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# Asia in Review

*Grasp the pattern, read the trend*

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Dear Readers,

Welcome to this week's issue of the Asia in Review (AiR) covering the latest events, developments and trends in domestic politics, international relations and geopolitics in East Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia.

I wish you an informative read and extend special greetings to everyone who celebrates the Independence Day of Lebanon and Morocco and the National Day of Latvia, Oman and Qatar this week.

With best regards,

Henning Glaser

Editor in Chief

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

### China: Former agriculture minister expelled from party

(lb) China's Communist Party has expelled Tang Renjian, former agriculture minister, after a corruption investigation by the country's anti-graft body. Tang, 61, was initially placed under investigation in May and subsequently removed from his leadership position. His expulsion follows President Xi Jinping's continuing anti-corruption campaign, which has also included recent probes into high-profile figures such as former defense ministers Li Shangfu and Wei Fenghe.

State media reported that Tang was found guilty of accepting gifts, money, and property in exchange for influencing cadre appointments, using his power to benefit relatives' businesses, and interfering in judicial proceedings. CCTV stated that Tang "lost his ideals and

beliefs, abandoned his original mission," citing these actions as serious violations of party discipline and laws.

Tang served as governor of Gansu province from 2017 to 2020 before leading the agriculture and rural affairs ministry, where he implemented significant food security measures, including approving genetically modified crops. In September, Han Jun, 60, succeeded Tang as the new agriculture minister. [Reuters]

## China: Calls for tougher penalties for industrial safety violations in Hong Kong

(lb) The Association for the Rights of Industrial Accident Victims has urged Hong Kong authorities to appeal what it considers lenient penalties for occupational safety breaches. The call came after four fatal construction-related incidents occurred within a week. [South China Morning Post]

The association highlighted the need stricter enforcement, noting that fines imposed by the courts, often equivalent to tens of thousands of Hong Kong dollars (e.g., HKD 80,000, USD 10,230), fail to deter safety violations.

The labor rights group reported that 11 construction workers have died in industrial accidents in 2024, criticizing the construction industry's practices, especially subcontracting, which it claimed diluted safety messages and weakened compliance. The group called for mandatory, extended safety training and proposed that industrial safety education start at primary and secondary school levels to foster early awareness.

Meanwhile, the Federation of Hong Kong and Kowloon Labour Unions pointed out that securing insurance coverage was difficult for those in the construction industry, leading many self-employed workers to forgo insurance and risk being unprotected. It suggested the government introduce a specialized insurance scheme for the sector and use a portion of fines from safety violations to create a fund for victims.

Although Hong Kong raised the maximum penalty for serious safety violations to HKD 10 million (USD 1.28 million) with a possible two-year prison term in April 2023, recent fines have been significantly lower. A case last month saw Swire Waste Management Limited fined only HKD 80,000 (USD 10,230) for a fatal accident at a landfill, sparking concerns that such penalties lack sufficient deterrent effect. [Hong Kong Free Press]

## China: Judge criticizes delay in legal aid for Hong Kong environmental legal challenge

(lb) Hong Kong High Court Judge Russell Coleman criticized the government for delays in processing social worker Eddie Tse's legal aid application for his challenge against the San Tin Technopole project. Although Coleman rejected Tse's request to pause the proceedings, he emphasized that the Legal Aid Department should expedite handling the application due to the public interest and urgency of the case. Tse applied for legal aid on August 14, submitted all required documents by the end of August, yet had not received a response for nearly three months.

The planned 600-hectare San Tin Technopole near Hong Kong's border with Shenzhen has sparked concerns over environmental impacts on wetlands and local wildlife. Coleman noted that environmental protection and infrastructure projects are of significant public interest. He stressed that delaying the proceedings could undermine the case's urgency and broader implications, despite granting Tse a potential 14-day stay.

The judge critiqued the Legal Aid Department's handling, particularly an "unhelpful" letter from Assistant Principal Legal Aid Counsel Emily Ho that discouraged repeated inquiries. Coleman remarked that treating Tse's case as routine overlooked its importance, urging that it be handled with greater urgency given the public interest involved. [Hong Kong Free Press]

## China - Hong Kong: Journalist sues *Wall Street Journal* over dismissal

(lb) Selina Cheng, a former reporter for the *Wall Street Journal (WSJ)* and chairperson of the Hong Kong Journalists Association (HKJA), has initiated legal proceedings against the publication, claiming she was fired after being elected to the union leadership (see AiR No. 30, July/2024, 4). [Hong Kong Free Press]

Cheng stated she was dismissed under the guise of company "restructuring" in July 2024, despite warnings from senior editors to avoid running for the HKJA position. *WSJ* maintains that her termination was part of broader layoffs, rejecting her requests for reinstatement.

Cheng's dismissal has prompted her to file a complaint under Hong Kong's Employment Ordinance, which protects employees' rights to join labor unions. Violations of this ordinance can result in fines of up to HKD 100,000 (USD 12,855). Cheng expressed willingness to testify and provide evidence that supports her claim that her dismissal violated labor protections.

Press freedom in Hong Kong has faced significant challenges in recent years, with increased restrictions under the National Security Law and Article 23 Safeguarding National Security Law. Cheng's case follows similar incidents involving foreign journalists, such as the refusal to renew a work visa for Victor Mallet of the *Financial Times* in 2018. The Independent Association of Publishers' Employees, a union representing Dow Jones staff, called Cheng's dismissal "unconscionable" if her allegations are accurate, urging *WSJ* to reinstate her and clarify the reason for her termination.

Hong Kong's global press freedom ranking has dropped sharply, placing 135th out of 180 in the 2024 World Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders, down from 80th in 2021. Observers point to a growing climate of fear and self-censorship among journalists in the city, as Beijing continues to expand its control over media and restrict topics deemed sensitive to national security. [Radio Free Asia] [RSF]

## China: Uyghur man sentenced to seven years for possessing illegal books

(lb) A Uyghur man, Jappar Ablimit, was sentenced to seven years in prison in China's Xinjiang region for possessing books deemed "illegal," according to reports from a police officer and a Uyghur source in Turkey. Ablimit, who lived in Yopurga county, Kashgar, was detained during a 2017 crackdown on Uyghurs, though the exact date of his sentencing is unknown.

In 2014, Chinese authorities mandated that Xinjiang's Uyghur population, numbering around 12 million and predominantly Muslim, surrender all religious texts and related materials. This included the Quran and items like prayer rugs, as part of a campaign purportedly aimed at curbing religious extremism. Despite the directive, some residents either chose not to comply or lost track of where these items were stored. The 2017 crackdown, marked by mass detentions, led to extensive searches of homes, during which any surviving "illegal" books were confiscated.

Ablimit was reportedly caught in this sweep. [Radio Free Asia]

## China: Tibetan language advocate faces surveillance after brief detention

(lb) Tashi Wangchuk, a prominent advocate for Tibetan language rights, was detained for 15 days in Qinghai province, China, on charges of “disrupting social order” and allegedly spreading false information online. The detention followed his arrest on October 20 by the Internet Police Unit and ended with his release on November 4. Wangchuk, aged 39 and a former political prisoner, was accused of insulting government departments and distorting government policies, leading to public order disruptions.

Despite his release, Wangchuk remains under heavy surveillance and continues to face interrogations, according to sources.

This development follows longstanding accusations against the Chinese government of intensifying efforts to suppress ethnic languages and promote Mandarin, as part of broader policies aimed at cultural assimilation. Human rights organizations have raised concerns about the erosion of minority languages and cultures, arguing that these measures align with attempts to integrate ethnic minorities into the dominant Han Chinese culture. While China claims to support "bilingual education," critics argue that the closure of Tibetan-language schools and restrictions on teaching in Tibetan jeopardize the transmission of cultural identity to future generations.

Wangchuk’s activism dates back to 2015, gaining international attention through his advocacy for the preservation of the Tibetan language and a 2016 documentary by *The New York Times*. Arrested soon after, he was imprisoned and allegedly tortured, serving five years before being released in 2021. Since then, he has continued his efforts to defend Tibetan cultural rights, even as Chinese authorities maintain strict control over his movements and interactions. [Radio Free Asia]

## China: Young woman's illicit surrogacy case goes viral on social media

(jf) A 22-year-old Chinese woman’s story about being drawn into the illegal surrogacy industry and suffering

a miscarriage went viral last week, sparking intense discussions about women's rights and social inequality on Chinese social media. Surrogacy is prohibited in China, with authorities promising stringent action against illegal activities involving the buying and selling of sperm, eggs, and surrogacy services.

Zhang Jing, 22, revealed to Phoenix TV magazine that financial difficulties led her to donate her eggs and later agreed to act as a surrogate for a fee of RMB 30,000 (USD 4,152). She was promised a total payment of RMB 240,000 if she successfully delivered the child. However, complications at five months forced her to undergo an abortion.

Zhang's story gained significant attention on Weibo, China's social media platform, with the hashtag "#2000s-born Surrogate Miscarriage Girl Speaks Out#" garnering over 86 million views and 10,000 comments. Many comments expressed strong opposition to surrogacy, warning that legalizing it could heighten competition, reduce compensation, and further erode women's value. [Weibo, in Chinese]

The incident fueled demands for stricter enforcement against illegal surrogacy, with some voices cautioning that the continuation of such a black market could pave the way for even more concerning practices, like human organ trafficking. [Reuters]

This account follows closely after reports of a 28-year-old surrogate in Chengdu who was allegedly abandoned by her agency after becoming pregnant (see AiR No. 45, November/2024, 1).

## China-Hong Kong: Court sentences 45 pro-democracy activists to prison

(jf) A Hong Kong court has sentenced Benny Tai, a prominent 60-year-old pro-democracy advocate and legal scholar, to ten years in prison. This marks one of the most significant outcomes in the city's largest national security case to date. Tai, who played a central role in the 2014 and 2019 pro-democracy protests, was portrayed by prosecutors as the main "organizer" behind an effort that began in July 2020 to hold an unofficial primary election aimed at selecting pro-democracy candidates for the Hong Kong's legislature.

A total of 44 other activists were also sentenced, many receiving years-long prison terms for participating in what prosecutors described as a plan to "overthrow" the government by voting down the city's budget and potentially unseating the city's leader, a scenario

allowed under Hong Kong's Basic Law. The national security police arrested 47 people in a predawn operation in January 2021, with 31 of them later pleading guilty, including Tai. Fourteen were found guilty in May, and two, Laurence Lau and Lee Yue-shu, were acquitted. [AP News]

Notably, the trial, which spanned 118 days and faced multiple delays, was managed by three appointed judges and excluded key aspects of the traditional common law system in Hong Kong, such as trial by jury and an assumption in favor of bail. Those who pleaded guilty were given reduced sentences. Among them, Claudia Mo, a 67-year-old former journalist and legislator, was sentenced to four years and two months, while activist Joshua Wong, 27, received four years and eight months. Owen Chow, 27, who did not plead guilty, received one of the longest terms after Tai at seven years and nine months. Former journalist Gwyneth Ho, 34, was sentenced to seven years, and Australian citizen Gordon Ng, who promoted the primary on social media, was handed a seven-year, three-month sentence.

Observers believe prosecutors may seek longer sentences for some, including Tai and Wong, as appeals are anticipated. [Aljazeera]

## China - Hong Kong: Man charged with sedition over social media posts

(lb) A 57-year-old man has been charged under Hong Kong's local security legislation, Article 23, for allegedly publishing social media posts deemed "seditious." The charge, formally stated as "knowingly publishing publications that had a seditious intention," was announced by the National Security Department of the police following the man's arrest.

The police accused the man of repeatedly posting content online that incited hatred towards both the central Chinese authorities and the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) government, as well as promoting violence. Article 23, distinct from the Beijing-enacted 2020 National Security Law, covers crimes such as treason, sedition, espionage, and external interference, permitting pre-charge detention for up to 16 days and imposing penalties up to life imprisonment.

Article 23, which was initially shelved after mass protests in 2003 and enacted in March 2024 (see AiR No. 13, March/2024, 4), has faced criticism from international rights groups and Western governments

for being overly broad and restrictive. Authorities argue the law is essential for national security, citing the need to prevent foreign interference and fulfill constitutional obligations following the 2019 protests. The maximum sentence for sedition was increased to seven years, or up to ten years if external collusion is involved.

Since its enactment, at least three people have been convicted under Article 23. Notable cases include 27-year-old Chu Kai-pong, who received a 14-month sentence for wearing a T-shirt with a protest slogan, and Chung Man-kit, sentenced to ten months for seditious graffiti. Additionally, Au Kin-wai was sentenced to 14 months for posting seditious content online. [Hong Kong Free Press]

## China – Hong Kong: Man charged with insulting China's national anthem

(lb) A 19-year-old man in Hong Kong was charged with insulting China's national anthem during a 2026 World Cup Asian qualifier match between Hong Kong and Iran on June 6. The charge, announced over five months after the incident, relates to behavior witnessed by police officers at Hong Kong Stadium, where the anthem "March of the Volunteers" was played.

The incident reportedly involved the man turning his back and failing to stand for the duration of the anthem. During the match, plainclothes officers were present, observing and recording spectators. Two other individuals arrested alongside the charged man have not been prosecuted as of now.

According to Hong Kong's National Anthem Law, passed in 2020, publicly and intentionally insulting the national anthem is a criminal offense punishable by fines of up to HKD 50,000 (USD 6,400) and imprisonment for up to three years. Authorities issued a statement advising citizens against testing the law, reinforcing the strict standards for anthem-related conduct. [Hong Kong Free Press]

This case follows a similar incident in August, where a man was sentenced to eight weeks in prison for singing the pro-democracy song "Do You Hear the People Sing" during the playing of China's anthem at a volleyball match. Although he initially appealed the conviction, he withdrew his application in October, underscoring the sensitive nature of anthem-related expressions in Hong Kong.

## China: Official data shows slow industrial output in October

(jf) China's industrial output growth saw a slight slowdown in October, signaling that it might be premature to declare a recovery in the troubled property market, despite a notable uptick in consumer activity. This set of data sustains the pressure on Chinese policymakers as they brace for potential economic strain with Donald Trump set to return to the U.S. presidency, having promised higher tariffs on Chinese imports and appointing staunch China critics to his administration.

Official figures from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) revealed that October's factory output increased by 5.3 percent year-over-year, slightly down from 5.4 percent in September and falling short of the predicted 5.6 percent growth from a Reuters poll. On the brighter side, retail sales rose 4.8 percent in October, picking up speed from 3.2 percent in September, marking the fastest growth since February. The boost was driven by a national holiday and the Singles' Day shopping festival, which started on October 14, earlier than the previous year. [National Bureau of Statistics, in Chinese]

Fixed asset investment increased by 3.4 percent in the January-October period compared to the previous year, meeting forecasts but unchanged from the growth rate of January-September. Despite the data, Chinese stocks dipped and RMB fell amid concerns linked to Trump's expected policy direction.

On the property front, analysts noted that conditions remained weak with no major improvements in investment, sales, or prices. While the decline in property investment intensified through January-October, sales showed a slight improvement (see article below), hinting that the stimulus might be beginning to take hold, albeit a sustained recovery could still be distant. [Reuters]

## China: Home prices see fastest decline in nine years but show signs of stabilization

(lb) In October, new home prices in China experienced their most significant year-on-year decline since 2015, dropping 5.9 percent compared to a 5.8 percent fall in September. This marked the 16th consecutive month of decreasing home prices. However, on a month-on-

month basis, the decline slowed to 0.5 percent, the smallest decrease since March, after a 0.7 percent drop in September. This slowdown was observed across tier-one, tier-two, and tier-three cities.

The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) indicated positive signs, reporting that 75.9 percent of survey respondents now expect home prices to remain stable or increase over the next six months, a significant rise of 17.6 percentage points from the previous survey. Additionally, three out of 70 cities surveyed showed growth in home prices year-on-year in October, up from two cities the prior month. This suggests that government measures to support the property market are beginning to yield results.

Property investment continued to decline from January to October, although the pace of property sales improved slightly. The NBS noted that property developers' cash flows were improving and expressed optimism about a stabilizing trend in the market. Recent government actions included tax incentives, and a 25 basis-point cut in benchmark lending rates to stimulate home buying and demand.

Analysts, however, remain cautious about long-term recovery prospects. Zichun Huang, an economist at Capital Economics, noted that while government measures have brought some relief, a substantial fiscal easing next year appears unlikely, meaning any boost to the sector could be short-lived. Policymakers have also emphasized ensuring the timely delivery of pre-sold homes, with 2.85 million homes completed as of mid-November. [Reuters]

## China: Largest property developer Country Garden submits debt rejig plan to creditors

(jf) China's largest property developer, Country Garden, has presented initial terms for an offshore debt restructuring plan to certain creditors as of late October, according to multiple sources familiar with the situation. The company, which defaulted on USD 11 billion in foreign bonds late last year, is striving to sidestep liquidation amid financial struggles, which include around a million unfinished homes and a staggering debt load close to USD 190 billion.

The plan, shared with key offshore creditors, features a revised cash flow projection – a typical step in debt restructuring aimed at demonstrating the developer’s capacity to meet its financial commitments. However, this new projection reportedly indicates a bleaker

financial outlook for the coming years compared to earlier 2024 forecasts. The specific details of the cash flow figures have not been disclosed, and Country Garden has yet to respond to requests for comment from Reuters.

The submission of the proposal comes as the developer fights a liquidation petition filed in Hong Kong, with a pivotal court hearing scheduled for January 20, 2025. Support from creditors on this restructuring proposal would be a critical step toward securing additional time from the court for implementing the plan. PJT Partners, acting as a financial adviser for the primary group of offshore bondholders involved in the talks, has refrained from commenting. The restructuring framework being discussed includes the possibility of bondholder haircuts and a debt-to-equity swap, sources said.

The liquidation petition against Country Garden was initiated by Ever Credit, a subsidiary of Hong Kong-listed Kingboard Holdings, due to non-payment of a USD 205 million loan. Meanwhile, trading of Country Garden shares has been suspended since April, pending the release of its full-year 2023 and interim 2024 results. October's contracted sales for the developer dropped by 31 percent to approximately RMB 4.33 billion, highlighting the ongoing difficulties.

China's real estate market has seen widespread turmoil since mid-2021, leading to defaults by numerous developers and leaving millions of homes incomplete across the country. Several developers, including China Evergrande Group, have faced liquidation orders, with state-backed Sino-Ocean Group being among the latest to confront such proceedings. [Asia Financial]

## China: Tencent suggests sluggish AI monetization

(jf) Tencent Holdings, the leader in gaming and social media in China, stated that its investments in artificial intelligence (AI) have yet to produce significant revenue and may take several more quarters before impacting earnings. Over the past two years, Tencent has ramped up its AI initiatives, developing services to train and deploy large-language models and introducing Yuanbao, a chatbot supported by its proprietary Hunyuan LLM.

Despite pouring billions into AI development to compete in launching ChatGPT-like services, monetizing these innovations remains difficult.

Tencent President Martin Lau noted on post-earnings call on November 13 that, unlike in the U.S., China has fewer AI startups purchasing substantial computing power. While AI-related cloud revenue has reached a sustainable level, explosive growth isn't expected soon.

Tencent has integrated AI into various products, including more targeted advertising, but these advancements have not yet translated into notable revenue. Lau mentioned it might take several quarters before these AI-driven efforts contribute meaningfully to earnings. Meanwhile, domestic competitors like Baidu and Alibaba, who have also heavily invested in AI, are expected to report their earnings in the coming days.

