvement in a riot that left nine dead.

Bdap's lawyer plans to appeal the decision, arguing that it violates Thailand's anti-torture law, which forbids deportation to countries where individuals face torture. Human Rights Watch criticized the decision, noting Vietnam's history of mistreating political dissidents. Concerns have been raised by the United Nations and rights groups regarding Bdap's safety if extradited, and calls have been made for Thailand to reject the extradition to prevent setting a dangerous precedent for other political refugees. [Midland Daily News] [Voice of America]

Vietnamese in Australia unite to aid typhoon victims

(cc) In response to Typhoon Yagi's devastation in Vietnam, the Vietnamese community in Australia has united to raise nearly VNR 5 billion (USD 203,300) to aid victims. Vietnamese Ambassador to Australia, Pham Hung Tam, expressed gratitude for the community's support, highlighting the diaspora's strong commitment to helping their compatriots in times of need. [Vietnam News] [Vietnam Plus]

Announcements

Upcoming online events

4 October 2024 @ 2:30-4:00 p.m. (GTM+7), CPG, Thailand

Asia in Review Webinar Series on Elections in 2024

Where is Japan Heading Post-Kishida?

This webinar will analyze the election of the new president of the Liberal Democratic Party in Japan, focusing on the new leader and the implications for Japan's domestic politics and foreign policy in the post-Kishida era.

For more information, see [CPG].

2 October 2024 @ 12:30 - 14:00 p.m., (GMT +2), Bruegel, Belgium

The Power of Perspective: Long-term strategies for a resilient Europe

Europe has been navigating a series of interconnected crises, including environmental and geopolitical challenges. This event will focus on the importance of adopting a long-term perspective to handle these rapid changes, as outlined in a recent report presented to the European Council.

For more information, visit [Bruegel].

2 October 2024 @ 12:00 p.m. - 1:15 p.m., (GMT -4), Harvard Belfer Center, USA

Demystifying the Polar Silk Road: What We Know About China's Arctic Investments

The Arctic Initiative will host a seminar on Chinese investments in the Arctic, examining the interests and concerns of Arctic states. Experts will discuss the economic and security implications of these investments.

For more information, visit [Harvard Belfer Center].

2 October 2024 @ 10:00 a.m. - 11:30 a.m., (GMT +8), S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore

Coping with China’s Rise: India’s Strategy and Policy Options

This event will analyze the debate within Indian strategic circles about the feasibility of economic openness to China. The presentation will assess India's China policy, its security challenges, and the effectiveness of current strategies, focusing on the Galwan conflict and post-COVID restrictions on Chinese businesses.

For more information, visit [RSIS].

2 October 2024 @ 5:30 p.m. - 7:30 p.m., (GMT +11), Asia Society Policy Institute, Australia

ASPI's Women in Defence and Security Network's Informal Networking

This event offers networking opportunities for professionals in the defence and security sector, coinciding with a leadership course for Indonesian security officials hosted by Deakin University.

For more information, visit [Asia Society].

2 October 2024 @ 11:15 a.m. - 12:00 p.m., (GMT -4), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, USA

A Conversation with U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell

Kurt Campbell will discuss U.S. foreign policy challenges, including competition with China, the war in Ukraine, and climate change, while reflecting on the Biden administration's strategy over the past four years.

For more information, visit [Carnegie Endowment].

2 October 2024 @ 1:00 p.m. - 4:20 p.m., (GMT -4), Brookings, USA

The 2024 Knight Forum on Geopolitics

Brookings will host a series of conversations exploring significant ideas and potential solutions to global security challenges. This year's forum will feature keynote discussions with White House Office of Science and Technology Policy Director Arati Prabhakar and former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Joseph F. Dunford, along with panels of Brookings experts.

For more information, visit [Brookings].

2 October 2024 @ 1:00 p.m. - 2:00 p.m., (GMT -4), Brookings, USA

Election 2024: Technology and Electoral Dynamics

This webinar, hosted by Governance Studies at Brookings and the Council on Foreign Relations, will feature a panel of experts discussing the role of technology in the electoral dynamics of the U.S. 2024 presidential election. It is part of a series of events leading up to Election Day.