For the quarter ending September 30, Tencent reported revenues of RMB 167.19 billion (USD 23.14 billion), aligning closely with the RMB 167.8 billion average forecast by analysts according to London Stock Exchange Group data. Revenue from domestic gaming grew 14 percent to RMB 37.3 billion, continuing the recovery after previous quarterly declines, while international gaming revenue increased by 9 percent to RMB 14.5 billion.

Fintech and cloud services saw a modest 2 percent growth to RMB 53.1 billion, with the payments business impacted by weak consumer spending in China. Revenue from marketing services, formerly known as online advertising, rose by 17 percent to RMB 30 billion. Tencent's net income climbed 47 percent to RMB 53.23 billion, slightly surpassing analyst projections of RMB 52.89 billion. [Reuters]

## China: New record of college students to graduate in 2025

(jf) China is anticipated to experience a significant increase in the number of college graduates in 2025, with official data projecting a rise of 430,000 compared to the previous year. This would bring the total number of graduates to 12.22 million.

To support graduates entering an increasingly competitive job market, the Chinese government has implemented a range of initiatives aimed at guiding them toward new opportunities in a rapidly shifting economy. A key part of these efforts involves aligning talent development with the evolving needs of the economy and society, as outlined in a circular from the Ministry of Education.

The circular noted that talent demand reports and lists highlighting sectors with critical skill shortages will be issued to better analyze the labor market. Universities have been encouraged to reassess and refine their academic offerings. The ministry plans to introduce a "red-yellow card" alert system to flag programs that lead to low employment rates, ensuring such courses are closely watched and adjusted to reflect current job market requirements. [Xinhua]

In September, China's youth unemployment rate saw a slight decline to 17.6 percent, but it was still the second-highest rate recorded this year. To assist university students in finding jobs, authorities publish annual guidelines, and the latest guideline released by the Ministry of Education on November 14 mandates that companies must not limit their job openings to graduates from only top-tier universities.

However, securing a job continues to be a significant hurdle for new graduates. A report by Zhilian Zhaopin, a leading job search platform in China, indicated that as of April, only 55.5 percent of the graduating class of 2024 had secured job offers. This figure was lower than the 57.6 percent recorded for the class of 2023 during the same period last year. [South China Morning Post]

## China: New tax policies to support property market released

(jf) China introduced new tax policies on November 13 aimed at fostering stability and healthy development within its real estate market, which is a critical pillar for the nation's economic growth. The Ministry of Finance announced these measures to enhance incentives related to deed taxes, aiming to support both essential housing needs and the desire for improved living conditions.

Starting December 1, individuals buying their first residential property or a second home up to 140 square meters will pay a uniform 1 percent deed tax nationwide. For properties over 140 square meters, the tax rate will be 1.5 percent. This change, rolled out in collaboration with the State Tax Administration and the Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, marks a shift designed to benefit those looking for larger homes.

The new policy is particularly advantageous for home buyers in major cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen. Previously, these cities imposed a flat 3 percent deed tax on second home

purchases. Under the revised policy, those buying second homes of up to 140 square meters will see their tax reduced to 1 percent, while homes larger than this will incur a reduced 2 percent rate.

The new policies also include a 0.5 percentage point reduction in the minimum prepayment rate for land appreciation tax, which aims to ease financial pressure on real estate firms. Authorities plan to align value-added tax and land appreciation tax policies with the removal of criteria distinguishing ordinary and non-ordinary housing, ultimately lowering transaction costs for second-hand homes and stabilizing tax obligations for real estate developers.

These updated tax rates are likely to boost demand for larger and second homes. Further supportive measures are expected to continue rolling out, reinforcing market confidence and stability. The real estate market showed signs of recovery in October, with new home transaction volumes rising by 0.9 percent year-on-year, reversing a downward trend that began in June of the previous year. Additionally, second-hand home transactions increased for the seventh month in a row, up by 8.9 percent year-on-year. [State Council] [South China Morning Post]

## China - Hong Kong: Court sentences bomb plot leader to nearly 24 years in prison

(lb) The Hong Kong High Court has sentenced Ng Chi-hung, the ringleader of an alleged bomb plot targeting police, to 23 years and 10 months in prison. The court found Ng guilty of “conspiracy to commit a bombing of prescribed object” under Hong Kong’s United Nations (Anti-Terrorism Measures) Ordinance. Six additional members of the “Dragon Slaying Brigade” received sentences ranging from five years and 10 months to 13 years and six months in prison.

This case, involving an alleged plan to attack police during the pro-democracy march organized by the Civil Human Rights Front in December 2019, marks the first time individuals have been prosecuted under the ordinance since it was enacted in 2002. Judge Cheung Wai-ling, who presided over the case, stated that the defendants had plotted to detonate two bombs to injure or kill police officers, using one bomb to force officers into the range of a larger explosion.

The Hong Kong government highlighted the case as involving “extreme terrorist violence” and suggested that future cases may involve the application of stricter national security laws, such as the National Security

Law (NSL) and the Safeguarding National Security Ordinance (SNSO). Senior Superintendent Li Kwai-wah noted this as the harshest penalty related to the 2019 anti-extradition movement, indicating the seriousness with which the court viewed the offenses. The police and the Department of Justice are considering whether to review the sentences further. [Jurist News]

## China: Military might showcase at Zhuhai Air Show

(lb) At the recent Zhuhai Air Show, China made waves by unveiling significant advancements in its military capabilities, spotlighting a strategic push towards modernizing its air and naval power. The biennial event, a window into China's defense ambitions, underscored the nation's drive to challenge global military leaders and project strength within the Asia-Pacific region.

*Unveiling of the J-35 and advanced stealth capabilities*

The J-35 fighter jet, making its public debut, stood out as a testament to China's ambitions to field a fifth-generation carrier-capable stealth aircraft. Compared to Western counterparts like the U.S. F-35, the J-35 is equipped with cutting-edge features such as an active electronically scanned array (AESA) radar and distributed aperture system (DAS) for enhanced situational awareness. The fighter's development is widely seen as marking a leap in China's carrier air wing capabilities, paving the way for expanded operations from its newer carriers, such as the Fujian.

China's premier stealth jet, the J-20, was also showcased, highlighting continuous improvements in indigenous engine technology and stealth performance, positioning it as a direct rival to the American F-22 Raptor.

*Emerging drone technologies and counter-drone systems*

Drones took center stage, reflecting the strategic emphasis on unmanned warfare. The Zhuhai show featured the latest models capable of swarming tactics, a modern challenge in military confrontations. To counter this threat, China introduced the FK-4000 anti-drone system, leveraging microwave technology to disrupt swarms, showcasing advancements in electronic warfare.

The "Killer Whale" autonomous drone ship exemplified China's commitment to enhancing naval capabilities through unmanned technology. With potential uses ranging from reconnaissance to force projection, such

assets underline a strategic pivot toward long-endurance, crewless operations that could shift future maritime dynamics.

*Strategic implications for regional power balance*

The airshow reinforced concerns among neighboring countries and global powers about China's rapid military modernization. The J-35's debut signals potential shifts in the balance of power, especially in sensitive areas like the Taiwan Strait. Analysts anticipate that the deployment of these fifth-generation fighters in carrier strike groups will bolster China’s power projection and operational reach.

The U.S. and allied nations, including Japan and South Korea, are closely monitoring these developments, with expectations of enhanced military cooperation and potential countermeasures to maintain regional stability. The show’s display of naval and aerial technology also raised the stakes for competitive military spending across the region, signaling an arms race that may reshape defense policies.

*Civil-Military fusion and global arms market presence*

China’s dual-use strategy, integrating civilian technology with military applications, was evident in the showcased drone and electronics capabilities. This approach not only strengthens domestic military power but also positions China as an increasingly influential player in the global arms market, appealing to buyers in the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and Africa. Cost-effective alternatives to Western equipment have made Chinese arms more attractive, disrupting traditional market shares. Attracting 600,000 visitors in all, this year’s show saw over CNY 280 billion (USD 38.7 billion) in orders. That compares with USD 39.8 billion in orders in 2022 and USD 40 billion in 2016.

*Future outlook*

The Zhuhai Air Show underscored China's desire to advance its military technology and challenge U.S. supremacy, particularly in the Asia-Pacific theater. The show’s emphasis on unmanned systems and stealth fighters highlighted a future where warfare could increasingly rely on advanced, autonomous technologies. As global powers respond, military strategies are expected to evolve, with new investments in counter-drone systems, enhanced stealth capabilities, and cooperative security initiatives among allies.

China's continued progress in military innovation not only shifts regional dynamics but signals broader implications for global security, marking a pivotal

chapter in the arms competition of the 21st century. [South China Morning Post 1] [South China Morning Post 2] [South China Morning Post 3] [Air News]

## China: Officials search for "risks and dangers" as security tightened after Zhuhai car attack

(jf) In the aftermath of a car attack on November 12 that claimed 35 lives in Zhuhai, security has been significantly heightened across Guangdong province. Authorities are actively investigating the incident and seeking to hold officials accountable. Measures have been ramped up, particularly in crowded areas and other Guangdong cities to identify potential threats.

The police disclosed details of the incident on November 12 night, a full day after it occurred, labeling it a “major malicious case.” According to their report, a 62-year-old man named Fan drove an SUV into a group of people exercising outside a stadium, a no-vehicle zone, resulting in 35 fatalities and 43 injuries. The suspect was arrested but is currently in a coma due to self-inflicted injuries. Preliminary findings suggest the act was motivated by grievances related to property division during his divorce. [Global Times]

The attack comes during China's major air show in Zhuhai, showcasing the military's latest technology, where media briefings have been altered due to safety concerns.

A Guangdong official confirmed that they have deployed additional police from other cities to Zhuhai, emphasizing the need for increased visibility of law enforcement to reassure the public. A second official from Guangzhou highlighted that preventive measures are being reinforced following President Xi Jinping's directive to prevent similar occurrences. [South China Morning Post]

On November 17 officials in Zhuhai announced charges against the 62-year-old attacker.

In a separate incident, a former student carried out a deadly knife attack at a vocational college in eastern China, killing eight and injuring 17, police reported on November 17. The stabbing spree took place on November 16 at Wuxi Vocational College of Arts and Technology in Yixing, a city within Jiangsu province. The college provides training in areas like wire and cable manufacturing, interior design, and marketing, aiming to channel more young people into career-oriented

education as an alternative to traditional universities amid rising youth unemployment.

The 21-year-old suspect was detained at the scene and admitted to the crime, police stated. [Global Times]

These incidents have fueled a rare, yet heavily monitored, discussion on mental health, economic strain amid China's slowing economy, and the uncertainties faced by younger generations who fear they may not share the prosperity experienced by those who benefited from rapid economic growth. This year alone, at least six other significant knife attacks have been reported across the country. In Wuxi, police noted that the suspect was driven by frustration over not receiving his graduation certificate, failing an exam, and dissatisfaction with his wages.

Qu Weiguo, a professor at Fudan University, remarked that recent acts of "indiscriminate revenge against society" share similarities: perpetrators who are socially and economically disadvantaged, often grappling with mental health issues, and who feel powerless and unheard. Qu wrote on Weibo that the key to preventing such cases is to establish social safety nets and psychological counseling services, suggesting public oversight mechanisms as another measure. However, his post was censored by November 17 afternoon. [Reuters]

## Japan: Prime Minister Ishiba pushes for political funding reforms

(hs) Shigeru Ishiba, re-elected as Japan's 103rd Prime Minister on November 11 (see No. 46, November/2024, 2) has pledged significant reforms to address political funding scandals that have plagued his party. These scandals, which involved the failure to report proceeds from fund-raising events, contributed to the Liberal Democratic Party's (LDP) losses in the October 27 Lower House election (see No. 44, October/2024, 5). To regain public trust, Ishiba outlined several proposals, including abolishing the undisclosed "policy activity expenses" that political parties allocate to individual lawmakers and ensuring transparency in how Diet members spend their fixed monthly allowances, which cover research, travel, and communication costs. He also called for unused funds to be returned. Additionally, he proposed creating an independent body to oversee political funding and a public database to provide access to political fund reports.

However, Ishiba faces opposition within his own party regarding the reform of corporate and group

donations, which have long supported the LDP's political activities. At a meeting on November 12, LDP officials resisted the idea of banning such donations, with some arguing that they are not inherently corrupt. While Ishiba has expressed caution about banning corporate donations outright, he has proposed limiting the donation amounts and improving transparency, arguing that the current system needs reforms to avoid corruption. The LDP also plans to revise the Political Fund Control Law by the end of the year, focusing on the abolition of policy activity expenses, disclosure of allowances, and establishing a third-party body to monitor political funds. [The Asahi Shimbun 1]

To push these reforms forward, Ishiba has sought cooperation from opposition parties, including the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDP) and the Democratic Party for the People (DPP). While the CDP advocates for the abolition of corporate and group donations, the DPP has taken a more cautious approach, supporting limits on donations rather than a complete ban. Ishiba has agreed to continue discussions with opposition leaders, including DPP's Yuichiro Tamaki, on issues such as raising the income threshold for taxation and finalizing a comprehensive economic package by the end of the month.

With a divided Diet, Ishiba's government will need the support of opposition parties to pass key bills, including those on political funding reforms and the economic package. The outcome of these discussions remains uncertain, but Ishiba's leadership will be tested as he balances internal party opposition with the demands of the opposition for transparency and reform in political funding. [The Asahi Shimbun 2]

## Japan: First opposition member appointed as budget committee chairperson in 30 years

(hs) The Japanese House of Representatives appointed Jun Azumi, a lawmaker from the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDPJ), as chairperson of its Budget Committee on November 13. Since 1994, he is the first from an opposition member to taken on the role, which oversees a range of national political discussions. The appointment reflects shifts within Japan's Diet following recent elections, where the opposition secured a more substantial share of leadership posts. The ruling and opposition parties now hold ten and seven chairperson positions in standing committees, respectively, a notable change from the previous 15-to-2 distribution in favor of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and Komeito.

Azumi, formerly the CDPJ's Diet Affairs Committee chairperson, expressed optimism that this shift will foster more balanced debates, moving away from the ruling bloc's previous dominance in setting schedules. Similarly, Yukio Edano, a former CDPJ leader, now heads the influential Commission on the Constitution, which discusses constitutional reforms. He aims to facilitate dialogue that respects differences while seeking consensus.

The committee leadership posts were determined in a personnel affair meeting and not through direct voting among party leaders. This procedural change highlights a shift in Japan's political landscape, with the current minority government enabling the opposition to gain meaningful committee leadership roles. It marks a departure from traditional dominance by the ruling bloc, over key Diet functions and signals a move towards a more power sharing and legislative balance. [The Japan News]

## Japan: Date for extraordinary Diet session to address pressing issues set

(hs) Reports have emerged that the Japanese government and Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) were deliberating over choosing a date to convene an extraordinary session of the Diet, potentially on November 28.

The session will address critical issues, including the fiscal 2024 supplementary budget and proposed amendments to the political funds control law following the LDP's slush fund scandal. The budget is designed to finance a new economic package aimed at bolstering the economy, making this session particularly significant. Additionally, revisions to the political funds control law are expected to be a central focus, as the scandal has intensified scrutiny of political funding practices.

The timing of the session remains under discussion due to Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba's overseas commitments, including the APEC and G20 summits in South America. Diet affairs chiefs from nine ruling and opposition parties and one parliamentary group met to discuss the session.

The opposition reiterated its demand for an earlier convening of the Diet and pressed for an immediate debate on disclosure standards for lawmakers' use of government-funded allowances for research, public relations, and accommodation. The LDP and Komeito bloc did not immediately respond to these requests.

Hirofumi Ryu, Diet affairs chief of the main opposition Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDP), emphasised the opposition's intent to leverage its majority in the House of Representatives. Hirofumi Ryu stated that the opposition would deliberate exhaustively before reaching conclusions, underscoring their determination to hold the government accountable during this pivotal session.

This extraordinary Diet session is seen as a crucial platform to address pressing economic and political accountability issues, underscoring its importance for Japan's governance. [Nippon News]

## Japan: Government sets up hotline to report workplace grievances, targeting issue of death by overwork

(hs) As Japan's Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW) launched its annual November campaign to address the risks of "karoshi," or death by overwork, the ministry opened a confidential hotline encouraging workers to report workplace grievances. This hotline, a feature of Japan's efforts over the past decade to tackle overwork, has become a platform for employees to voice concerns around excessive hours, unpaid wages, harassment, and a lack of mental health support. These stories underscore Japan's deep-seated cultural norms around work, where unpaid overtime and presenteeism have long been embedded in corporate practices. [World Economic Forum]

In terms of legislative action, Japan has implemented several key measures to curb overwork. The 2014 law against death from overwork marked a turning point, formally recognizing overwork as a societal issue. Later, the Work Style reforms of 2018 aimed to cap overtime at 100 hours per month and extend protections to small and medium-sized enterprises, covering nearly 70 percent of the workforce. The reforms have had a visible impact on sectors like transportation, where stricter overtime limits on truck drivers were introduced this year, raising concerns about labour shortages in Japan's convenience-driven society.

Today, Japan's overwork culture faces a new set of pressures as its ageing, shrinking population poses both challenges and opportunities. While overall working hours have declined, the rise of part-time roles and "name-only" management positions often conceals hidden overtime. Labor shortages are pushing companies to adopt overdue productivity measures like digitization and automation, though

some experts question if these changes are happening quickly enough to meet the country's needs. In logistics, for instance, the Nomura Research Institute predicts a 36 percent shortfall in truck drivers by 2030, leading to discussions on innovations like autonomous driving lanes and increased use of bullet trains for goods transport.

The shifting dynamics of Japan's workforce are also strengthening employees' bargaining power in some areas, particularly wages. According to researcher Keisuke Nakamura, the scarcity of workers is pressuring employers to adjust working hours to retain talent. However, these shortages can also lead to undeclared overtime as employees "fill in" for missing staff. According to the MHLW's latest survey, reports of illegal overtime increased, with nearly 45 percent of businesses involved.

While Japan's average working hours are on a steady decline, progress remains gradual. Corporate Japan is increasingly adopting streamlined processes and eliminating low-priority tasks. Until these initiatives fully take effect, companies will compensate for stricter overtime caps by hiring more aggressively. Although Japan is moving closer to resolving its overwork crisis, experts suggest a true milestone will come when the karoshi hotline becomes unnecessary. [The Financial Times]

## Japan: Highest school absenteeism in over a decade recorded

(sw) A record 346,482 elementary and junior high school students in Japan missed 30 or more days of school during the 2023 academic year, marking the 11th consecutive year of increase. This figure, up 15.9 percent from the previous year, represents 3.7 percent of all students.

The rise is attributed to a growing trend among parents of not forcing attendance and insufficient support for special needs students. Of the absentees, 130,370 were in elementary schools and 216,112 in junior high schools. The top reasons cited were lack of motivation (32.2 percent), anxiety or depression (23.1 percent), and special needs issues (13.6 percent).

Bullying cases also increased by 7.4 percent to 732,568, with 1,306 recognized as serious incidents, the first time surpassing 1,000. Bullying was identified in 83.6 percent of schools. Meanwhile, 397 student suicides were recorded, though 186 had unknown circumstances. [Kyodo News]

## Japan: Domestic battery demand set to grow

(hs) Japan's electric vehicle (EV) market remains small, with EVs comprising less than 1 percent of cars on the road and holding only a tenth of China's market share. However, Japan's rapid growth in solar energy is opening new avenues for battery manufacturers. Solar power became the country's largest clean energy source this year, with over 3 million residential solar systems installed in 2023. This strong demand for solar is expected to drive interest in residential battery systems, a trend that government initiatives will reinforce. Starting in 2025, Tokyo will require all new homes built by large-scale homebuilders to include solar panels, which will likely further boost battery demand.