For more information, visit [Brookings].

2 October 2024 @ 10:00 a.m. - 11:15 a.m., (GMT +8), S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore

On the Home Stretch: The Race to 270 and the Domestic and Foreign Policy Implications of the 2024 Elections

This webinar will explore the state of the 2024 U.S. presidential campaign, examining polling accuracy,

campaign strategies of Kamala Harris and Donald Trump, and the election's implications for U.S. domestic and foreign policy.

For more information, visit [RSIS].

2 October 2024 @ 4:00 p.m. - 8:00 p.m., (GMT +1), Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), UK

'NAVALNY' Documentary Film Screening & Panel Discussion

This screening of the documentary "NAVALNY" will be followed by a panel discussion on the political legacy of Alexei Navalny, a prominent Russian dissident, whose life and activism challenged Vladimir Putin's regime.

For more information, visit [RUSI].

2 October 2024 @ 12:15 p.m. - 1:30 p.m., (GMT -4), Middle East Institute, USA

US Strategy Since Oct. 7: Assessing the Biden Administration's Middle East Policy One Year On

This panel will assess U.S. policy in the Middle East since October 7, focusing on efforts to negotiate ceasefires, hostage releases, and the role the Middle East will play in broader U.S. foreign policy considerations in the future.

For more information, visit [Middle East Institute].

2 October 2024 @ 10:00 a.m. - 11:00 a.m., (GMT -4), Wilson Center, USA

UK and US Antarctic Collaboration: The Cutting Edge of Polar Science and Future Directions

This program will feature prominent scientists discussing the long-standing collaboration between the UK and the US on Antarctic science, crucial for understanding glacier dynamics and global sea-level rise. Future ambitions related to the upcoming International Polar Year will also be addressed.

For more information, visit [Wilson Center].

2 October 2024 @ 6:00 p.m. - 7:00 p.m., (GMT -4), Chatham House, UK

Looking Ahead to the 2024 US Presidential Election

This panel will discuss the current state of the 2024 US presidential election, analyzing key issues influencing voter preferences and the impact on voter turnout as candidates ramp up their campaigns.

For more information, visit [Chatham House].

2 October 2024 @ 4:00 p.m. - 5:30 p.m., (GMT -7), Stanford University, USA

America Votes 2024: Part 1

This event will explore the critical issues surrounding the upcoming elections in the United States, focusing on voter turnout, candidate platforms, and potential impacts on governance. Experts will engage in discussions that highlight the importance of civic engagement and informed voting in a democracy.

For more information, visit [Stanford University].

3 October 2024 @ 12:00 - 1:15 p.m., (GMT -4), Cato Institute, USA

The Unraveling: Reflections on Politics Without Ethics and Democracy in Crisis

Join a discussion featuring author Bob Bauer as he reflects on the themes of his new book, addressing the erosion of ethical standards in contemporary politics and its implications for democratic governance.

For more information, visit [Cato Institute].

3 October 2024 @ 12:00 p.m. - 1:15 p.m., (GMT -7), Stanford University, USA

Parties, Patronage, and the State: New Paths to Bureaucratic Reform

This event will discuss the evolving dynamics between political parties and state bureaucracy, emphasizing reform strategies that promote efficiency and accountability. Scholars will share insights on the role of patronage in shaping bureaucratic outcomes and potential pathways for transformation.

For more information, visit [Stanford University].

3 October 2024 @ 12:00 - 1:20 p.m., (GMT -7), Stanford University, USA

Gender Inequity and Economic Impact: Demographic Change in India and the Cost of Widowhood

This panel will examine the socio-economic consequences of demographic changes in India, focusing on the impact of widowhood on economic opportunities and gender equity. Experts will discuss the underlying cultural factors and policy implications for promoting gender equality in the region.

For more information, visit [Stanford University].