Virtual power plants (VPPs) represent another growing market. These systems interlink home batteries via a cloud platform, allowing operators to sell stored energy during peak demand periods. This provides additional income for homeowners while supporting grid stability. The government's planned fiscal 2026 launch of a dedicated electricity trading market for residential storage will promote this model.

Tesla has already made inroads, launching VPPs in Japan in 2021 with its Powerwall battery, now sold through Yamada Denki's 1,000-store network. Priced at USD 13,700 (JPY 2 million) with installation, Tesla's Powerwall offers 13.5 kilowatt-hours of backup power, enough to cover an average household's daily needs, and competes with Panasonic and other local brands.

While Japan typically has few power outages, the country's vulnerability to natural disasters highlights the need for reliable energy storage. Companies like Toshiba, Itochu, and Hitachi are also investing in this sector, recognising its growth potential as global demand for energy storage rises. McKinsey forecasts the market to reach JPY 23.38 trillion (USD 150 billion) by 2030. As EV sales slow, energy storage is becoming critical for EV and battery makers, making it a key pillar in Japan's renewable energy strategy. [The Financial Times]

## Japan: Automakers to adopt biofuel standards by 2030

(sw) Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry has called automakers to adapt new vehicles for compatibility with gasoline blended with biofuel by the early 2030s. The initiative aims to cut CO2 emissions as part of Japan's broader climate goals.

To address supply challenges, as Japan largely imports biofuel, the ministry plans to collaborate with petroleum wholesalers to offer 10 percent biofuel blends by fiscal 2030, with a target of 20 peercent by 2040. An action plan involving the private sector is expected by next summer.

Biofuel is seen as a more sustainable alternative to conventional gasoline. While most vehicles can currently use fuel with 3 percent biofuel, increasing the blend to 20 percent will require new safety standards and emissions testing. [Kyodo News]

## Japan: Tsuruga reactor banned from restarting

(hs) Japan's Nuclear Regulation Authority (NRA) has officially ruled that unit 2 of the Tsuruga nuclear power plant in Fukui Prefecture cannot resume operations after it failed to meet safety regulations. This marks the first time a reactor has been deemed non-compliant under the regulatory standards introduced in 2013, which prohibit critical facilities from being located above active faults.

The decision follows years of investigation into the Tsuruga 2 site. In 2013 and 2015, NRA experts concluded that an active fault runs beneath the reactor building.

The plant's operator, Japan Atomic Power Company (JAPC), disputed the findings. It insists its analysis showed the fault was inactive and did not extend under the unit. JAPC sought a review for the reactor's restart in 2015.

In 2024, the NRA review team reaffirmed that the fault could not be ruled out as active and extended beneath the reactor. After public consultations and expert screenings, the authority concluded the unit did not meet safety criteria and barred its restart.

JAPC expressed disappointment, arguing that its studies complied with the standards and announcing plans to reapply for approval. The company intends to conduct further investigations with input from external experts to address regulatory requirements. [World Nuclear News]

## Japan: Seven & I receive buyout offer from members of founding family

(hs) Japanese diversified retail holdings company Seven & i Holdings, which own's the convenience store chain 7-Eleven, has entered talks with Canada's retail giant Alimentation Couche-Tard (ACT) for a potential takeover valued at JPY 7.02 trillion (USD 47 billion), while also considering a competing offer from its founding Ito family. The proposed ACT acquisition, if successful it would be Japan's largest-ever corporate takeover and significantly impact the country's mergers and acquisitions landscape.

ACT, which has sought Seven & i for over 20 years, made its initial approach public in August. After Seven & i rejected an initial offer of JPY 5.83 trillion (USD 39 billion) as undervalued, ACT raised its bid to JPY 7.02 trillion (USD 47 billion). The company's special committee is now reviewing both offers and other options to enhance shareholder value.

The Ito family bid aims to keep control within Japan. Their proposal would require significant financing from Japanese banks and potentially Itochu, a trading company that already owns Family Mart.

Both offers underscore the high stakes of controlling Japan's largest retailer, with implications for corporate governance in Japan's globalized market. [The Financial Times]

## Japan: Central bank governor signals potential rate hike

(hs) The Bank of Japan (BoJ), Japan's central bank, is holding short-term interest rates steady at around 0.25 percent, but signaled that further hikes were likely as inflation pressures persist. The decision, made by the BoJ's monetary policy board on November 16, was widely expected, with some analysts projecting a rate increase as early as the next meeting in December.

Governor Kazuo Ueda indicated that the BoJ would proceed with raising rates if wages and prices continued to meet expectations. Ueda stated that if the economic and inflation outlooks were realized, the central bank would continue adjusting monetary policy, including further interest rate increases. He emphasized that maintaining ultra-low borrowing costs could risk accelerating inflation beyond forecasts. His

hawkish comments led to a 0.7 percent rise in the yen (JPY 152.3 per USD1), pushing it up.

Meanwhile, the yield on Japan's 10-year government bonds reversed course, falling after Ueda's remarks. Despite growing political instability in Japan, following the ruling Liberal Democratic Party's loss of its parliamentary majority in the October 27 snap election (see AiR No. 44, October/2024, 5), Ueda reaffirmed that the BoJ would press on with its policy of monetary tightening. The election results, which saw voters punishing the LDP for rising prices and slow wage growth, have raised concerns about the future stability of Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba's government.

Analysts have noted that while the election outcome could complicate BoJ efforts, it is unlikely to derail its normalisation of monetary policy, which began in March 2024 when the BoJ raised interest rates from negative to 0.25 percent. In its quarterly outlook, the BoJ forecast inflation to remain at its 2 percent target, easing slightly from 2.5 percent in the current fiscal year (ending March 2025) to 1.9 percent by fiscal 2025. Price growth is expected to be driven partly by a weakening yen, which had fallen to JPY 143.7 per USD 1 earlier in October.

Analysts highlighted the BoJ's projection that core inflation would remain within the target range, suggesting more rate hikes are likely if inflation stays on track. The BoJ's assessment now includes more confidence that domestic factors, such as wage-driven price increases, are playing a larger role in inflation than external pressures like rising import costs.

While acknowledging risks from both domestic and global economic factors, including developments in the US economy and financial markets, the BoJ's outlook remains cautiously optimistic. The bank's actions will likely be influenced by the results of Japan's 2025 spring wage negotiations, with analysts predicting another rate hike before the year's end. [The Financial Times] [Reuters]

## Japan: USD 87 billion stimulus package planned to aid households

(sw) The Japanese government is planning a supplementary budget of approximately JPY 13.5 trillion (USD 87 billion) to fund a stimulus package aimed at aiding low-income households and addressing rising living costs.

As part of the package, households exempt from residential taxes would receive JPY 30,000 (USD 193), while families with children would get JPY 20,000 yen per child. Additionally, the government plans to reinstate electricity and gas subsidies for three months starting in January.

The budget also includes measures to phase out gasoline subsidies, initially set to expire in December. Over the past three years, Japan has allocated JPY 11 trillion (USD 71.5 billion) to alleviate the impact of rising utility costs and gasoline prices on households.

Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba is expected to finalize the package on November 22, though the fragile minority government may need to negotiate with opposition parties to secure approval. [Reuters]

## Japan: World's first facility for liquid hydrogen material testing opened

(hs) The National Institute for Materials Science (NIMS) in Tsukuba, Ibaraki Prefecture, has launched a groundbreaking facility to develop materials for storing and transporting liquid hydrogen. This state-of-the-art center, funded by the government's Green Innovation Fund at a cost of JPY 3 billion (approximately USD 19.35 million), aims to overcome the technical challenges of using hydrogen as a next-generation fuel.

The facility is the first globally capable of evaluating materials under ultra-low temperatures near liquid nitrogen levels while controlling both temperature and pressure. Researchers are focusing on finding cost-effective and safe materials to enable hydrogen storage and transport, crucial for achieving a hydrogen-powered society.

Preliminary experiments using various metals will continue until fiscal 2025, creating a database of material properties. From fiscal 2026, this data will be shared with private companies to accelerate hydrogen technology development. Yoshinori Ono, a NIMS unit leader, expressed optimism about expanding viable materials and reducing costs, paving the way for a sustainable hydrogen future. [The Mainichi]

## Japan: Concerns raised after prime minister’s two medical checkups within five days

(hs) Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba received his second medical checkup in five days last week, sparking concerns about his health after he appeared to fall asleep during a parliamentary session earlier in the week.

Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshimasa Hayashi attributed the incident to cold medicine and dismissed fears about Ishiba's well-being, emphasizing there was no impact on his official duties. Hayashi explained that the approximately 30-minute checkup at a Tokyo facility was a routine health examination scheduled in advance of Ishiba's trip to South America for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation and G20 summits in Peru and Brazil. [Kyodo News]

## Mongolia: Government discusses key reforms and infrastructure projects at November cabinet meeting

(fs) The Mongolian government held a regular session on November 13 focusing on legislative and infrastructure reforms.

Key discussions included the finalization of the draft Law on State-Owned and Local Government-Owned Companies, led by Minister and Cabinet Secretary Nyam-Osor Uchral. The bill aims to improve the financial discipline, transparency, and governance of state-owned enterprises while clarifying criteria for establishing such companies and expanding opportunities for private sector engagement.

In an effort to improve public services, the government plans to implement a digital operator system at the 11-11 Citizen Feedback Center to address issues related to healthcare services and prescription access. This system will enhance the response to public complaints, with weekly analyses and updates to the cabinet on actions taken. Additionally, the center will use the e-Mongolia system to notify citizens of complaint resolutions and other service updates.

Another major item on the agenda was the Gashuunsukhait-Gantsmod cross-border railway project. Industry and Mineral Resources Minister Tsevegdorj Tuvaan provided updates on the ongoing negotiations with China's China Energy Group, following Prime Minister Luvsannamsrain Oyun-Erdene's October meeting with the company's leadership. As one of Mongolia's 14 prioritized mega projects, the railway project is expected to increase Mongolia's coal exports to 120 million tons and potentially raise the per capita GDP to USD 10,000.

The government is also focusing on strengthening foreign investment, working on updates to the Investment law. This revision aims to protect investor rights, establish a streamlined dispute resolution system, and encourage foreign direct investment (FDI) by improving Mongolia's business environment. Provisions include reinforcing investor protections, aligning with international best practices, and reducing regulatory duplication. The law is expected to foster economic growth, attract FDI in key sectors like manufacturing and infrastructure, and promote high-value-added exports and technology transfers. [Sonin]

## Mongolia: Beltese Mörön LLC executives sentenced for fraud and money laundering

(fs) The Khövsgöl Provincial Court has concluded the trial involving executives of Beltese Mörön LLC, accused of large-scale fraud and money laundering.

Founders S.G and G.N, along with seven other individuals, were convicted of fraud and money laundering under Mongolia's criminal code. The scheme, which misled 2,606 victims under the guise of financial assistance, involved pyramid-style marketing tactics, defrauding victims of approximately USD 13.26 million.

Sentences ranged from two to twelve years of imprisonment, with one defendant receiving a suspended sentence. The court also mandated the restitution of USD 11.1 million to victims and an additional USD 2.1 million from civil respondents. Confiscated assets valued at USD 638,797 were proportionately allocated to compensate victims. [News.mn]

## Mongolia: Minister discusses asset management collaboration

(fs) Minister of Labor and Social Protection of Mongolia Luvsantseren Enkh-Amgalan attended the "Global Pension, Social Protection, and Sovereign Wealth Fund Summit" in Hong Kong.

He met Sheng Tan, Director of Operations at asset management firm LAZARD. Discussions centered on potential partnerships and technical support for managing Mongolia's National Wealth Fund and Savings Fund assets. [GoGo]

## Mongolia: Electricity tariffs to rise amid energy sector losses

(fs) The Energy Regulatory Commission of Mongolia has implemented a new electricity tariff structure starting November 15.

Average tariffs will increase from USD 0.063 to USD 0.082 per kWh, with a three-tier pricing model introduced to encourage energy conservation. Households will now pay USD 0.051 for the first 150 kWh,USD 0.075 for 150-300 kWh, and USD 0.083 for consumption above 300 kWh.

Officials estimate the average household, which consumes 220 kWh monthly, will see an increase of USD 4.62 in their electricity bill. Currently, 45 percent of households consume less than 150 kWh, 40% consume 150-300 kWh, and 15 percent exceed 300 kWh monthly.

A Peak Hour Tariff will also be introduced, alongside continuing discounts for Ger district households and unchanged rates for those receiving social welfare, while businesses will face a 30% tariff increase.

The changes aim to reduce the energy sector's operational losses, which have persisted due to pricing below production costs. [Montsame]

## Mongolia: Imports surge

(fs) In the first ten months of 2024, Mongolia's imports rose to USD 9.58 billion, marking a 26.7 per cent increase from the same period in 2023, according to the Mongolian Customs General Administration.

Key imports included petroleum products, which comprised 18.6 percent of total imports, followed by automobiles at 9.5 per cent, trucks at 6.4 per cent, and heavy machinery such as bulldozers and excavators at 2.6 per cent. The remaining goods made up 62.9 per cent of imports. [Montsame]

## Mongolia: Nationwide connectivity to be expanded

(fs) The Ministry of Digital Development, Innovation, and Communications of Mongolia (MDDIC) is

advancing efforts to expand telecommunications coverage across the country.

The MDDIC aims to improve coverage by extending network services to 74 rural bags (administrative units) this year, and another 55 bags in 2025. It also plans to launch a national satellite in 2027 to enhance connectivity in remote areas.

In a recent meeting, MDDIC Minister Batarkhuu Tsend and representatives of Mobicom Corporation, the largest mobile phone operator in Mongolia, discussed strategies for ensuring comprehensive network access. The dialogue focused on balancing immediate network expansion through terrestrial infrastructure with long-term satellite solutions.

Tsend encouraged operator companies to support network expansion and highlighted ongoing updates to the Universal Service Obligation Fund of Mongolia, which funds telecommunications projects independently of the State Budget, largely through contributions from major telecommunications companies.

Mobicom's advisor, Hiroyuki Kobayashi, expressed interest in collaborating with MDDIC on various projects, including creating a drone testing zone, remote work for Mongolian engineers in Japan, and incentives for training IT professionals. [Montsame]

## Mongolia: Cybersecurity measures strengthened amid rising cyber threats

(fs) In a recent Cabinet meeting, Mongolia's Minister of Digital Development, Innovation, and Communications Tsend Baatarkhuu announced new initiatives aimed at fortifying national defenses against cybercrime.

Baatarkhuu highlighted the critical need for an integrated cybersecurity framework for all organizations managing sensitive information, a move driven by rising cyber incidents, including a recent breach at Intermed Hospital, in which hackers compromised nine servers.

In response to these challenges, the Cabinet approved a mandate requiring all entities handling critical data to employ specialized cybersecurity personnel.

Mongolia ranks 103rd on the United Nations Cybersecurity Index currently, performing well in legal standards but facing deficiencies in technical capacity and international coordination. [GoGo]

## North Korea: Citizens react to return of Trump to presidency

(bw) North Koreans in North Hamgyong province are keenly following news of Donald Trump's reelection with reactions ranging from cautious optimism to concern, according to a daily NK source.

Many recall his past meetings with Kim Jong Un and hope for renewed talks, while others worry about potential changes in U.S. policy.

Trade officials in border cities fear impacts on commerce with China and Russia. Young people are particularly interested, discussing Trump's personality and expressing hope that his presidency might improve North Korea's political and economic situation amid growing exposure to outside information. [Daily NK English]

## North Korea: Housing reconstruction remains incomplete as flood victims seek refuge

(bw) Flood victims in Sinuiju, North Korea, are abandoning temporary shelters as winter nears, frustrated by delays in promised housing reconstruction. Kim Jong Un extended the completion deadline to December, leaving many still in tents amid cold and rain.

Though the authorities have housed vulnerable flood victims like the elderly, children, and pregnant women in public buildings and inns, many displaced residents still live in tents, according to a Daily NK source.

A single room requires a monthly payment of at least 20 kilograms of corn, and with the seasonal changes, the high cost of kindling makes daily heating as expensive as food. This places a significant burden on displaced individuals seeking shared housing. Those with some resources are prioritizing shared accommodations, while those without means are left relying on potential state assistance. [Daily NK English]

## North Korea: Despite crackdown, state authorities benefit from drug trade

(bw) Drug abuse persists in North Korea despite stricter anti-narcotics laws, with growing involvement of officials who use and distribute methamphetamine and opium for profit, according to local sources. [Daily NK English 1]

A gram of methamphetamine (known locally as “ice” or “bingdu”) costs about USD 21 inside North Korea – equivalent to PRW 300,000 or enough to buy 42 kilograms of rice. Unable to afford these prices, some officials have turned to trafficking. The same gram sells for USD 280-420 in China, prompting officials to coordinate with North Korean trade representatives there to export the drug for a tenfold profit. [Dail NK English 2]

The central government acknowledges the problem but struggles to curb it. In 2021, the 15th plenary meeting of the Standing Committee of the 14th Supreme People’s Assembly enacted an anti-drug law that stipulated a maximum penalty of death for illegally gathering, manufacturing or smuggling drugs.

## North Korea to order mass production of suicide attack drones

(bw) North Korean Leader Kim Jong Un oversaw on November 14 the performance test of various types of suicide attack drones, produced by an affiliated institute of the Unmanned Aerial Technology Complex and related companies. [Yonhap News Agency]

Kim would go onto praise UAVs and their ascension into prominence in warfare around the world, stating they are, "an essential requirement in military aspect nowadays.” Kim further emphasized his regime’s “possibility and potentiality to produce and introduce various types of UAVs,” adding the “prospect of combining and applying new and promising tactical methods also in the aspect of art of war as required by modern warfare,” and ordering to “go into full-scale mass production.”

A plan has already been drafted by the Party Central Committee on developing unmanned military hardware to eventually set forth a crucial strategic policy, according to Kim. [KCNA]

Kim’s remarks are seen as signaling Kim’s push to shift North Korea’s military significantly towards drone warfare. They come at a time when Western concerns are mounting over Pyongyang’s military cooperation with Moscow, as the U.S. State Department reported that 10,000 North Korean soldiers have been deployed

to Russia's Kursk region. These troops are reportedly engaged in combat alongside Russian forces, helping to alleviate pressure on Russian units involved in Ukraine's ongoing incursion (see AiR No. 45, November/2024, 1). According to a Ukrainian commander, this deployment allows Russian forces to be redirected to other assault operations.

North Korea's recent military activities include a self-detonating drone test in August, overseen by Kim Jong Un, and ongoing threats of retaliation against South Korea. In October, Pyongyang accused Seoul of flying propaganda drones over its territory, though South Korea neither confirmed nor denied the claim. Previously, in 2022, North Korea sent five drones into South Korean airspace, with one reportedly reaching northern Seoul. [CNN]

## North Korea: Chinese phones peddled through border banned

(jb) State authorities have enforced a ban on the use of Chinese-made cellular phones in North Hamgyong province as the phones are suspected to enable flow of information and communication with the outside world.

Security forces, dispatched to Hoeryong city in North Hamgyong province which borders China, will monitor phone signals and detect those citizens in possession of Chinese phones who conduct international business and receive remittance from abroad. Provincial state authorities are focused on ensuring that the flow of money through such illegal means will be stopped through monitoring and the enforcement of legal consequences.

Citizens who have thus far used Chinese phones for business reported fear of crackdown as it would impact their livelihoods. [Daily NK English]

## North Korea expands GPS jamming near inter-Korean border

(mc) According to South Korean authorities, North Korea has increased its GPS jamming operations along the inter-Korean border, affecting more expansive areas from the Northwest Islands to Gyeonggi and northern Gangwon provinces. Although the 10th day of GPS jamming along the South Korean border has not affected South Korea's military operations, it poses a

risk to civilian navigation for ships and aircraft. [National Herald]

These operations were stated to have been carried out in connection with Pyongyang's efforts to train against drone attacks, continuing jamming operations previously carried out in May and June (see AiR No. 46, November/2024, 2).

South Korean officials confirm to closely monitor the operations to assess the situation to protect navigation and communication systems around the Korean Peninsula as North Korea intensifies its military preparations and technological countermeasures. [Yonhap Agency News]

## South Korea: Consultative body on doctors' strike remains at impasse with government

(jb) The second round of talks held by the consultative body consisting of the government, the ruling People Power Party and the medical community, which was recently formed to resolve the year-long strike by junior doctors (see AiR No. 46, November/2024, 2), has yielded no results as all parties refuse to reach common grounds on the demands for medical school enrollment quotas for 2025 and 2026 put forth by junior doctors.

While the medical community has asked for the government to completely roll back their increase in enrollment quotas, which they had proposed earlier in February, the government has stood strong on its 2025 numbers, stating that it will amend the quota only from 2026 onwards.

The medical community in the consultative body is currently only represented by medical school deans and medical researchers. The consultative body was boycotted by junior doctors and the Korean Medical Association, the premier organization of doctors in the country. Junior doctors have continued their strike during these talks, citing them irrelevant until the government completely revokes its proposed quotas. [The Korea Times]

## South Korea: Opposition leader given suspended sentence, faces potential election ban

(mc) Lee Jae-myung, the leader of South Korea's main opposition Democratic Party (DP), was sentenced on November 15 to a one-year suspended prison term for making false statements during his 2022 presidential campaign. The Seoul Central District Court found him guilty of violating the Election of Public Officials Act by misleading the public in media interviews.

The court determined that Lee falsely claimed he was not linked to former Seongnam Development Corp. executive Kim Moon-ki, who was involved in fraud during Lee's tenure as mayor, and that he did not play golf with Kim on a trip. The court noted that such statements in press interviews could mislead the public.

The sentence, suspended for two years, raises concerns about Lee's eligibility to run in the 2027 presidential and parliamentary elections in South Korea. Lee has announced his intention to appeal the verdict. [Yonhap News Agency 1]

In a related development, the Suwon District Court on 14 November fined Kim Hye-kyung, wife of Democratic Party Chairman Lee Jae-myung, 1.5 million won for violating election laws during Lee's 2022 presidential primary election campaign.

Kim was found guilty of authorizing a Gyeonggi provincial government corporate card to pay for 104,000 won worth of meals for the wives and aides of three-party lawmakers in August 2021.

Regarding these allegations, Kim denied the accusation and blamed the blame on the payment sector. Suppose the court upholds the verdict. In that case, Kim will be banned from participating in election campaigns in South Korea for five years, which could adversely affect his wife, DP leader Lee's participation in future presidential elections. [Yonhap News Agency 2]

In a latest development, Lee was indicted on November 19 without detention on charges of misappropriating funds during his tenure as governor of Gyeonggi Province. The indictment also includes Lee’s former chief secretary, Chung, and another former Gyeonggi official, Bae, all facing breach of trust charges.

Lee is accused of using a government vehicle for personal purposes, costing KRW 106.53 million (USD 76,500) from July 2018 to October 2021. Of that, KRW 60.16 million (USD 43,000) was linked to the use of a Genesis G80 sedan, which Lee allegedly kept parked at his residence. Additionally, Lee is accused of misusing

provincial government funds via corporate cards for personal expenses, including laundry services, fruit for family memorial services, and breakfast sandwiches.

While the prosecution claims to have evidence of similar misappropriations by Lee's wife, Kim Hye-kyung, the indictment against her has been suspended. [The Korea Herald]

## South Korea: Arrest warrants issued for political broker, ex-lawmaker in Yoon-linked scandal

(jb) The Changwon District Court has issued arrest warrants for former lawmaker Kim Young-sun and influential public polling specialist Myung Tae-kyun as of November 15. The case involves allegations that Kim received funds in exchange for securing Myung a position in the South Korean National Assembly.

The court held a hearing on the matter the previous day, citing concerns over evidence tampering and the manipulation of poll statistics to favor certain lawmakers in their bid for parliamentary power. Myung, a prominent figure in the ongoing political scandal surrounding President Yoon Suk-yeol, First Lady Kim Keon-hee, and the Presidential Office, has drawn particular scrutiny.

Although Myung holds no official government position, his role has been likened to that of a "kingmaker," with allegations that he received payments in return for tailoring poll results to elevate specific lawmakers. His political involvement dates back to June 2021, when he provided strategic advice to then-presidential candidate Yoon Suk-yeol during the primaries held in November that year.

The scandal has also implicated the ruling People Power Party, with accusations that the First Lady interfered in this year's April parliamentary elections. Prosecutors have pursued the case vigorously, also summoning two other lawmakers suspected of involvement. However, the court declined to issue warrants for them, citing "insufficient necessity and justification for detention." [The Korea Herald]

## South Korea: Top court finalizes suspended prison term for ex-lawmaker

## in embezzlement case

(bw) The Supreme Court of South Korea upheld a 1.5-year suspended prison sentence for ex-lawmaker Youn Mee-hyang, convicted of embezzling funds donated to help support women who were forced into wartime sexual slavery by Japan during World War II.

Youn, a former leader of the Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance, misappropriated about KRW 80 million (USD 54,000) in donations and KRW 65.2 million (USD 45,000) in government subsidies. Indicted in 2020 winning a parliamentary seat on the Democratic Party's (DP) ticket, she was expelled from the Democratic Party in 2021.

The top court's ruling came over four years after her indictment. Youn was indicted in September 2020 for collecting hundreds of millions of won in donations in her private bank accounts and spending some of that money on personal matters, while heading a major civic group for wartime sexual slavery victims, the Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance for the Issues of Military Sexual Slavery.

In February 2023, a Seoul district court sentenced her to a fine of KRW 15 million (USD 10,700), setting the amount of embezzlement at KRW 17.2 million (USD 12,400). But the appellate court this week found Youn guilty of embezzling about KRW 80 million and misappropriating KRW 65.2 million provided by the gender ministry as subsidies. [Yonhap News Agency] [Korea Times]

## South Korea: Bill passed to compensate for damage from North Korean trash balloons

(jb) Following North Korea's months-long campaign of flying balloons filled with trash across the inter-Korean border into South Korea, the South Korean National Assembly passed on November 14 a series of changes to the Framework Act on Civil Defense allowing citizens who were victims of the trash balloons to claim compensation, in part or full, for damage to their person and/or property.

As these incidents do not come under the purview of a full-scale civil defense emergency, state and local governments are now enabled to provide compensation under this amendment. [The Korea Times]

The law will come into effect six months after their passing. [The Korea Herald]

## South Korea: Undercover probes of digital sex crimes permitted

(jb) The National Assembly has passed a bill revising the Act on Special Cases Concerning the Punishment of Sexual Crimes with overwhelming support, as 272 out of 273 members present voted in favor.

Previously, the act only permitted undercover police investigations into sexual crimes targeting minors. The revision now extends its scope to include women of all ages. This change enables the government to monitor and assess the impact of digital sex crimes on vulnerable demographic groups across South Korea. [The Korea Herald]

On the same day, the National Assembly also unanimously approved a bill amending the Act on Promotion of Information and Communications Network Utilization and Information Protection, with all 281 members present voting in favor. The amendment authorizes the government to work with social media companies to compel the removal of deepfake sexual media from their platforms (see AiR No. 46, November/2024, 2).

## South Korea: Seoul metro union sets eyes on December 6 strike

(jb) The largest Seoul Metro labor union, one of three representing the company's workforce, conducted a vote from November 15 to 18, with 83 percent of its members participating. Of the 7,862 members who voted, 5,547 supported going on strike.

Key grievances include the company's refusal to cancel a planned restructuring, dissatisfaction with a proposed 2.5 percent pay raise, insufficient hiring, and inadequate workplace safety measures. Workers are demanding a higher pay increase, expanded recruitment, and improved accident prevention to enhance safety standards.

Despite negotiations since October, the union, Seoul Metro, and the Seoul Metropolitan Government (SMG) have failed to reach an agreement. The union warned that unless their demands were addressed during a labor commission meeting with the SMG, they would initiate a full strike. Following the SMG's failure to meet

these demands, the union officially declared a general strike during a rally outside City Hall on November 19. [Korea Joongang Daily]

The general strike, scheduled for December 6, will mark the third consecutive annual strike. During the strike, union members will limit their activities to tasks mandated by law, including inspecting working conditions in pairs and adhering strictly to safety regulations.

The Seoul Metro Union represents over 60 percent of the company's workforce. [Yonhap News Agency] [The Korea Times]

## South Korea: Stock market plummets

(bw) South Korea's stock market and currency rank among the weakest global performers this year, reflecting concerns over slowing economic growth and structural challenges such as an aging population.

The KOSPI, South Korea's benchmark index, has fallen nearly 9 percent year-to-date, closing at 2,416.86 points on Friday, while the secondary KOSDAQ market has dropped 21 percent. [Yonhap News Agency]

In contrast, the Dow Jones Industrial Average has risen 15.27 percent, and the tech-focused Nasdaq has surged 24 percent over the same period.

The South Korean won has also experienced a significant decline, closing at KRW 1,398.80 on November 15, down 8.6 percent from 1,288 won at the end of last year. This makes it the second-worst performer among major currencies. [Bloomberg]

Market analysts attribute these trends to South Korea's structural economic vulnerabilities, weak domestic demand, and concerns over rising protectionism under the incoming Trump administration, which have dampened investor confidence.

## South Korea: Food delivery platforms to introduce tiered commission fees

(dql) Delivery platforms and restaurant partners have agreed to lower commission fees from the current 9.8% to a range of 2-7.8 percent starting next year, following months of negotiations mediated by a government consultative body.

Under the new tiered system, merchants will be categorized based on their in-app revenue. Those in the top 35 percent of revenue earners will pay a 7.8 percent fee, while merchants whose revenue falls between 35 percent and 80 percent will be charged 6.8%. The lowest 20 percent of earners will benefit from the most significant reduction, with fees set at just 2 percent.

The agreement, to enter into force for three years from 2025, applies to major platforms like Baemin, Coupang Eats, and Yogiyo. The decision comes after continued pressure from merchants, who have been advocating for a flat 5 percent cap on commission rates.

One of the world's largest, South Korea's food delivery market is valued at over KRW 20 trillion (USD 14.4 billion), fueled by high smartphone usage and urban density. Baemin dominates with a 60 percent market share, followed by Yogiyo and Coupang Eats. [Yonhap News Agency]

## South Korea: Decrease in female executives at state-run firms, organizations recorded

(bw) A report released on November 14 found a 10.7 percent decline in the number of female executives at government-run organizations and companies since 2022.

Leaders Index, a corporate analysis firm, analyzed data from the state-run All Public Information In-One system, revealing that in 2024, 741 executives at public companies and organizations were women, accounting for 20.6 percent of all executives. This represents a drop from 22.9% in 2022. Notably, among the 74 standing auditors at public organizations, only four were women.

While the overall female workforce in public organizations and companies increased by 1.3 percent to 152,362 in 2024 (up from 150,432 in 2022), this growth is modest compared to the 11.1 percent rise recorded between 2019 and 2021.

In the private sector, female executives remain less prevalent than in the public sector. However, private firms have been steadily increasing the representation of women in top positions. Research by Unico Search, a local headhunting firm, shows that in 2024, 463 female executives held roles in the country’s top 100 companies by sales, making up 6.3 percent of all executives. This marks a steady upward trend from 3.5

percent in 2019, 4.1 percent in 2020, 4.8 percent in 2021, and 5.6 percent in 2023.

A report released November 14th has found, the number of female executives at government-run organizations and companies has decreased by 10.7 percent since 2022. [The Korea Herald]

## South Korea: 38% of fishing vessels over 21 years old

(jb) The Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries reported on November 14 that 24,504 fishing boats in the country were over 21 years old, as per a survey data sheet ending in 2023.

These vessels, which form over 38 percent of the total fishing vessels accounted for by the Ministry, have only increased in number since 2020, where it previously stood at 30.2 percent. At present, 12,205 registered fishing boats are recorded to have been built over 26 years ago. While boats which are considered too old for use have not been decommissioned as part of an official move by the Ministry, it conducts regular inspections which allow for monitoring of the safety and operability standards of the fishing boats in employ.

As the number of older boats in use increases further, the number of newly constructed fishing vessels decreased in 2024 to approximately 60 percent of 2023's manufacturing numbers. The ministry and the government at large have inspected the cause of fishing boat accidents in the last year, of which 817 accidents occurred with boats which were over 21 years old, accounting for 36.7 percent of all accidents which occurred.

In a similar vein, the ministry and the Coast Guard are jointly investigating the case of the 129-ton Geumsong which sank off the coast of Jeju's Biyang island on November 15. [The Korea Herald]

The Korean Statistical Information Service (KOSIS) also maintains an open-source access Statistical Data List, updated every 5 years of fishing vessels and powered vessels by tonnage groups. [KOSIS]

## South Korea: Police dismantle USD 2.8 billion deepfake-driven gambling ring

(mc) The South Korean police dismantled an online gambling ring that had been operating since 2019 and generated profits totaling KRW 4 trillion (USD 2.8 billion), detaining 50 individuals involved.

According to a statement from the Metropolitan Police, the gang ran illegal gambling sites hosted on servers abroad, primarily in the Philippines and Thailand. They used YouTube broadcasts and advanced deepfake technology to impersonate celebrities and lure new users into signing up for the betting platforms.

Investigators revealed that members of the illegal sites placed high-stakes bets on manipulated versions of Spor Toto, South Korea's legal betting system.

The gambling ring allegedly amassed illicit profits of up to 300 billion won, with 30 percent reportedly distributed among the gang members. Authorities have seized assets worth KRW 10 billion (USD 7.2 million), including real estate, luxury goods, and bank deposits, as part of the investigation. [The Korea Herald]

## South Korea: Military commander to face 10-year sentence for trainee's death

(jb) The Chuncheon District Court has scheduled a sentencing hearing for December 12 in the case involving the death of a conscripted soldier at an Army division recruit training center in Inje, South Korea.

The defendants, identified as Company Commander Kang and his deputy Nam, face charges of abuse of power and implementing extreme training measures that led to the illness and death of trainee Park on May 23. The prosecution is seeking a ten-year sentence for Kang and a seven-year sentence for Nam, arguing that their unlawful and excessively harsh training exercises directly caused Park's death, which could have been prevented if proper protocols had been followed.

Prosecutors emphasized that the case highlights the need to instill accountability among Army recruitment staff and restore public trust in the military. [The Korea Herald 1]

South Korea's conscription system, managed by the Military Manpower Administration, drafts approximately 200,000 men annually. The system has faced scrutiny due to frequent fatalities, with three conscripted soldiers reported dead in 2024 alone. A particularly alarming figure from 2022 revealed 93

deaths of low-ranking conscripted soldiers, according to Statistics Korea.

During the Moon Jae-in administration, the Presidential Truth Commission on Deaths in the Military was established under the Special Act on Ascertaining the Truth of Military Accidents Resulting in Death. However, the commission's term ended in September 2023 and was not renewed under the Yoon Suk-yeol administration, despite continuing concerns about deaths attributed to suicide, illness, accidents, and abuse. [The Korea Herald 2]

The upcoming verdict has reignited a national debate on ensuring the safety and welfare of conscripted soldiers in the South Korean Army.

## South Korea: New long-range air defense radar approved for combat use

(mc) South Korea's Defense Acquisition Program Administration announced on November 18 that the newly developed long-range air defense radar has been approved for combat operations and will be added to the military's inventory. This radar will enhance South Korea's ability to monitor and respond to air threats around the clock within the Korea Air Defense Identification Zone.

The radar, which began production in February 2021, successfully passed several tests, including performance evaluations at extreme temperatures, electromagnetic compatibility tests, and endurance evaluations over 18 months. It has also received Friend or Foe Identification certification from the United States.

This new radar system transmits radar data from the field in real time to the Air Defense Control Center, improving the ability to respond rapidly to potential threats. Mass production is scheduled to begin in 2026, and the radar is expected to significantly bolster South Korea's air defense capabilities in the region. [Defense Mirror]

## Taiwan: Amendment passed to remove acting National Communications Commission head

(hs) Taiwan’s legislature passed on November 16 an amendment to the National Communications

Commission (NCC) Organization Act, mandating the removal of acting NCC head Wong Po-tsung, who has served beyond his term. The amendment, driven by opposition parties including the Kuomintang (KMT) and Taiwan People's Party (TPP), sets an official departure date for Wong on December 1.

Wong's removal will leave the 7-member NCC with just 3 members. Since a quorum of four is needed for the commission to function, this effectively paralyzes its operations. The amendment builds on previous revisions made in July and November 2024, which limit NCC members to two terms and prevent term extensions or reappointments.

Wong, who has been with the NCC since 2014, had previously been appointed acting chairman after the terms of several commissioners expired in July 2024. Opposition lawmakers have criticized this move, claiming the government exploited a loophole in the law, as earlier amendments did not set a clear implementation date for Wong's removal.

This latest legislative step underscores opposition dissatisfaction with the government's handling of the NCC leadership issue. They argue that the lack of clear dates in previous amendments forced them to take action to close these loopholes. In response, Wu Szu-yao, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) caucus whip, acknowledged the legislative outcome but called on the opposition to end their boycott of the DPP's proposed NCC nominations to allow the commission to resume normal operations.

The issue is significant as it highlights tensions between Taiwan's ruling and opposition parties, with the opposition accusing the government of manipulating legal frameworks for political advantage. It also underscores concerns about the continued functioning of the NCC, an important body for regulating Taiwan's media and communications landscape. [Focus Taiwan]

## Taiwan: Cryptocurrency taxation to be reviewed

(hs) During a legislative hearing Taiwan's Ministry of Finance confirmed that it would review regulations on taxing cryptocurrency gains following a surge in digital asset prices after Donald Trump's presidential election victory. This is in response to concerns raised by lawmaker Lai Shyh-bao from the main opposition party, the Koumintang, who pointed out that the

government has yet to effectively collect taxes on profits from cryptocurrency trades.

Lai argued that cryptocurrency should be taxed like other digital assets under Taiwan's Income Tax Act. Director-general of the Taxation Administration Sung Hsiu-ling, agreed with Lai's assessment that investors must file taxes on cryptocurrency gains. Wu Lien-ying, director-general of the National Taxation Bureau of Taipei, defended the current policy, stating that business and corporate taxes are collected from the 26 cryptocurrency exchanges registered with the Financial Supervisory Commission. She did not clarify how income taxes are collected from individual traders.

Lai raised concerns about the lack of auditing for cryptocurrency transactions, prompting Chuang and Sung to agree to review the relevant tax regulations within three months. The review comes amid heightened activity in the crypto market, with Bitcoin gaining nearly 33 percent since November 5, reaching NTD 2.8 million (USD 90,723), and Dogecoin more than doubling over the same period.