3 October 2024 @ 3:30 - 5:00 p.m., (GMT -7), Stanford University, USA

Settler Empire and the United States: Francis Lieber on the Laws of War | Helen Kinsella

This event will delve into the historical context of Francis Lieber's contributions to the laws of war and their relevance to contemporary discussions on military conduct. The session will feature insights from Helen Kinsella, emphasizing the interplay between law and military strategy in settler colonial contexts.

For more information, visit [Stanford University].

3 October 2024 @ 4:00 - 5:30 p.m., (GMT -7), Stanford University, USA

Technology, Culture, and Power Speaker Series: Mara Mills

In this installment of the speaker series, Mara Mills will explore the intersection of technology and culture, focusing on how power dynamics shape technological

develop.m.ent and usage. The discussion will include critical perspectives on the societal implications of emerging technologies.

For more information, visit [Stanford University].

3 October 2024 @ 4:00 - 6:00 p.m., (GMT -7), Stanford University, USA

Disguised Repression: Targeting Opponents with Non-Political Crimes to Undermine Dissent

This event will address strategies employed by regimes to suppress dissent through non-political means, analyzing the implications for civil liberties and democratic governance. Experts will discuss case studies and the international response to such practices.

For more information, visit [Stanford University].

3 October 2024 @ 6:00 p.m. - 7:00 p.m., (GMT -4), Harvard Kennedy School, USA

Race and Identity in the Presidential Election

This panel will discuss how race continues to shape the 2024 U.S. presidential election. From anti-immigrant rhetoric to debates over racial identity, the discussion will explore how race impacts voter engagement and policy positions.
For more information, visit [Harvard Kennedy School].

1 - 3 October 2024 @ 9:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m., (GMT +1), POLITICO, Belgium

POLITICO Competitive Europe Week

POLITICO will host a conference on European competitiveness, featuring discussions on how the U.S. and Europe can boost growth in a shifting global order. Experts will explore European competitiveness and strategies for strengthening the continent's economic

position.
For more information, visit [German Marshall Fund].

3 October 2024 @ 9:00 a.m. - 11:30 a.m., (GMT -5), Inter-American Dialogue, USA

Bolstering Latin America-Japan-US Cooperation on Energy Transition and Critical Minerals Supply

This event will explore Japanese outreach in Latin America and the prospects for cooperation between Japan, the U.S., and Latin American countries in sectors such as energy transition and critical minerals. Experts will discuss policy trends and future collaboration.

For more information, visit [Inter-American Dialogue].

3 October 2024 @ 3:00 p.m. - 5:00 p.m., (GMT +1), DIIS, Denmark

How to fight disinformation without sacrificing free speech

As disinformation becomes a growing threat, Western states are increasingly regulating media platforms. This seminar will address the challenge of securing media freedom while protecting society from disinformation.

For more information, visit [DIIS].

3 October 2024 @ 3:30 p.m. - 5:00 p.m., (GMT +2), Istituto Affari Internazionali, Italy

Fostering AI Innovation and Competition: A G7 Policy Roadmap

This event aims to stimulate public debate on AI innovation and competition, ahead of key meetings like the G7 Ministerial Meeting on Technology and Digital. Experts will explore the role of competition authorities in promoting a balanced AI ecosystem.

For more information, visit [IAI].

3 October 2024 @ 10:00 a.m. - 11:00 a.m., (GMT -4), National Endowment for Democracy, USA

Leveraging AI for Democracy: Civic Innovation on the New Digital Playing Field

This event will launch a report on the potential for AI to enhance democratic processes. Experts will discuss how AI tools can enable civic participation and new forms of deliberation in the digital age.

For more information, visit [NED].

3 October 2024 @ 6:00 p.m. - 7:15 p.m., (GMT +10), Lowy Institute, Australia

Launch of the 2024 Asia Power Index: Is Asia multipolar?

The Lowy Institute will launch its annual assessment of power distribution in Asia, involving 27 countries. This event will explore narratives regarding China's dominance and the rise of a multipolar Indo-Pacific region. Experts will discuss what the Asia Power Index reveals about these dynamics.

For more information, visit [Lowy Institute].

3 October 2024 @ 9:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m., (GMT -4), Heritage Foundation, USA

By the People, for the People: Election Integrity and the Conservative Legal Movement

The Heritage Foundation and Harvard Journal of Law and Public Policy will host a symposium on election law and the conservative legal movement. Experts will discuss issues related to election integrity, lawfare, and how these impact the future of the conservative legal movement.

For more information, visit [Heritage Foundation].

3 October 2024 @ 10:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m., (GMT +5:30), Observer Research Foundation, India

India and the World: Shaping Strategy, Advancing Development, Securing Sustainability

This event will focus on India's engagement with global governance and its role in fostering international partnerships to advance growth, sustainability, and political development, with insights from top experts and researchers.

For more information, visit [ORF].

4 October 2024 @ 11:00 a.m. - 12:30 p.m., (GMT -4), Brookings, USA

The United States and China in Latin America: Rivalry, Cooperation, or Something In-Between?

This event will analyze the economic benefits and potential national security concerns associated with China's engagement in Latin America. Experts will explore the cooperation and competition between the U.S. and China in the region.
For more information, visit [Brookings].

4 October 2024 @ 10:00 a.m. - 11:00 a.m., (GMT -4), Wilson Center, USA

Book Talk | The Melting Point: High Command and War in the 21st Century by General (Ret) Kenneth Frank McKenzie

General (Ret) Kenneth Frank McKenzie will reflect on pivotal moments from his command in US Central Command in his new memoir. He discusses the challenges of high command and the critical importance of leadership in warfare.

For more information, visit [Wilson Center].

4 October 2024 @ 12:00 p.m. - 1:30 p.m., (GMT -4), Harvard Kennedy School, USA

Discussions with The Enemy: How Exposure to the Other Side and Counter-typical Viewpoints Can Moderate Extremity

This presentation will explore how exposure to counter-typical viewpoints from political opponents influences the moderation of extreme views, using a large-scale field experiment on partisan discussions.

For more information, visit [Harvard Kennedy School].

4 October 2024 @ 11:00 a.m. - 12:30 p.m., (GMT +8), ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore

Thailand at a Crossroad: Challenges and Pathways to Democratic Reform

This seminar will examine democratic backsliding in Thailand, analyzing the impact of judicial and political maneuvers on party systems and the challenges to achieving long-term democratic reform.

For more information, visit [ISEAS].

4 October 2024 @ 10:00 a.m. - 11:00 a.m., (GMT -5), CNAS, USA

Upcoming Elections in Moldova and Georgia

This virtual event will explore the crucial elections in Moldova and Georgia, which are pivotal for their democratic futures and geopolitical orientations. The discussion will cover Russia's influence in these countries and the broader Euro-Atlantic perspective for good governance and democracy.

For more information, visit [CNAS].

4 October 2024 @ 12:00 - 1:30 p.m., (GMT -7), Stanford University, USA

Taiwan’s Roles in the Global Supply Chain: TSMC and How It Moves from Local to Global

This panel will discuss the pivotal role of Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) in the global supply chain, emphasizing its transition from a local player to a global leader. Experts will address the implications for international trade and technology policy.

For more information, visit [Stanford University].

7 October 2024 @ 9:30 a.m. - 11:30 a.m., (GMT -4), Heritage Foundation, USA

Never Again Is Not Enough: Remembering the Tragedy of October 7

This event reflects on the one-year anniversary of Hamas' October 7 attack on Israel and addresses the rise in antisemitism in the U.S. Experts will discuss ways to combat antisemitism and restore the U.S.-Israel alliance.

For more information, visit [Heritage Foundation].

7 October 2024 @ 1:30 p.m. - 4:35 p.m., (GMT +1), DIIS, Denmark

Refugee decision-making in first countries of asylum

This event will examine how individual refugees perceive and respond to opportunities and challenges in their countries of first asylum, discussing their decisions to stay or move within or across borders.