The Taiwanese government's tax system operates under the principle of territoriality, meaning that individual income tax is only applied to earnings within Taiwan. Cryptocurrency earnings from foreign transactions can evade scrutiny if they are disguised as overseas activities or remain below the taxable income threshold for overseas earnings. For 2024, the threshold is set at NTD 7.5 million (USD 230,372), up from NTD 6.7 million (USD 205,042) in 2023. Legal experts have raised concerns about how effectively these rules can be enforced, particularly for large earnings made through overseas exchanges. [Focus Taiwan]

## Taiwan: Hon Hai to launch innovative AI-powered factories using Nvidia Tech

(hs) Hon Hai Precision Industry Co., known globally as Foxconn, is set to begin production at factories in Taiwan and Mexico using Nvidia's Omniverse platform. This technology employs "digital twins" – virtual replicas of physical systems – to simulate and optimize manufacturing processes. The collaboration was first announced at Hon Hai's 2023 Tech Day.

The Taiwanese factory will commence production in December 2024, with the Mexico facility following in early 2025. These AI-powered factories will test and manufacture Nvidia's Blackwell AI chips, though

industry reports suggest potential delays in chip release due to overheating issues. [Focus Taiwan]

### Taiwan: State-run steel company to be investigated over subsidiary's employment of Chinese sailors

(dql) Taiwan's government has announced that it will investigate state-run China Steel Corporation (CSC) following allegations that its Chinese sailors could pose a national security risk.

During a budget discussion, concerns were raised about the employment of Chinese sailors at China Steel Express Corporation (CSE), a subsidiary of CSC whose scope of business includes shipping services for raw materials, ship chartering, operational management of ships, operation of a shipping agency, and shipping of steel products.

It was pointed out that while state-owned enterprises like Taiwan Power Company and petroleum, natural gas, and gasoline company CPC Corporation, Taiwan, did not employ Chinese sailors, CSE had a 20 percent Chinese workforce. The concerns centered on the question whether these employees would follow orders from the Taiwanese company or the Chinese government in the event of a Taiwan Strait crisis. [Taiwan News]

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

## Bangladesh: Interim leader Yunus calls for patience, pledges election roadmap after reforms

(lm) On the 100th day of Bangladesh's interim government, Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus addressed the nation, calling for patience while the government finalizes reforms. Yunus assured that a roadmap for the upcoming elections would be announced once the necessary electoral reforms are in place. Although a slight delay in elections may be necessary, he emphasized that reform commissions are actively working, with reports expected between December and January. Discussions with political parties will follow to reach consensus on the proposed reforms.

Yunus likened the electoral process to a train journey that requires completed tracks, stressing that the pace of progress depends on how quickly consensus is achieved among political parties. He reaffirmed the government's commitment to inclusivity and transparency, while also highlighting that reforms in other areas would proceed in tandem with the electoral changes. [The Daily Star 1]

*Challenges ahead: International Crisis Group's report on the Yunus administration*

The International Crisis Group (ICG) also released a report on the Yunus administration's first 100 days, detailing the critical challenges faced by the interim government. The report stressed the need for consensus-building among political parties, the military, and civil society, as well as the urgent need for progress in political, economic, administrative, and electoral reforms. The ICG emphasized that international support would be essential to stabilize the economy and support the reform process.

While the interim government has significant public support, the report warned that high expectations could backfire if the administration fails to deliver meaningful results. The Yunus government faces the daunting task of rebuilding institutions damaged by corruption and mismanagement under the previous regime. The report also pointed to the issue of illicit financial outflows, with billions of dollars leaving the country over the past 15 years.

The ICG called for the Yunus administration to hold elections under a reformed system within 18 months to ensure its legitimacy. It also urged international backing, particularly from India, to stabilize the country

and support democratic reforms. The report concluded that while there is potential for systemic change, failure to meet expectations could result in a return to autocracy or instability. [The Daily Star 2] [International Crisis Group]

## Bangladesh: Inclusion of figures tied to Awami League administration criticized by Sarjis

Sarjis Alam, general secretary of the July Martyr Memorial Foundation and a prominent figure in the anti-discriminatory student movement, has criticized the interim government for its lack of representation from Rangpur, Rajshahi, and Mymensingh divisions. Speaking at an event titled "Bangladesh Stands with Martyr Families" at Rangpur District Shilpakala Academy, he expressed astonishment at the exclusion, pointing out that 13 advisers hail from the Chattogram division. He questioned whether the three omitted divisions lacked capable individuals to manage ministries.

Sarjis also criticized the appointment of filmmaker Mostofa Sarwar Farooki as an adviser, accusing him of ties with the previous "fascist regime" through flattery and opportunism. He argued that individuals who were silent during political struggles should not hold advisory positions in the current administration.

Additionally, Sarjis raised concerns about alleged extortion through arrests following the July uprising, calling on authorities to address and end such practices.

During the event, speakers advocated for the inclusion of Akhter Hossain, former social welfare secretary of Dhaka University Central Students' Union (DUCSU) and member secretary of the National Citizen Committee, in the advisory council. [The Daily Star]

## Bangladesh: Hill district councils reconstituted with new leadership

(lm) Bangladesh's interim government has restructured the Hill District Councils of Rangamati, Bandarban, and Khagrachhari, each comprising 15 members. The Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs issued circulars on November 7 appointing Kajal Talukdar, Prof. Thanjama Lusai, and Jiruna Tripura as the

respective chairpersons. These councils will remain effective until further directives.

The Hill District Councils, initially established as Local Government Councils, were renamed following the signing of the 1997 Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord. This agreement between the Awami League government and the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samity (PCJSS) aimed to end decades of ethnic conflict in the region. The PCJSS, a political group representing the indigenous Jumma people, had been advocating for greater autonomy and recognition of their rights amid disputes over land, resources, and governance.

The peace accord provided for regional autonomy, land dispute resolution, and cultural recognition of the indigenous communities. As part of this agreement, the councils were given broader responsibilities in local governance, including managing education, health, and resource allocation in the hill districts.

However, the councils were suspended intermittently in later years due to administrative and political challenges, including allegations of inefficiency and lack of inclusivity. [The Daily Star]

## Bangladesh: Election Reform Commission calls for political consensus on EVM use

(lm) The Chairman of the Election Reform Commission, Badiul Alam Majumdar, has urged political parties to reach a consensus on the use of electronic voting machines (EVMs), which he described as "flawed and controversial." Speaking at a press briefing, Majumdar highlighted persistent concerns about EVM reliability, transparency, and potential misuse, which have fueled debate over their role in elections.

The commission, which has held 21 meetings to address electoral weaknesses, has formulated recommendations aimed at improving transparency and efficiency in the electoral process. Public feedback has been sought through various platforms, with 364 submissions received to date. Majumdar reaffirmed the commission's impartiality, stating, "We have no hidden agenda. Our work is unbiased and not aligned with any political party. We are determined to ensure that past mistakes are not repeated."

He also criticized the alleged involvement of intelligence agencies in prior elections, citing voter and candidate harassment as undermining democratic integrity. "Such actions have no place in a democratic

electoral process," he emphasized, calling for accountability for those involved.

*Challenges with EVMs*

The use of EVMs faces multiple challenges, including technical malfunctions, operational inefficiencies, and transparency issues. Sudden announcements of voting centers and logistical complications have further weakened public trust in the system.

Majumdar noted that 60,000 to 70,000 malfunctioning EVMs are currently stored at the Bangladesh Machine Tools Factory Limited (BMTF), accumulating unbudgeted warehouse expenses. [The Daily Star]

## Bangladesh: Maulana Saad loyalists plan gathering in Dhaka on December 7

(lm) The Tabligh Jamaat faction loyal to Maulana Mohammed Saad Kandhalvi held a large assembly at Dhaka's Kakrail Mosque last week, drawing thousands of followers from across the country. The event, which included a sermon and Juma prayers, announced a larger gathering set for December 7.

Tabligh Jamaat is a global Islamic missionary movement founded in India in the 1920s, encouraging Muslims to embrace personal piety and adhere to the fundamental teachings of Islam. Maulana Saad, a great-grandson of the movement's founder, currently leads the Nizamuddin Markaz, its global headquarters in Delhi. His leadership has sparked internal divisions, including disputes over control of key events and properties.

Supporters at the Kakrail event expressed hopes to host the first phase of the Biswa Ijtema, an annual Islamic congregation, which they traditionally organize. They also demanded that Kakrail Markaz, Tabligh Jamaat's main center in Bangladesh, be handed over to them.

At a press conference earlier, leaders of the faction emphasized their rightful claims over Tabligh Jamaat properties and warned against denying them. Imam Muhammad Azimuddin of Kakrail Mosque stressed unity and fairness, urging the government to support their demands. [The Daily Star]

## Bangladesh: ACC restructuring near completion, Yunus targets corruption

## reforms

(lm) Chief Adviser Professor Muhammad Yunus has announced that the restructuring of the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) is nearing completion, emphasizing the government's commitment to tackling corruption in all sectors.

In his national address, Yunus stated, "We are committed not only to the judiciary but also to protecting all sectors of the country from the pervasive threat of corruption. The process of restructuring the Anti-Corruption Commission is almost in its final stages."

As part of broader reforms, Yunus highlighted the reinstatement of the Supreme Judicial Council to ensure systematic disciplinary action against judges, reflecting the administration's focus on accountability within the judiciary.

The chief adviser revealed that investigations are underway against 79 individuals from a list of 150 influential figures accused of corruption and money laundering. This effort is part of a larger crackdown on illicit financial activities.

Additionally, Yunus announced the abolition of the controversial provision allowing individuals to legalize undisclosed assets, commonly referred to as "black money," through a 15 percent income tax payment. [The Daily Star]

## Bangladesh: High Court orders inquiry into 2017 Adani Power deal

(lm) The High Court of Bangladesh has directed the energy ministry to conduct a high-level inquiry into the government's 2017 power purchase agreement with Adani Power (Jharkhand) Limited. The court instructed the energy and mineral resources secretary to form a committee with international energy and legal experts within a month. The committee is tasked with submitting a detailed report within two months.

The inquiry follows a writ petition questioning the legality of the deal and potential corruption. The court also ordered government authorities to submit relevant documents and explain why the agreement should not be declared illegal. A follow-up hearing has been scheduled for February 25, 2025. [The Daily Star]

## Bangladesh: Legal actions Against figures linked to crimes during Anti-Discrimination Movement continues

In the aftermath of the August ousting of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh continues to see an ongoing wave of legal actions against individuals allegedly involved in crimes during the so-called Anti-Discrimination Student Movement that culminated in the fall of the previous administration.

On November 10, Momtaz Uddin Ahmed Mehedi, former secretary of the Supreme Court Bar Association (SCBA), was arrested at his residence and subsequently remanded for three days in connection with the murder of a bus driver. The victim was fatally shot on August 5 during the student-led mass protests. The case names 288 individuals, including the ousted Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. [The Business Standard]

Similarly, Atiqul Islam, former mayor of Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC), was arrested on October 16 in the Mohakhali DOHS area. He has been placed on a five-day remand over the murder of an individual who was shot during a protest in the Uttara East area on July 18 and died the following day. [Bss News 1]

Additionally, Md. Iqbal Hossain, president of the Shahbagh unit of the Tanti League—a group representing weavers and closely aligned with the Awami League—was arrested on November 13 in Rupnagar. He is accused of involvement in the killing of a student during the Anti-Discrimination Student Movement. [Bss News 2]

## Bangladesh: Interim government pledges justice for disappearances and killings, outlines international prosecution plans

(lm) The interim government, led by Chief Adviser Professor Muhammad Yunus, has pledged comprehensive action to address the legacy of enforced disappearances and killings in Bangladesh. This includes both prosecuting perpetrators in international courts and providing rehabilitation and compensation for victims.

In a national address, Yunus announced steps to bring those responsible for atrocities, including the July-August killings, to justice. A commission investigating human rights abuses over the past 15 years has already identified 1,600 cases of disappearances, with projections suggesting the number may surpass 3,500.

He urged victims and their families to come forward, assuring them of safety and emphasizing the administration's resolve to hold perpetrators accountable.

The government has initiated discussions with international bodies, including the International Criminal Court's lead strategist Karim Khan, to facilitate legal proceedings against those implicated in crimes. The administration has also ratified the International Convention Against Disappearances to prevent similar violations in the future.

The government is collaborating with the United Nations, which has pledged assistance in investigating the July-August killings. UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Turk, during his recent visit to Bangladesh, committed to delivering a report by early December and enhancing the UN's presence in Dhaka to strengthen human rights protection.

Addressing the psychological toll on victims and families, Yunus highlighted the profound suffering reflected in messages written on city walls during the July-August revolution. He described enforced disappearances as "a crime worse than murder," citing the enduring uncertainty faced by families.

Law Advisor Asif Nazrul echoed these sentiments during the 8th Congress of the Asian Federation Against Involuntary Disappearances (AFAD) in Dhaka. He proposed collaborative efforts between the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances and the International Crimes Tribunal to ensure transparent trials. Nazrul also acknowledged the need for compensation and rehabilitation, emphasizing the government's commitment to addressing victims' expectations. [The Daily Star 1] [The Daily Star 2]

## Bangladesh: Interim leader Yunus pledges labor reforms as protests highlight wage crises

(lm) Bangladesh's interim leader, Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus, has pledged comprehensive labor reforms to attract foreign investment and address escalating worker grievances in Bangladesh's industrial sectors. Speaking at the COP29 climate conference in Baku, Azerbaijan, Yunus emphasized the government's commitment to resolving labor issues, framing them as critical for both economic stability and social justice. [The Daily Star]

Meanwhile, industrial unrest has intensified across Bangladesh, with garment, tea, and other sector workers staging protests over unpaid wages and poor labor conditions.

*TNZ Apparels workers resume operations after receiving overdue wages*

In Gazipur, TNZ Apparels Limited resolved a one-month wage delay affecting 3,620 workers and 120 staff across five factories, enabling operations to resume last week. Mohammad Azizul Islam, general secretary of the Bangladesh Garment Workers Trade Union Center, urged other factories to avoid similar disruptions by promptly clearing payments. [The Daily Star 1]

*Beximco workers stage ongoing highway protests over unpaid salaries*

In contrast, workers from Beximco Industrial Park in Gazipur's Kashimpur area staged ongoing protests, blocking the Dhaka-Tangail highway for four consecutive days. The workers were demanding payment of October wages, with factory management promising payment by November. The workers refused to return to work until their dues were cleared.

Beximco, facing a severe liquidity crisis, has been unable to pay wages due to difficulties in opening letters of credit for raw materials. This situation, which has led to a total of 24 factories closing across the Beximco Group, highlights the depth of the financial troubles the company is facing. The closure of these factories is exacerbated by Beximco's inability to meet its monthly salary obligations to approximately 40,000 workers. [The Daily Star 2] [The Daily Star 3] [The Daily Star 4]

*Tea workers in Sylhet demand overdue wages and rations*

In Sylhet, hundreds of tea workers took to the streets demanding nearly three months' unpaid wages and rations. Organized by the Sylhet District branch of the Bangladesh Trade Union Centre, the protest underscored the plight of approximately 12,000 workers from 12 tea estates managed by the National Tea Company (NTC).

Protesters marched from Keane Bridge to Zindabazar, warning that 40,000 to 50,000 workers and their families are on the brink of starvation as living costs soar. Workers demanded immediate wage and ration payments, a fair minimum wage for 2023-24 aligned with market conditions, full family rations, land rights, and updated labor laws. [The Daily Star 5]

## Bangladesh: BJIM and TIB highlight threats to media freedom and accountability

(lm) The Bangladeshi Journalists in International Media (BJIM) and Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) have raised concerns about press freedom and institutional accountability amid the interim government's recent actions.

BJIM condemned the revocation of press accreditation cards for 167 journalists, reportedly without explanation, as a significant blow to media independence. In a statement, BJIM stressed the critical role of media freedom in democracy, urging the establishment of an autonomous and independent watchdog commission to oversee journalists and their activities transparently and free from political influence. [The Daily Star 1]

Simultaneously, TIB Executive Director Dr. Iftekharuzzaman alleged that the judiciary and certain media outlets had facilitated the autocratic governance of ousted Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Speaking at a training workshop on investigative journalism in Dhaka, he emphasized the need for judicial independence and media integrity to ensure democratic accountability. He criticized institutions tasked with enforcing accountability for becoming complicit in authoritarian practices and called for political reforms to establish a functional judiciary. [The Daily Star 2]

## Bangladesh: Students protest for merit-based admissions at Dhaka school

Students of Dhaka Residential Model School and College staged a 45-minute protest last week, blocking Mirpur Road in front of their institution to demand merit-based admissions for Classes 3 to 11. The demonstration followed an online awareness campaign organized by the students to highlight their demands. [The Daily Star]

## Bangladesh: Eight more die of Dengue, 994 hospitalized in 24 hours

(vk) As of November 16, Bangladesh reported 8 more dengue-related deaths and 994 new hospitalizations.

According to the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), the new fatalities bring the total death toll to 407, while the total number of dengue cases reached 78,595.

This increase in cases highlights the continuing severity of the dengue outbreak, compared to 2023, when the country recorded 1,705 deaths and 321,179 cases. [Bss News]

## Bangladesh: Interim government approves long-term LNG import from Brunei

(asa) On November 13, Bangladesh's interim government approved the import of liquefied natural gas (LNG) from Brunei under a government-to-government (G-to-G) contract. The proposal, approved by the Advisors Council Committee on Economic Affairs (ACCEA), was presented by the Ministry of Power, Energy, and Mineral Resources, with the state-owned company Petrobangla leading the negotiations.

This decision follows Brunei's offer to export LNG to Bangladesh during Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah's 2022 visit. Petrobangla will now begin negotiations with Brunei Energy Services and Trading Sdn Bhd (BEST) to finalize the LNG pricing and contract terms. Bangladesh currently imports LNG from Qatar and Oman, and this new agreement expands its supply sources.

The move comes after Brunei renewed its efforts to supply LNG to Bangladesh following previous setbacks. It was initially delayed due to opposition from former state officials, but with recent political changes, the deal has moved forward.

In a separate meeting, the government also approved the import of two LNG cargoes from the international spot market, at a cost of approximately BDT 1,353.9 million (USD 113.13 million), with suppliers Vitol Asia and TotalEnergies Gas & Power. [Dhaka Tribune] [The Business Standard]

## Bangladesh: Finance adviser denies financial crisis, calls for governance and economic reforms

(lm) Finance Adviser Prof. Dr. Salehuddin Ahmed asserted that Bangladesh is not in a financial crisis but faces political and economic challenges driven by both

internal and external factors. Speaking at a policy dialogue on "Financial and Economic Reforms in Bangladesh 2024," Dr. Ahmed emphasized the need for governance reforms to stabilize the economy.

*Governance and economic challenges*

Dr. Ahmed highlighted the mismanagement and lack of accountability in state-owned companies, many of which are nearing collapse. He noted ongoing efforts to restore governance and expressed optimism in the resilience and creativity of the Bangladeshi people. Measures like reducing import duties have been introduced to curb inflation, but challenges persist in the production and supply chain.

He criticized the widespread influence of middlemen and extortion, which significantly inflate market prices. For example, the price of brinjal rises from BDT 10 (USD 0.083) at the production level to BDT 60 (USD 0.498) in kitchen markets due to intermediaries and extortion at multiple points. "A political solution is needed to stop extortion and eliminate middle-interest groups," he said.

Dr. Ahmed also condemned flawed project planning and corruption inherited from the previous government. Citing the Indian Adani Group's tax evasion in project implementation, he stressed the importance of accountability and feasibility studies in public projects.

*Addressing legacy issues*

Dr. Ahmed criticized the former regime's GDP calculations, calling them misleading and lacking accountability. He accused the prior government of politicizing data and prioritizing sectors like energy and finance to enable wealth extraction. Despite these challenges, he expressed hope that current reform efforts would lay a foundation for future governments to build upon.