For more information, visit [DIIS].

7 October 2024 @ 12:00 p.m. - 1:15 p.m., (GMT -4), Harvard Belfer Center, USA

Green Industrial Policy and Decarbonization

This Energy Policy Seminar will feature Jonas Meckling discussing green industrial policy and its role in decarbonization. The seminar will explore the political economy of decarbonization and the impact of industrial strategies on energy transitions.
For more information, visit [Harvard Belfer Center].

7 October 2024 @ 1:00 - 2:00 p.m., (GMT -4), Cato Institute, USA

Federal Surveillance Reform: Achievements and Unfinished Business

This event will analyze the Section 702 program's track record, discussing constitutional rights violations and successes in foreign intelligence. Experts will evaluate the ongoing need for surveillance reform in light of civil liberties.
For more information, visit [Cato Institute].

8 October 2024 @ 1:00 - 2:00 p.m., (GMT -4), Cato Institute, USA

State and Local Law Enforcement: Trends in Policing and the Law and Technology Surrounding It

This panel will explore changes in policing practices since the George Floyd protests, focusing on monitoring protests and the impact of technology on law enforcement. Experts will discuss the implications for civil society and accountability.

For more information, visit [Cato Institute].

8 October 2024 @ 4:00 p.m. - 5:00 p.m. (GMT -4), Cato Institute, USA

Pivot or Die: How Leaders Thrive When Everything Changes

This event features a discussion on competition, innovation, and the influence of policy and regulation on leadership. Experts will share insights on adapting to rapid changes and the strategies that can help leaders thrive in challenging environments.

For more information, visit [Cato Institute].

8 October 2024 @ 2:00 p.m., (GMT -7), Hoover Institution, Stanford University, USA

To War Or Not To War: Vietnam And The Sigma Wargames

This event introduces the Sigma Wargames, examining their historical context and the implications for U.S. foreign policy. A panel of historians will discuss the warnings these games presented and the reasons their insights did not influence the Johnson Administration’s decisions, ultimately shaping a costly conflict for America.

For more information, visit [Hoover Institution].

8 October 2024 @ 10:00 a.m. - 11:00 a.m., (GMT -4), National Endowment for Democracy, USA

The Struggle Against Authoritarian Influence in the Western Balkans

This event will discuss the report "The Struggle Against Authoritarian Influence in the Western Balkans," focusing on Montenegro as a case study. Experts will analyze tools of authoritarian influence on democratic institutions and propose innovative responses for civil society.

For more information, visit [NED].

8 October 2024 @ 9:00 a.m. - 10:15 a.m., (GMT +8), ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore

Global Stakes: Trump vs. Harris and the Future of U.S. Foreign Policy

As the U.S. presidential election approaches, this webinar will examine the foreign policy differences between Donald Trump and Kamala Harris, focusing on their respective stances on China, protectionism, and diplomatic styles.
For more information, visit [ISEAS].

8 October 2024 @ 3:00 p.m. - 4:30 p.m., (GMT -4), Wilson Center, USA

Claudia Sheinbaum: What's Next for US-Mexico Relations

As Mexico prepares to inaugurate its first female president, Claudia Sheinbaum, this panel will explore the implications for US-Mexico relations, including trade dynamics and the political landscape in both countries.

For more information, visit [Wilson Center].

8 October 2024 @ 6:00 p.m. - 7:00 p.m., (GMT -4), Chatham House, UK

How Will India-UK Relations Reset Post-Elections?

Following the elections in both countries, experts will discuss how the new political environments in India and the UK will influence their bilateral relations moving forward.

For more information, visit [Chatham House].

8 October 2024 @ 1:30 p.m., (GMT -4), Atlantic Council, USA

The Future of US Strategy Toward Iran: A Bipartisan Roadmap for the Next Administration

The Scowcroft Middle East Security Initiative will release a report detailing a comprehensive approach to US policy toward Iran, aimed at informing the next administration's strategies regardless of the election outcome.