*Broader criticisms and reform plans*

Dr. Debapriya Bhattacharya, distinguished fellow at the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), alleged that the central bank under the previous government facilitated financial sector corruption. He accused the former administration of presenting a false growth narrative, emphasizing visible development without increasing the tax-to-GDP ratio or private investment.

Farzana Lalarukh, Commissioner of the Bangladesh Securities Exchange Commission (BSEC), outlined ongoing reforms to rebuild investor confidence in the

capital market. She noted plans to enhance accountability and transparency through digital platforms. [The Daily Star]

## Bangladesh: Interim government directs private sector to import 327,000 metric tons of rice

(vk) The Bangladeshi interim government has ordered the private sector to import 327,000 metric tons of rice within a month to stabilize prices and address supply gaps ahead of the Aman harvest. Importers must market the rice by December 10 and sell it directly in sacks without repackaging.

The Aman harvest, a key rice-growing season in Bangladesh, typically spans November and December, relying on monsoon-fed crops. M. Habibur Rahman Hosaini, Additional Secretary of the Food Ministry, stated that the imports aim to bridge the shortfall until the harvest is completed in about six weeks.

The move is expected to reduce retail rice prices and affect the cost of newly harvested paddy, currently sold at BDT 36–36.50 per kilogram (USD 0.30–0.32). Public food storage as of November 13 stood at 1.29 million metric tons, including 848,139 metric tons of rice, 439,564 metric tons of wheat, and 1,245 metric tons of paddy. [Bss News]

## Bangladesh: Railways service recovers land, implements service improvements

(vk) In the last three months, Bangladesh Railway (BR) has intensified efforts to recover occupied land, reclaiming nearly 20 acres in a series of 27 eviction drives. Between August and October 2024, BR targeted 447 properties and successfully recovered 19.21 acres of land. To update and monitor land use, BR has compiled a list of 12,595 individuals and entities that have unlawfully occupied railway land.

BR is also improving passenger services by launching a call center, increasing mobile court drives, and forming a monitoring team for railway stations. [Bss News]

## Bangladesh: Army granted extended magistracy power for 60 more days

(lm) The interim government has extended the magistracy power granted to commissioned officers of the Bangladesh Army for an additional 60 days, effective until January 14, 2025.

The Ministry of Public Administration issued the notification on November 15, granting officers ranked captain and higher executive magistracy authority across the country. This authority also applies to army officers on deputation in the Bangladesh Coast Guard and Border Guard Bangladesh.

The magistracy powers, initially granted on September 17, were later extended to the Bangladesh Navy and Air Force on September 30. These powers, outlined under specific sections of the Code of Criminal Procedure (CRPC) 1898, enable officers to issue arrest orders and perform judicial functions, including imposing fines and sentences. [The Business Standard]

## Bangladesh: 11 injured in Raozan attack by masked assailants

(lm) At least 11 people were injured in an attack by masked assailants in a village in Chattogram last week. The attackers, numbering 20-25, fired indiscriminately and assaulted locals after targeting a shopkeeper, accusing him of sending a politically sensitive message.

The injured include residents connected to a local political figure, with the attack reportedly linked to a factional conflict within the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). Police identified the assailants as followers of a BNP leader and seized weapons left at the scene. No case has been filed, and investigations are ongoing. [The Daily Star]

## Bangladesh: Army warns against misuse of its name in jhut business

(lm) The Bangladesh Army has cautioned the public against fraudulent activities involving its name in the jhut (garment waste) business. The army highlighted recent incidents where individuals falsely used the names of senior officials to engage in jhut trading and other illegal activities in industrial areas, damaging the army's reputation.

To address these concerns, the army urged citizens to report such cases and provided contact numbers for this purpose. [The Daily Star]

## Bhutan: Second session of fourth Parliament commences

(lm) Bhutan's King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck presided over the opening ceremony of the second session of Bhutan's Fourth Parliament in Thimphu, marked by a traditional Chipdrel ceremony and attended by members of the Royal Family, government officials, foreign diplomats, and students.

The session will address key legislative matters, including the Goods and Services Tax (Amendment) Bill of Bhutan 2024, the Cattle Tax Exemption Bill of Bhutan 2024, and the Parliamentary Entitlements (Amendment) Bill of Bhutan 2024. A joint sitting will review the Performance Audit Report of the State Mining Corporation Limited.

Simultaneously, the 34th session of the National Council (NC) began, with Chairperson Sangay Dorji praising His Majesty's efforts to enhance peace, prosperity, and international relations. The NC will deliberate on issues such as rural credit access, the Anti-Corruption Commission's Annual Report 2023, education-related legislation, and the state of media in Bhutan, along with the Air Service Agreement.

Both houses will continue deliberations, with the NA addressing legislative priorities and the NC reviewing follow-up reports and presenting an interim report on Bhutan's tourism sector. [Kuensel]

## Bhutan: Parliamentary Entitlements Bill proposes enhanced benefits for MPs

(lm) The Parliamentary Entitlements (Amendment) Bill 2024, introduced in Bhutan's National Assembly, seeks to improve benefits for Members of Parliament (MPs). Proposals include well-furnished offices, a one-time equipment allowance for devices like laptops, a lump-sum joining allowance, and bereavement support equal to three months' salary for families of MPs who pass away while in office.

Legislative Committee Chairperson Kuenga emphasized the amendments aim to address inconsistencies between existing laws and ensure MPs have the resources to fulfill their responsibilities effectively. The is set for a third reading on November 26. [Kuensel]

## Bhutan: Accountability questioned in BITS development failure

(lm) The Bhutan Integrated Tax System (BITS), a critical project to support the country's Goods and Services Tax (GST) system, has faced scrutiny after significant delays and cost overruns. Initially entrusted to DHI-TechPark Limited in June 2020, the project incurred costs of BTN 119.111 million (approximately USD 1.43 million) before its termination in April 2022 due to consistent delays and missed milestones.

The Royal Audit Authority (RAA) flagged the failure, citing poor planning, inadequate consultant capacity assessments, and insufficient monitoring as key reasons. Despite these findings, the Ministry of Finance (MoF) announced in February 2024 that audit objections were dropped after justifications from the Office of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (OPMC), emphasizing lessons learned for future initiatives.

The failure stemmed from an overestimation of domestic capacity to develop complex tax software. Initially, the government favored using commercial-off-the-shelf (COTS) software for GST. However, the project was redirected to DHI-TechPark, leading to delays and financial losses.

To salvage the initiative, the government awarded a new contract to New Zealand-based firm Data Torque Limited on August 23, 2024, with an estimated project cost exceeding BTN 1 billion (approximately USD 12 million). The system is now slated to become fully operational by 2029, with phased implementation targets set for various tax modules.

Critics, including the RAA and private sector representatives, have called for stronger accountability, highlighting the financial and operational setbacks caused by mismanagement. The project's failures have also delayed GST implementation, further impacting Bhutan’s economic reforms. [Kuensel]

## Bhutan: Integrating happiness into criminal justice reform

(mt) At the Fourth International Conference on Gross National Happiness (GNH) and Law, experts highlighted the need to align Bhutan’s criminal justice system with GNH values. They emphasized that a robust rule of law and a fair justice system are crucial for societal well-being and happiness. Key challenges—

like limited legal resources and ambiguous laws—were noted as obstacles to effective governance.

A shift toward restorative justice was recommended, focusing on rehabilitation over punishment to support social reintegration. National Assembly Speaker Lungten Dorji advocated for sentencing reforms, especially for non-violent offenses. Legal education campaigns were also proposed to boost public understanding and trust in the justice system, reinforcing Bhutan's commitment to a compassionate, happiness-oriented approach to justice. [Kuensel]

## Bhutan: MPs push for stronger social media regulations

(lm) Bhutanese MPs are urging stricter social media regulations to address risks such as mental health issues, misinformation, cyberbullying, and online fraud. During a National Assembly session, MP Dorji Wangmo cited the Information, Communications, and Media Act of 2018, emphasizing protections for vulnerable groups, including children.

MoICE Minister Namgyal Dorji highlighted ongoing efforts by the Bhutan Information, Communications and Media Authority (BICMA) in collaboration with the Royal Bhutan Police and civil society organizations to raise awareness about online risks. He also announced plans to establish a media committee to enhance governance. [Kuensel]

## Bhutan: Clear legal framework needed to end corporal punishment

(lm) Efforts to ban corporal punishment in Bhutan require a clear legal framework, according to research presented at the fourth international GNH and Law Conference in Paro. Professor Wing Cheong Chan of Singapore Management University, who conducted the study "Ending Corporal Punishment of Children in Bhutan – Taking a Soft Approach," emphasized that cultural acceptance and a lack of explicit legal prohibition hinder efforts to eliminate physical discipline.

Bhutan has pledged to end violence against children and is a signatory to multiple international conventions, including the SAARC Convention on Child Welfare. While the country has laws like the Child Protection Act of Bhutan (2011), which prohibits harsh

punishment and allows restraint only under specific conditions, none explicitly outlaw corporal punishment. Professor Chan argued that long-term reforms, training in alternative discipline strategies, and laws promoting positive parenting are essential.

Although many participants at the conference supported the call for reform, some raised concerns about practical challenges. Teachers and parents highlighted the difficulty of managing disobedience without physical discipline and the pressures of achieving academic excellence, which sometimes lead to corporal punishment. [Kuensel]

## Bhutan: Agenda Chikha launched to empower people with disabilities

(mt) Her Royal Highness Princess Eeuphelma Choden Wangchuck launched Agenda Chikha, a four-year initiative aimed at empowering people with disabilities (PwDs) in Bhutan.

Spanning from 2024 to 2027, Agenda Chikha focuses on four key pillars: empowering lives, building institutional capacity, challenging stereotypes, and strengthening data on PwDs. The initiative seeks to foster collaboration between policymakers, the private sector, development partners, and PwD communities to improve their lives.

It aligns with Bhutan's National Policy for Persons with Disabilities and the UN's goal to leave no one behind. The launch coincided with Bhutan's SDGs Partnership Week, promoting inclusive solutions for sustainable development. [Kuensel]

## Bhutan: Nationwide screening to combat rising NCDs

(lm) The Ministry of Health (MoH) launched a nationwide screening program to address non-communicable diseases (NCDs), which account for 69 percent of deaths in Bhutan. Running until December 7, the initiative targets adults aged 18 and older, screening for hypertension, diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases across 56 hospitals, 188 primary health centers, and 51 sub-posts, including mobile clinics for remote areas.

The program aims to identify high-risk individuals for treatment while promoting healthier lifestyles through awareness campaigns. Rising NCD-related risk factors

include tobacco use (29.8 percent in 2023), physical inactivity (18.3 percent), and increasing cases of high blood pressure and cholesterol.

Health Minister Lyonpo Tandin Wangchuk emphasized the need for prevention and treatment, highlighting the alarming rise in heart conditions among youth. The government allocated BTN 45 million (USD 540,000) under the 13th Five-Year-Plan, with BTN 19 million (USD 228,000) for the current fiscal year to support screenings, follow-ups, and public health education. The Dratshang Health Coordinators Guideline was also launched to aid community health advocacy. [Kuensel]

## Bhutan: Bitcoin asset value surpasses USD 1 billion

(lm) Bhutan's Bitcoin (BTC) holdings have exceeded USD 1 billion, driven by recent price surges and strategic cash-outs by Druk Holding and Investments (DHI).

Bhutan currently holds 12,206 BTC valued at about USD 1.11 billion, representing over 35 percent of the country's 2023 GDP of USD 3.02 billion. Despite a recent reduction in holdings, Bhutan ranks fifth globally among Bitcoin-holding nations, following the United States, China, the United Kingdom, and Ukraine.

Bhutan mines Bitcoin using abundant hydropower resources, positioning the country as a leader in environmentally sustainable cryptocurrency mining. Existing mining facilities are located at multiple sites, including the former Education City Project. Bhutan plans to expand its mining capacity to 600 megawatts by 2025 in partnership with Bitdeer, a Nasdaq-listed technology company.

The first project, a 100MW mining operation in Gedu, began in mid-2023. A larger 500MW facility at the Jigmeling Industrial Park in Gelephu is slated to commence operations by mid-2025. This expansion follows a USD 500 million partnership announced in May 2023 between DHI and Bitdeer.

While the mining investments have contributed to Bhutan's digital transformation, they have also impacted national reserves. According to the World Bank, Bhutan invested USD 539 million in cryptocurrency mining from July 2021 to June 2023. During this period, reserves declined significantly, dropping from USD 1.27 billion in June 2021 to USD 573 million by June 2023.

Additionally, Bhutan's imports of IT equipment have surged to support mining operations, totaling approximately USD 48 million in 2023 and approximately USD 142.92 million in 2022. [Kuensel]

## Bhutan: Government targets 2.5 percent unemployment amid workforce challenges

(lm) The Bhutanese government has set a target to reduce the national unemployment rate to 2.5 percent by the end of its tenure, according to Namgyal Dorji, Minister for Industry, Commerce, and Employment (MoICE).

Addressing Parliament, the minister emphasized that job creation is crucial, particularly to address youth emigration and its impact on essential public services. Unemployment has declined from 5.8 percent in 2022 to 3.1 percent in 2024, with youth unemployment falling from over 28 percent in 2022 to 16.5 percent this year. However, more than 6,000 youth remain unemployed, and emigration, especially to countries like Australia, continues to strain the workforce.

To tackle these challenges, the government has launched initiatives such as the Youth Engagement and Livelihood Programme, the establishment of employment service centers in all dzongkhags, promotion of safe overseas employment opportunities, and programs focusing on reintegration, entrepreneurship, and job matching. [Kuensel 1]

Meanwhile, Bhutan's Opposition Leader Dasho Pema Chewang has voiced concerns over critical human resource shortages in the civil service, warning that the issue could jeopardize the ambitious objectives of the 13th Five-Year Plan. In a letter to the Royal Civil Service Commission (RCSC), Dasho Pema highlighted high attrition rates, superannuation of senior professionals, and inefficiencies stemming from governance reforms, which have led to unclear roles in national planning and coordination.

The forced ranking system in civil service performance assessments has also been criticized for fostering workplace disharmony. Parliament has recommended abolishing the system and doubling the human resource development budget to BTN 4.9 billion (approximately USD 58.8 million) under the 13th Five-Year Plan. Prime Minister Lotay Tshering is expected to report on proposed reforms, including a review of RCSC's Max Moderation System, in the second session of the fourth Parliament.

According to the RCSC's annual report, 2,724 civil servants left the service between July 2023 and March 2024, while 3,086 new recruits joined. [Kuensel 2]

## Bhutan: Non-residents to contribute to country's development through new fixed-term deposit initiative

(mt) A new fixed-term deposit program has been launched to allow non-resident Bhutanese to directly contribute to the development of Bhutan, including the country's first international airport at Gelephu Mindfulness City.

The initiative, unveiled on November 11, partners Gelephu Investment and Development Corporation with ORO Bank. It offers flexible deposit options with attractive returns to help fund key infrastructure projects.

The scheme is exclusively available to Bhutanese living abroad, providing a unique chance to actively shape Bhutan's future while benefiting from secure financial returns. The subscription period ends on December 31, 2024. [Kuensel]

## Bhutan: National Council addresses regional tourism disparities

(lm) The National Council's Economic Affairs Committee has raised concerns about significant regional imbalances in Bhutan's tourism sector, citing that the western region attracted 230,296 tourists in 2019, while the central, eastern, and southern regions saw only 17,660, 7,129, and 4,578 visitors, respectively. Chairperson Tshewang Rinchen attributed the disparity to better infrastructure in the west, including Paro International Airport and a concentration of hotels, while remote regions suffer from poor transport links and limited accommodations.

The Economic Affairs Committee plans further consultations with government agencies and field visits to address these challenges. A detailed report will be presented during the National Council's summer session.

As of September 2024, Bhutan had received 95,633 tourists, including 31,073 international visitors. [Kuensel]

## India: Supreme Court bans punitive demolitions, upholds due process

(rsv) India's Supreme Court has declared the use of demolitions as punishment for accused individuals unconstitutional, emphasizing that such actions violate the rule of law and due process. In its November 13 ruling, the court stated that only judicial bodies have the authority to determine guilt, and executive actions targeting properties based on allegations undermine the principles of justice and separation of powers.

The judgment responded to petitions challenging punitive demolitions, particularly in states governed by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), where such actions have been criticized for disproportionately affecting Muslim communities following incidents of protests or violence. The BJP denies these allegations, framing the demolitions as part of a crime-control strategy.

The court mandated strict guidelines for demolition procedures. Authorities must issue a minimum of 15 days' notice to occupants, stating the reasons for demolition, and offer an opportunity for response through a documented hearing. Demolition activities must be videographed and reported to municipal authorities, with any violations considered contempt of court. However, the court clarified that these protections do not extend to unauthorized structures on public land or those previously ordered for removal by judicial authorities.

Rights organizations, including Amnesty International, welcomed the ruling as a critical step in curbing arbitrary demolitions, which have been described as targeting marginalized communities under the guise of enforcing construction laws. Legal experts highlighted the ruling as a landmark for upholding constitutional protections. [The Hindu] [BBC 1]

Despite this progress, victims of past demolitions remain without redress or compensation. Many families who lost their homes in similar actions are still struggling to rebuild their lives, with ongoing court cases seeking accountability. The ruling, while setting a strong precedent for due process, leaves the resolution of past injustices unresolved. Experts caution that the effectiveness of the judgment will depend on its enforcement and the willingness of state machinery to adhere to the prescribed guidelines. [BBC 2]

## India: Delhi Chief Minister Atishi assumes Minister Gahlot's portfolios following resignation

(lm) Delhi Chief Minister Atishi will take over all the departments previously overseen by Kailash Gahlot, who resigned from both the Delhi Cabinet and the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP). The Chief Minister's Office confirmed that a proposal for this transition has been sent to Lieutenant Governor VK Saxena.

Gahlot, formerly the minister for transport, administrative reforms, home, and women and child development, cited dissatisfaction with AAP's shifting priorities as the reason for his resignation. In his letter to party leader Arvind Kejriwal, Gahlot expressed concerns over controversies like the 'Sheeshmahal' issue, which he said tarnished the party's image and core values. He criticized the government's focus on political conflicts with the Center, stating it had compromised the delivery of basic services to Delhiites.

Despite his resignation, Gahlot pledged to continue serving the people of Delhi outside the AAP. [The Times of India]

## India: Government plans updated law on MPs' disqualification over office of profit

(lm) The Indian government intends to repeal the 65-year-old Parliament (Prevention of Disqualification) Act, 1959, and introduce a new law tailored to modern requirements. The draft Parliament (Prevention of Disqualification) Bill, 2024, has been prepared by the legislative department of the law ministry, following recommendations from the Joint Committee on Offices of Profit (JCOP) during the 16th Parliament.

The proposed legislation seeks to streamline Section 3 of the existing Act and remove the negative list of offices whose holders would incur disqualification. It also aims to eliminate inconsistencies between the current law and other statutes that prevent disqualification for holding certain offices.

Key changes include the removal of Section 4, which temporarily suspends disqualification in specific cases, replacing it with provisions empowering the central government to amend the schedule through notification.

The draft bill emphasizes a comprehensive definition of "office of profit" and proposes clearer language and formatting. It aims to protect members involved in flagship programs such as Swachh Bharat Mission and Smart City Mission from disqualification. [The Business Standard]

## India: House panel pushes for reforms in OBC creamy layer policy

(lm) An Indian parliamentary committee on Other Backward Classes (OBCs) is pressing the government to address longstanding issues in the implementation of the "creamy layer" policy, particularly the lack of "equivalence of posts" across government institutions.