For more information, visit [Atlantic Council].

8 October 2024 @ 12:00 - 1:15 p.m., (GMT -7), Stanford University, USA

Mightier than the Sword: Civilian Control of the Military and the Revitalization of Democracy | Alice Friend

This event will explore the relationship between civilian oversight of the military and the health of democratic institutions. Alice Friend will discuss historical examples and current challenges, emphasizing the importance of maintaining democratic control over military forces.

For more information, visit [Stanford University].

8 October 2024 @ 4:30 - 5:30 p.m., (GMT -7), Stanford University, USA

Japan at a Crossroads: the New Prime Minister and Where She/He Might Lead Japan

This event will analyze the political landscape in Japan following the appointment of the new Prime Minister. Experts will discuss potential policy directions and their implications for Japan's role in the international arena.

For more information, visit [Stanford University].

Recent Book Reslease

Fawaz A Gerges, What Really Went Wrong: The West and the Failure of Democracy in the Middle East, Yale University Press, 336 pages, published May 28 2024. For a review, see [LSE].

***Anush Kapadia, A Political Theory of Money*,** Cambridge University Press, 320 pages, published February 22, 2024, For a review, see [LSE].

Justin M. Jacobs, Plunder?: How Museums Got Their Treasures, Reaktion Books, 240 pages, published October 10, 2024. For a review, see [Asian Review of Books].

***Martin Thomas, The End of Empires and a World Remade: A Global History of Decolonization*,** Princeton University Press, 672 pages, published March 19, 2024. For a review, see [Foreign Affairs].

***Alissa Klots, Domestic Service in the Soviet Union: Women's Emancipation and the Gendered Hierarchy of Labor*,** Cambridge University Press, 318 pages, published May 2, 2024. For a review, see [Foreign Affairs].

***Mitri Alperovitch with Garrett M. Graff, World on the Brink: How America Can Beat China in the Race for the Twenty-First Century*,** PublicAffairs**,** 400 pages, published April 30, 2024. For a review, see [Foreign Affairs].

Calls

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].

Jobs and Positions

The **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** is looking for a **Finance Associate, GS6 (Fixed Term), UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia, Kathmandu, Nepal** to be based in Kathmandu, Nepal. Applications are accepted until October 2, 2024. More information is provided at [UNICEF].

The **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** is looking for a **Budget Specialist, P3 (Fixed-Term), UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia, Kathmandu, Nepal** to be based in Kathmandu, Nepal. Applications are accepted until October 7, 2024. More information is provided at [UNICEF].

Team:

Ainesh Dey (ad), Ally Koh (alk), Anna Chong (ac), Axel Melkonian (am). Aye Moe Pwint Phyu, Busawan Kachonnarongvanish (bk), Chloe Joyce Wong Rong (cr), Chow Song Chee (cc), Duc Quang Ly (dql), Felice Valeria Thessalonica (ft), Felix Serna Calvo (fs), Fitri Aulia Ikhsani (fi), Geo Dzakwan Arshali (ga), Hamail Tahir (ht), Helene Skaff (hs), *Henning Glaser (hg), Iram Tariq (it), Ji Fang (jf), Junaid Amjad (ja), Jyotsna Badrinarayanan (jb), Lawrence Brenner (lb), Lucas Meier (lm), Mohammad Rizwan Ali (mra), Muhammad Anugrah Utama (mu), Muhammad Syammakh Daffa Alghazali (ma), Myat Sandar Zaw (msz), Nicholas Fenech (nf), Oliver Cubbin (oc), Rishi Shrivastava (rs), Riya de los Reyes (rr), Robishan Subba (rs), Shekinah Annuncia (sa), Siddhima Sivanand (ss), Sike Chan (sc), Simon Welfonder (sw), Thomas van Oeveren (to), Thurein Lynn (tl), Tomwit Jarnson (tj), Venus Phuangkom, Wai Yan Phyo Naing (wn)*

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