The term "Other Backward Classes" refers to socially and educationally disadvantaged groups identified for affirmative action under India's reservation system. The "creamy layer" policy excludes the wealthier or more privileged members of these communities from benefiting from such reservations, ensuring that affirmative action benefits reach the most deserving. The classification is based on income and professional criteria.

"Equivalence of posts" refers to categorizing positions in public sector units (PSUs), banks, universities, and other bodies in alignment with government classifications of Group A, B, C, and D roles. Although the government announced in 2017 that equivalence would be established, progress has been slow, with disagreements over categorization continuing to create inconsistencies.

The committee's 2019 report criticized the current approach, citing dissatisfaction among OBC stakeholders and pointing out discrepancies in equivalence determined by the Department of Public Enterprises (DPE) and the Department of Financial Services (DFS). The report called for a reevaluation in line with the 1993 Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT) guidelines.

A key concern is the inclusion of "salary" in calculating income for creamy layer eligibility for PSU employees, a practice contrary to the 1993 guidelines, which excluded salary and agricultural income from the computation. The committee plans to push for a standardized national model for determining income to reduce errors and ensure fair implementation.

The panel aims to address what it sees as discriminatory practices in the current system,

emphasizing the need for uniformity and adherence to established guidelines. The proposed reforms seek to eliminate inconsistencies and better align the creamy layer policy with its intended purpose. [The Times of India]

## India: Election Commission orders BJP Jharkhand to remove controversial post

(lm) India's Election Commission (EC) has directed the Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) of Jharkhand to remove a contentious video from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Jharkhand's official social media platforms, citing violations of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC). The move follows complaints from the opposition Indian National Congress and Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM), alleging that the video contained misinformation and incited hatred.

The EC also issued a notice to BJP Jharkhand, demanding an explanation for the video, which depicted individuals of a specific community entering a JMM supporter's house uninvited, accompanied by captions claiming transformative promises by the JMM. Congress and JMM leaders labeled the video as baseless and divisive, accusing the BJP of attempting to sway voters through misinformation.

The controversy arises amidst heightened scrutiny during ongoing Assembly elections. Both BJP and Congress leaders, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Amit Shah, and Rahul Gandhi, face separate allegations of MCC violations. The EC has requested responses from BJP president JP Nadda and Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge regarding complaints about their star campaigners.

Jharkhand has completed the first phase of its elections, covering 43 of 81 seats. The remaining constituencies, alongside Maharashtra's, will vote on November 20, with results expected on November 23. [The Times of India]

## India: Government considers minimum import price on textiles to shield domestic industry

(lm) The Indian government is exploring the imposition of a Minimum Import Price (MIP) on several textile products, including viscose rayon yarn and polyester woven fabrics, in response to a surge in imports,

predominantly from China. The proposed measure aims to protect domestic industries from predatory pricing and reduce import dependency, especially in light of India's growing trade deficit with China, which reached USD 40.81 billion between April and August 2024.

MIP is a temporary safeguard that prohibits imports priced below a specified threshold, providing relief to domestic producers and stabilizing local prices. Key imports under review include man-made fiber fabrics, flax, and cotton shorts. With 99 percent of viscose rayon yarn and 93 percent of MMF fabrics sourced from China, the government seeks to curb import dependency. [The Economic Times]

## India: Government proposes 100 percent FDI in insurance and eases agent rules

(lm) The Indian government is set to introduce reforms allowing 100 percent foreign direct investment (FDI) in insurance businesses and easing restrictions on insurance agents, as part of the upcoming Insurance Amendment Bill. This initiative aims to boost competition and attract global players, aligning with the "Insurance for All by 2047" vision led by the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (IRDAI).

The proposed bill removes the 74 percent FDI cap, enabling foreign insurers to operate independently in India. It also allows individual agents to sell policies from multiple insurers, eliminating the current one-company restriction.

India’s low insurance penetration rate, at just 4 percent, underpins these reforms, which aim to expand coverage by encouraging more players and providing greater customer choice. Additional provisions include composite licenses for life and non-life policies under one entity and eased solvency norms to free up capital for insurers. [The Times of India]

## India: Manipur's unrest escalates with mob violence, arrests, and government intervention

(lm) T Manipur's deepening ethnic conflict between the Hindu Meitei and Christian Kuki communities has plunged the northeastern state into chaos, with

violence erupting in Imphal following the discovery of six bodies allegedly abducted and killed by militants in Jiribam district. Among the victims were three women, two children, and a baby, believed to belong to a missing Meitei family. The body of a 27-year-old Kuki-Zo man, executed with his hands tied and a gunshot wound to the head, was also recovered. These incidents have reignited hostilities that began in May 2023, claiming over 250 lives and displacing 60,000 people.

On November 16, angry mobs torched the homes of political leaders across party lines, including PWD Minister Govindas Konthoujam, BJP MLAs Y Radheshyam and Paonam Brojen, and Congress MLA Thokchom Lokeshwar. Protesters also vandalized the office of an Independent legislator and attempted to storm Chief Minister N. Biren Singh's ancestral home, prompting security forces to use tear gas and rubber bullets. Eight people were injured in the clashes, and 23 individuals were arrested for arson and rioting. [The Business Standard 1]

The violence has spread to other parts of the state, with mobs targeting the office of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in Imphal and setting fire to churches and homes in Jiribam. Authorities imposed an indefinite curfew in five districts and suspended internet services in seven districts to curb unrest. Security forces have intensified patrolling and fortified key government buildings, including the state secretariat, BJP headquarters, and Raj Bhavan.

In response to the unrest, police arrested 23 individuals for arson and rioting. Authorities imposed an indefinite curfew in five districts of the Imphal Valley and suspended internet and mobile services in seven districts. Security forces have intensified patrolling and fortified key government buildings, including the state secretariat, BJP headquarters, and Raj Bhavan. [Al Jazeera]

Union Home Minister Amit Shah canceled election rallies in Maharashtra to focus on Manipur's crisis, convening high-level meetings in Delhi to review the security situation. The Army and Assam Rifles were deployed to Imphal, and the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA) was reimposed in Jiribam and other sensitive areas, granting the military expanded authority to conduct operations. Senior officials, including Lieutenant General Abhijit S. Pendharkar, are leading on-ground assessments. [The Business Standard 2] [The Hindu]

The opposition has criticized the government's handling of the crisis. Rahul Gandhi urged Prime

Minister Narendra Modi to visit the state and take decisive action. The National People's Party (NPP), an ally of the BJP, has withdrawn support from the state government, blaming Chief Minister Singh for failing to restore order. Indian National Congress leader and former Chief Minister Okram Ibobi Singh demanded a bipartisan approach to save Manipur, questioning the efficacy of the state legislature amidst the turmoil. [Al Jazeera]

The ethnic conflict stems from disputes over the Meitei community's demand for Scheduled Tribe status, which the Kuki community opposes. The ongoing violence has left Manipur divided along ethnic lines, with the Meitei controlling the valley and the Kuki dominating the surrounding hills. The killing of a 31-year-old Kuki woman, reportedly burned alive, has further fueled tensions.

Manipur police recovered firearms and ammunition during the arrests and reported the presence of organized armed groups exacerbating the violence. Meanwhile, displaced families, already struggling with limited resources, face worsening conditions as security concerns persist.

## India: First hypersonic missile successfully tested

(lm) India has successfully tested its first hypersonic missile, achieving speeds over Mach 6 (six times the speed of sound) and demonstrating mid-flight maneuverability. Conducted at Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam Island off Odisha's coast, the test positions India among an elite group of nations with advanced hypersonic technology.

The missile, capable of carrying payloads over 1,500 kilometers, marks a major defense milestone. Defense Minister Rajnath Singh hailed it as a "historic achievement." Hypersonic weapons, known for their speed and precision, are designed to evade modern air defense systems and provide strategic advantages.

This achievement builds on India's earlier trials with the Hypersonic Technology Demonstrator Vehicle (HSTDV) and reinforces its commitment to advanced defense capabilities amidst a global race for hypersonic dominance. Further tests are planned before full-scale production and deployment. [The Times of India]

## Maldives: Former President Solih, Male' Mayor Azim warn of authoritarian drift, criticize government for lack of progress

(lm) Former President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih and Male' City Mayor Adam Azim have heavily criticized the current administration, accusing it of authoritarian tendencies, mismanagement, and failure to deliver meaningful progress. Both leaders spoke at the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP)'s first major rally since losing power, marking a sharp critique of the government just before its one-year anniversary.

*Concerns over authoritarianism and undermining institutions*

Solih warned that the Maldives is heading toward political turmoil, accusing the administration of consolidating power and veering toward authoritarianism. He cited the dismissal of members of the Elections Commission and Anti-Corruption Commission as examples of interference in independent institutions, claiming these actions are designed to influence the 2028 presidential election.

"The Maldives is once again facing an environment of fear," Solih stated, highlighting concerns about the government's alleged efforts to undermine democratic institutions and centralize power.

*Criticism of budget and lack of transparency*

Solih criticized the proposed 2025 budget for lacking transparency and accused the government of depleting the 2024 budget of MVR 49.8 billion (USD 3.24 billion) within eight months, along with an additional MVR 5 billion (USD 325 million) in contingency funds. He claimed that despite these expenditures, there was little visible progress on development projects, debt repayment, or public services.

Solih further alleged that the government has failed to uphold its promises, citing reductions in Aasandha healthcare coverage, cuts to subsidies, raised taxes, and non-payment to fishermen, all of which have exacerbated financial hardships for citizens.

*Mayor Azim's criticisms of economic management*

Mayor Adam Azim echoed these sentiments, accusing the government of achieving little beyond inaugurating projects initiated during the MDP's tenure. He criticized increased utility bills, rising taxes, and the escalating dollar rate, all of which have placed additional financial burdens on citizens. Azim also highlighted delays in

delivering flats and land plots promised under the MDP's administration.

He further condemned the acquisition of military drones for USD 35 million (MVR 538 million) as an unnecessary expenditure, alleging that the drones remain unused. "A government can be led with wisdom and patience," Azim said, urging citizens to hold the administration accountable.

*Calls for safeguarding democracy and decentralization*

Both leaders stressed the importance of protecting democratic norms and decentralization. Solih accused the government of withholding funds from local councils, undermining the Decentralization Act and the Constitution. He emphasized that the administration's overreach threatens to erode democratic progress made in recent years.

Azim called on citizens to demand accountability and action, urging the government to prioritize the needs of the people. Both leaders reaffirmed their commitment to advocating for democratic governance and addressing the challenges facing the country. [The Edition 1] [The Edition 2] [avas.mv]

## Maldives: Media and Broadcasting Bill withdrawn following public outcry and government assurances

(lm) Independent MP Abdul Hannan AbooBakuru has withdrawn the controversial Media and Broadcasting Bill following widespread criticism from journalists, media organizations, and NGOs, as well as public opposition from President Dr. Mohamed Muizzu.

*Bill details and provisions*

The bill proposed merging the Maldives Media Council (MMC) and the Broadcasting Commission into a single Media and Broadcasting Commission. It granted the commission authority over media regulation, including enforcing codes of conduct, issuing fines, suspending licenses, and mandating public apologies. Fines ranged from MVR 5,000 to MVR 50,000 (USD 325 to USD 3,250) for media outlets and MVR 5,000 to MVR 10,000 (USD 325 to USD 650) for individuals.

The proposed commission would consist of seven members—four appointed by the President with parliamentary approval and three elected by registered media professionals. [the edition 1]

Initially, MP Hannan defended the bill, claiming it was independently drafted and necessary to address false reporting and stabilize the media landscape. However, he acknowledged journalists' concerns and suggested they would be considered during committee discussions. [the edition 2]

*Public and institutional backlash*

Journalists and media organizations launched the Hatharehge Haggugai ("Rights of the Fourth Estate") campaign to oppose the bill. Led by the Maldives Journalists Association (MJA) and MMC, the campaign criticized the bill as a threat to press freedom and democracy. [the edition 3] [the edition 4]

MJA Secretary General Ahmed Naif stated the bill could drive press freedom "decades back" and emphasized the need for a fresh bill drafted in consultation with journalists and editors. Transparency Maldives also warned that the bill could lead to self-censorship and restrict reporting on critical issues like corruption. [the edition 5]

*Government response and assurances*

Attorney General Ahmed Usham met with journalists and senior government officials, including Youth Minister Ibrahim Waheed and Minister at the President's Office Ibrahim Khaleel, to address concerns. Usham assured the journalists that their feedback would be considered and expressed his personal opinion that both the MMC and Broadcasting Commission should be dissolved to remove regulatory burdens on the media. [the edition 6]

Meanwhile, President Dr. Mohamed Muizzu publicly opposed the bill, declaring it incompatible with his policies and commitment to press freedom. Speaking during a ceremony marking his first year in office, Dr. Muizzu pledged to empower the media instead of controlling it. He announced plans to allocate funds to media outlets in the 2025 budget and provide office space for compliant media at the new STO Hotel under construction. [the edition 7] [the edition 8]

With limited support from the ruling People's National Congress (PNC), which holds a parliamentary supermajority, and mounting public backlash, MP Hannan requested to withdraw the bill. MJA and MMC have called for the bill to be permanently shelved and replaced with a new framework created through consultations with media stakeholders.

In related updates, the President's Office has opened applications for two soon-to-be-vacant Broadcasting

Commission positions, and MMC member elections, initially halted, remain uncertain. [the edition 9]

## Maldives: Amendment to Political Parties Act ratified, imposing five-year restrictions on use of defunct party symbols

(lm) President Dr. Mohamed Muizzu has ratified an amendment to the Political Parties Act, following its approval by parliament, which imposes a five-year ban on the use of names, colors, logos, and symbols of dissolved political parties. This measure, aimed at preserving the identity of defunct parties and preventing their elements from being adopted by active groups, was passed with strong parliamentary backing, with 61 MPs in favor and 10 opposing.

The amendment also revises state funding for political parties. Instead of a fixed 0.1 percent of the total annual budget, the allocation will now range from 0.1 percent to 0.2 percent of projected revenue, significantly reducing overall funding for political parties.

Penalties for violating the Act have been sharply increased. Individuals will face fines ranging from MVR 30,000 to MVR 75,000 (USD 1,950 to USD 4,875), up from the previous MVR 5,000–10,000 (USD 325 to USD 650). Political parties represented by offenders will now also face fines of MVR 100,000 (USD 6,500).

Additionally, the restriction preventing candidates who contested in party primaries from running in the same election in another capacity has been removed. [The Edition 1] [The Edition 2] [The Edition 3]

## Maldives: Opposition voices concerns over lack of project details in 2025 budget

(lm) The proposed 2025 State Budget has come under fire from opposition members and Maldives Development Alliance (MDA) leader Ahmed Siyam Mohamed for its lack of detailed information on development projects and allocation priorities. The budget allocates MVR 12.4 billion (USD 806 million) for Public Sector Investment Program (PSIP) initiatives, including MVR 3 billion (USD 195 million) for new projects. However, critics argue that it fails to specify project names, costs, updates, or intended locations, a standard practice in previous budgets.

During parliamentary debates and Budget Review Committee meetings, opposition MPs questioned the Finance Ministry's approach, emphasizing the need for transparency to ensure both Parliament and the public understand the government's planned initiatives. Finance Minister Ibrahim Ameer defended the budget, arguing that prioritizing projects based on cash flow and fiscal constraints prevents unfinished initiatives, a problem in past administrations. He explained that the current project list is derived from President Dr. Mohamed Muizzu's island visits and will be managed dynamically to allocate resources efficiently. [the edition 1]

Ahmed Siyam Mohamed, MDA President and MP for Meedhoo, echoed these concerns, calling the budget "poorly structured" and unsuitable for debate. He criticized the lack of specificity in the allocation of funds for education and island development, arguing that citizens deserve clarity on how public money will be spent. Highlighting increased embassy operation expenses, Siyam labeled them as wasteful, questioning the utility of embassies in countries like Singapore and Thailand. He called for the budget to be withdrawn and resubmitted with comprehensive details to align with public expectations and democratic principles. [the edition 2]

The main opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) also raised concerns about the budget's insufficient transparency. Opposition MPs suggested that while efficient resource management is essential, listing long-term projects transparently for parliamentary oversight does not conflict with fiscal responsibility. [SunOnline]

The Maldives Monetary Authority (MMA) Governor supported the government's focus on fiscal sustainability, pointing out that capital expenditures had risen unsustainably in past years, from MVR 7 billion (USD 455 million) in 2013 to MVR 23 billion (USD 1.5 billion) by 2019. He emphasized the importance of ensuring financing before initiating new projects to avoid further financial strain. [the edition 1]

## Maldives: Chief Justice and chief judges required to notify JSC of weekend travel

(lm) Judges in the Maldives must now notify the Judicial Service Commission (JSC) or their superior judge if they plan to travel out of Malé, either domestically or internationally, during weekends and public holidays.

A JSC circular issued last week clarified that the Constitution, Judges Act, and Judges' Code of Conduct require judges to fully dedicate their time to judicial duties. This policy applies to the Chief Justice, Chief Judges of the High Court and lower courts, Chief Magistrates, and other judges. Supreme Court judges must notify the Chief Justice, while High Court judges are required to inform the High Court's Chief Judge. Lower court judges and magistrates must report travel plans to their respective Chief Judges or Chief Magistrates.

The circular follows a policy introduced last month requiring judges to obtain permission before traveling out of their assigned jurisdictions. [the edition]

## Maldives: Case filed in High Court challenging Anti Defection Act

(lm) A private individual has submitted a case to the High Court seeking the revocation of certain articles within the Anti Defection Act. While the specific articles under challenge have not been disclosed, the Act primarily addresses scenarios where elected officials must resign upon changing party affiliation or joining a party after election as an independent.

Under the Act, Members of Parliament are required to resign within seven days if they leave their party, switch parties, or join one as an independent. However, the law does not specify actions to be taken if an MP refuses to comply. Similar provisions apply to members of island councils, city councils, and atoll councils.

The High Court has not released further details about the case. [the edition]

## Maldives: Island Aviation appeals tribunal ruling to reinstate Deputy MD Jennifer

(lm) Island Aviation Services (IAS), the operator of the Maldives' national airline, has appealed the Employment Tribunal's ruling to reinstate Aishath Jennifer as Deputy Managing Director and provide her with compensation. The appeal was filed with the High Court on November 19, though the court has not yet decided whether to accept the case.

Jennifer, who was appointed Deputy Managing Director in December 2018 during former President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih's administration, was

dismissed by the IAS board in January 2024. Following her dismissal, she filed a case with the Employment Tribunal.

On October 13, the tribunal ruled that Jennifer's termination lacked just cause and procedural fairness. It ordered her reinstatement and directed IAS to pay over MVR 56,000 (USD 3,640), equivalent to one month's salary and allowances, as compensation for wrongful dismissal. IAS was instructed to comply with the reinstatement order within one month and notify the tribunal of its actions.

IAS's appeal seeks to overturn this decision, leaving Jennifer's reinstatement and compensation pending the court's decision. [the edition]

## Maldives: Government to dissolve PCB Act and introduce new SOE law

(lm) The Maldives government has announced plans to dissolve the Privatization and Corporatization Board (PCB) Act and replace it with a new State-Owned Enterprises (SOE) Act. The new legislation, set to be submitted to Parliament in the first session of 2025, aims to provide a comprehensive governance framework for SOEs, establish ownership policies, and define operational and management standards in consultation with financial institutions.

Once the PCB Act is dissolved, its essential elements will be incorporated into the new SOEs Act, and the Ministry of Finance will take over all responsibilities related to state-owned companies. The move is part of broader efforts to improve corporate governance, with a focus on minimizing waste, optimizing financial management, and preventing overstaffing.

The Finance Ministry also plans to introduce a new recruitment policy and conduct regular audits to address inefficiencies within SOEs. Currently, the Maldives has 30 state-owned companies, about 40 percent of which are profitable, with only ten adhering to corporate governance standards.

To address financial challenges and reduce wasteful spending, the government has allocated MVR 2.1 billion (USD 136.5 million) in capital injections for this year. These measures reflect the administration's commitment to enhancing the efficiency and accountability of state-owned enterprises. [The Edition]

## Maldives: President announces initiative to extend passport and ID services to each Atoll

(axc) President Dr. Mohamed Muizzu has announced a project to ensure that Maldives citizens are better able to access passport and ID card services by making offices accessible within each of the Maldives Atolls. As part of the roadmap an initial plan has been extended to cover Male' City, L. Atoll and Dh. Atoll. The entire project is expected to be complete by 2025 and represents one of President Muizzu's election pledges. [Sun]

## Maldives: Presidential tourism advisor Mohamed Khaleel appointed to Economic Council

(lm) President Dr. Mohamed Muizzu has appointed Mohamed Khaleel, his tourism advisor, to the Economic Council. Khaleel, who serves as the Managing Director of Pulse—a major operator of tourist resorts in the Maldives—and is a shareholder of Manta Air, assumes this role amid debates over new foreign exchange regulations requiring tourist facilities to exchange dollars through the Maldives Monetary Authority (MMA).

Pulse has opposed these regulations, but President Muizzu reaffirmed his stance, stating he will not reverse the policy. The President emphasized that the decision, effective January 2025, is backed by technical studies and will bring significant economic benefits, ensuring that resorts and guesthouses exchange dollars through local banks. [the edition]

## Maldives: Government ordered to pay USSD 1.53 million for school tablets

(lm) The Civil Court of Maldives has directed the government to pay MVR 23.6 million (USD 1.53 million) to Maxcom Technologies for 71,000 tablets procured in 2017 for a school digitalization project.

The project, valued at MVR 151 million (USD 9.82 million), faced delays, leading the government to withhold the payment as a penalty. Maxcom sued to recover the withheld funds. The court ruled that the government had extended the project deadline multiple times and raised no objections about delays after setting the final deadline for June 2018.

The court concluded that Maxcom fulfilled the contract terms and ordered the payment to be made by December 1, 2024. [the edition]

## Maldives: Debt, reserves, and budget challenges amid economic pressures

(lm) The Maldives faces mounting economic pressures as government debt is projected to reach MVR 150 billion (USD 9.75 billion) in 2025, driven by planned deficit budgets and debt refinancing needs. The current total debt for 2024 is estimated at MVR 139 billion (USD 9.03 billion), with government-guaranteed loans pushing debt to 124 percent of GDP. Direct debt alone is forecast to reach MVR 138 billion (USD 8.97 billion) and is not expected to fall below 95 percent of GDP until 2026.

The Finance Ministry has called for urgent fiscal reforms to curb spending and manage the escalating debt burden. Without substantial reductions in debt relative to GDP, the Maldives risks challenges in funding development projects and maintaining essential public services. [The Edition 1]

To address immediate financial concerns, the Maldives Monetary Authority (MMA) secured a USD 400 million currency swap from the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), as part of a broader USD 750 million agreement made during President Dr. Mohamed Muizzu's state visit to India. The swap, finalized on October 22, boosted the Maldives' total reserves to USD 615 million, a significant increase from USD 371 million in September. However, usable reserves dropped to their lowest level in three years, standing at USD 45 million as of August.

The decline in usable reserves is attributed to foreign debt repayments and other expenditures, highlighting the country's ongoing financial challenges. While USD 120 million of the swap proceeds was invested in local banks to stabilize the domestic financial sector, the currency swap provides only short-term relief. [The Edition 2]

Meanwhile, the Maldives' budget expenditure for 2024 has reached MVR 41.59 billion (USD 2.7 billion) as of November 7, including loan repayments. Excluding these repayments, government spending is at MVR 39.5 billion (USD 2.57 billion), with 71 percent allocated to recurrent expenditures. Salaries, allowances, and pensions account for MVR 11.2 billion (USD 728 million), while MVR 16.8 billion (USD 1.09 billion) was used for administrative and operational costs.

Development projects under the Public Sector Investment Program (PSIP) received MVR 8 billion (USD 520 million), down from MVR 10.2 billion (USD 663 million) during the same period in 2023.

On the revenue side, the government collected MVR 29.3 billion (USD 1.9 billion), including MVR 22.4 billion (USD 1.45 billion) in tax revenue and MVR 6.3 billion (USD 409.5 million) in non-tax revenue. Additionally, MVR 565 million (USD 36.7 million) was received as grants. Despite this, the Maldives continues to face fiscal challenges, underscoring the urgency for structural reforms and sustainable economic strategies. [avas.mv]

## Maldives: First development bank inaugurated to bolster economic growth

(lm) The Maldives inaugurated its first development bank, the Development Bank of Maldives (DBM), to address funding challenges for Public Sector Investment Program (PSIP) projects and promote economic growth. President Dr. Mohamed Muizzu officially launched the government-owned bank, which recently received its operating license from the Maldives Monetary Authority.

DBM aims to finance infrastructure development, support private sector projects, and enhance foreign currency deposits. Economic Development Minister Mohamed Saeed highlighted its role in advancing sectors like renewable energy, fisheries, agriculture, and the digital economy. DBM CEO Noel Gregor Paterson-Jones outlined goals to build a digital economy and achieve developed economy status by 2040. A Financial Center Law will be proposed soon to further boost the financial sector. [The Edition]

## Maldives: Government reforms target subsidies, pensions, and police medical expenses

(lm) The Maldives government has announced a series of reforms aimed at addressing rising expenditures and ensuring equitable distribution of public funds. These initiatives, covering senior citizen allowances, targeted subsidies, and police medical schemes, are set to be implemented in 2025.

*Targeted subsidies for low-income households*

Beginning in April 2025, the government will provide a monthly subsidy of MVR 2,450 (USD 159.25) to the most financially disadvantaged 20 percent of households. The 2025 budget allocates MVR 900 million (USD 58.5 million) for this initiative, which aims to correct the current imbalance in subsidy distribution. Currently, 43 percent of subsidies benefit the wealthiest 40 percent of the population, while the poorest 20 percent receive only 17 percent.

The reforms will initially focus on staples, fuel, electricity, and sewerage, with eligibility determined by household income. Households must apply for subsidies through a direct transfer system, with local councils assisting to streamline the process. The government has pledged that the targeted subsidies will exceed any increases in expenses due to adjustments, ensuring meaningful support for low-income families. [The Edition 1]

*Pension system to prioritize low-income retirees*

In another move to address rising expenditures, the government will revise old-age allowance regulations to prioritize retirees unable to afford retirement independently. Starting in April 2025, the allowance system will transition to a targeted pension framework.

Last year, the Finance Ministry spent MVR 1.3 billion (USD 84.5 million) on retirement benefits, with MVR 298 million (USD 19.4 million) allocated to retirees. For 2025, the budget estimates MVR 1.5 billion (USD 97.5 million) for these allowances. Legal changes are being prepared to standardize pension benefits and ensure uniformity across institutions, focusing support on the most vulnerable seniors. [The Edition 2]

*Police allowances intact, medical scheme under review*

While allowances for police officers will remain unchanged, the government plans to restructure the police medical insurance scheme to reduce costs. The current scheme offers uncapped coverage, including services not covered under Aasandha, such as cosmetic procedures. This year alone, MVR 322 million (USD 20.93 million) was spent on medical schemes for both the police and Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF), exceeding the budget by 35 percent.

The government aims to transition to a private insurance package early next year to curb expenses. Last year, spending on additional insurance for police and MNDF rose from an allocated MVR 179 million (USD 11.64 million) to MVR 241 million (USD 15.67 million). [The Edition 3]

## Maldives: Government tackles Aasandha inefficiencies and upgrades healthcare infrastructure

(lm/sl) The Maldives government is addressing long-standing inefficiencies in the Aasandha health insurance system and advancing healthcare services by elevating key hospitals to tertiary care status. Health Minister Abdulla Nazim Ibrahim revealed that Aasandha's annual spending has exceeded its budget for 15 consecutive years, with medicines accounting for 60 percent of costs. To curb inefficiencies, the government has regulated drug prices and revised Aasandha services to prioritize those most in need. [The Edition 1]

On November 15, President Dr. Mohamed Muizzu inaugurated Dharumavanta Hospital as a tertiary care facility, featuring advanced services like a reproductive care center and catheterization lab. Hospital Director General Ibrahim Abdul Razzak Halim lauded the transformation under the current administration, citing previous neglect. Plans to elevate Hulhumale' Hospital to tertiary status are also underway, further enhancing healthcare infrastructure. [The President's Office – Republic of Maldives] [The Edition 2]

## Maldives: Finance Ministry explores alternatives to address Fenaka's financial crisis

(lm) The Ministry of Finance has announced that alternative options are being explored to resolve the financial challenges faced by Fenaka Corporation, moving away from the earlier decision to transfer the company under the State Trading Organization (STO).

Among the alternatives being considered is a potential merger between Fenaka and the State Electric Company Limited (STELCO). The ministry expressed optimism that a permanent solution could be found within the coming year.

Fenaka, which provides utility services across the Maldives, currently owes MVR 2 billion (USD 130 million) to STO for fuel purchases, making it the largest debtor to the organization. The company's total debt stands at MVR 4.1 billion (USD 266.5 million).

In August 2024, the government announced plans to transfer Fenaka's operations to STO by January 2025,

establishing an interim board to oversee the transition. However, the Finance Ministry is now reconsidering this approach.

Fenaka is also the state-owned enterprise (SOE) with the highest number of employees, with over 7,000 staff members. The company allocates 13 percent of its revenue to salaries, amounting to MVR 72 million (USD 4.68 million) in 2023. The ministry highlighted the need for sustainable reforms to address the company's financial and operational inefficiencies. [The Edition]

## Maldives: 70 percent of households to benefit from subsidy reforms, inflation projected to rise 3.9 percent

(lm) The National Social Protection Agency (NSPA) has announced that 70 percent of Maldivian households will receive subsidies under a new targeted subsidy system set to begin in April 2025. The reforms aim to prioritize households most in need, replacing the current universal subsidy system with one based on income and living standards assessments. NSPA CEO Heena Waleed stated that despite the changes, the majority of households would still qualify for assistance.

Currently, 43 percent of subsidies benefit the wealthiest 40 percent of the population, while only 17 percent reach the poorest 20 percent. The reforms are designed to correct this imbalance and will focus on subsidies for fuel, staples, electricity, and sewerage.

The Ministry of Finance, however, has projected a rise in inflation to 3.9 percent next year as a result of these changes. Inflation in the Maldives is typically low, supported by subsidies and price controls on essential goods and services, such as electricity. This year's inflation rate stands at 0.8 percent, compared to 2.9 percent in 2023.

The Ministry of Finance expects the inflationary impact of the reforms to extend for up to a year but notes that global market trends, as projected by the IMF, suggest lower prices in the medium term. This could result in a slower rise in inflation over time. [the edition 1] [the edition 2]

## Maldives: Education Ministry clears USD 16.25 million from outstanding bills, resolves pending issues

(lm) The Ministry of Education has paid MVR 250 million (USD 16.25 million) of the MVR 287 million (USD 18.65 million) owed to companies and individuals for bills incurred between 2019 and 2023, Education Minister Dr. Ismail Shafeeu announced. Only MVR 37 million (USD 2.4 million) remains outstanding, which the ministry plans to clear after addressing issues related to the remaining amounts.

Minister Shafeeu highlighted the challenge of making payments while ensuring the continuity of essential work. His comments follow concerns about a Male' area school project, awarded to a contractor for MVR 16 million (USD 1.04 million) during the tenure of former Education Minister Dr. Aishath Ali. Documents related to this project have reportedly gone missing, complicating the resolution of variation fees and expediting costs tied to the project.

Last July, the Education Ministry filed a police case against Dr. Aishath Ali over deleted official emails. Dr. Ali later claimed that her email account was deactivated on her last day in office and alleged attempts to access it, adding another layer of controversy to the ministry's financial challenges. [The Edition]

## Maldives: Tourism leader 'Champa' Mohamed Moosa opposes forex deposit rule as President Muizzu stands firm

(lm) Tourism leader 'Champa' Mohamed Moosa has urged the government to reconsider the Maldives Monetary Authority (MMA) regulation requiring resorts to deposit USD 500 per tourist into local banks. Moosa argued the policy lacks consultation, risks financial strain, and applies a one-size-fits-all approach. He warned it could harm investor confidence and destabilize the tourism sector. [the edition 1]

President Dr. Mohamed Muizzu, however, has reaffirmed his commitment to the regulation, citing its economic benefits. Speaking during a ceremony marking his administration's first year, Dr. Muizzu emphasized that the regulation would stabilize exchange rates, boost local dollar reserves, and strengthen the economy. He projected that the share of tourism revenue exchanged at local banks—currently just 1.5 percent—could rise to 20–25 percent.

Acknowledging the contributions of tourism pioneers, the President urged the industry to support the regulation, calling it essential for economic stability.

Despite Moosa's concerns, Dr. Muizzu stated firmly, "I will not change this regulation." [the edition 2]

## Maldives: Housing initiatives surge amid protests and reforms

(sl/lm) The Maldives government has launched a series of ambitious housing projects, aiming to address the nation's critical housing needs. However, delays in key housing schemes and public dissatisfaction highlight the challenges in ensuring transparency and equity.

President Dr. Mohamed Muizzu recently announced plans to commence construction on 27,000 housing units in 2025, including 15,000 units in the Malé area and 12,940 in the atolls. Speaking at a ceremony marking his administration's first year, he emphasized that housing is a top priority in the 2025 budget, which allocates MVR 1.5 billion (USD 97.5 million) for housing construction and MVR 1 billion (USD 65 million) for housing loans.

These projects aim to fulfill the President's campaign promises, with developments planned in islands such as Kulhudhuhfushi City, Thinadhoo, Addu, Fuvahmulah, and 41 other locations. Dr. Muizzu assured that all pledged housing units would be completed within his current term, describing the 2025 budget as a "housing budget" focused on expanding homeownership and improving living standards. [the edition 1]

In Baa Eydhafushi, the government has signed an agreement with China's Sino Hydro Corporation to construct 1,000 housing units in twelve 15-story towers. This project addresses the island's limited capacity for land expansion and supports the broader national strategy of delivering 40,000 housing units. The focus on housing for tourism workers and urban development reflects the administration's commitment to balancing economic growth with residential needs. [The President's Office – Republic of Maldives] [avas.mv]

However, the ambitious agenda has been overshadowed by public protests over delays in the Gedhoruveriyaa housing scheme. The Ministry of Housing has indefinitely postponed the release of the recipient list for 4,000 flats in Hulhumale', citing a need to review eligibility after an Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) investigation found that 60 percent of the previously announced list did not meet criteria. Protesters, frustrated by repeated delays, have demanded accountability and transparency, with some

even entering the ministry building to voice their concerns. The review process, advised by committees formed under President Muizzu's direction, now includes a thorough examination of over 20,000 applications to ensure fairness in allocation. [the edition 2] [the edition 3]

Despite these challenges, the government is also taking steps to bolster housing development through financial reforms. The Ministry of Finance recently transferred 19 plots of land valued at MVR 1.3 billion (USD 84.5 million) to Fahi Dhiriulhun Corporation (FDC) in exchange for MVR 1 billion (USD 65 million) worth of shares. This land-for-shares arrangement, validated by the Civil Court, strengthens the financial foundation of FDC, a state-owned corporation tasked with executing key housing projects. [the edition 4]

## Maldives: Recent tourist deaths spark safety and regulatory concerns

(lm) Recent tourist fatalities in the Maldives have sparked concerns about safety and regulatory lapses. A 15-year-old Singaporean girl died on November 8 after being struck by a boat's propeller during a school snorkeling trip near Dhigurah, Alif Dhaalu Atoll. Eyewitnesses blamed the accident on the boat unexpectedly reversing. Police investigations are ongoing.

Earlier, a Chinese tourist died on October 13 while snorkeling near Rasdhoo, Alif Alif Atoll. The Ministry of Tourism revealed the excursion operator's license had expired, with renewal sought only after the incident. Another Chinese tourist had died in a similar snorkeling accident near Maafushi on October 7.

The tourism ministry has pledged stricter oversight and announced plans to inspect unlicensed operators within two weeks. Officials are pushing for stricter actions against violators to improve safety in the tourism sector. [The Edition 1] [The Edition 2]

## Maldives: Police highlights low youth crime rate, calls for further reduction

(lm) The Maldives Police Service has stated that only two percent of Maldivian youth aged 15-34 are involved in crime, describing the majority as law-abiding and productive. Sharing this data on X (formerly Twitter), officials expressed optimism that

this figure could be reduced further with proactive and participative measures.

While police arrest data indicates that most individuals involved in reported crimes are youth, often repeat offenders, Shifan emphasized the importance of creating avenues for positive development to help curb criminal activity. [The Edition]

## Maldives: Coast Guard detains foreign vessel for illegal entry

(lm) The Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF) has detained a foreign vessel that illegally entered Maldivian waters. The vessel was identified and intercepted during a surveillance operation by the MNDF Air Corps and Coast Guard in the northern waters of the country.

This marks one of the operations utilizing military drones, which the Maldives began deploying in March 2024 after acquiring three units with assistance from the Turkish government. These drones, stationed at Noonu Maafaru Airport, enhance the nation's maritime security capabilities.

The opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) has requested that Defence Minister Ghassan Maumoon be summoned to Parliament to address questions about the drones' use for patrolling the Maldives' economic zone. [The Edition]

## Nepal: Leaders call for internal reforms as democracy faces mounting challenges

(rs/lm) At the Kantipur Conclave in Kathmandu, political leaders, experts, and international figures underscored the urgent need for internal democracy within Nepal's political parties and broader reforms to strengthen the democratic system. The discussions highlighted entrenched leadership, judicial independence, media integrity, and economic stagnation as critical challenges to Nepal's democratic progress.

Nepali Congress General Secretary Gagan Thapa emphasized that political parties must address their internal failings to foster democratic growth. He criticized senior leaders like Sher Bahadur Deuba, KP Sharma Oli, and Pushpa Kamal Dahal for perpetuating centralized control over leadership. Thapa called for reforms in membership distribution, internal elections,

and legal frameworks to enhance transparency and accountability within parties.

Former minister Ram Kumari Jhakri of the CPN (Unified Socialist) echoed similar concerns, lamenting the lack of leadership renewal and the disconnect between democracy and citizens' everyday lives. Baburam Bhattarai, chairperson of Nepal Samajbadi Party and former prime minister, described democracy as an evolving system that requires constant adaptation. He proposed a hybrid model incorporating liberal freedoms, social protections, and inclusive representation.

International voices added broader perspectives. Indian political activist Yogendra Yadav stressed the importance of raising political consciousness to fortify democracy, while British journalist Thomas Bell warned that divisive narratives and misinformation globally weaken democratic institutions. Nobel laureate Kailash Satyarthi highlighted how corruption, social media misuse, and institutional failures erode public trust in governance.

Chief Justice Prakash Man Singh Raut called for judicial reforms to counter public disillusionment, asserting that judicial independence is vital to democracy's integrity. He also urged the media to use its influence responsibly to rebuild trust and accountability.

Economic issues were also central to the discussion. Yuba Raj Khatiwada, economic advisor to the prime minister, attributed Nepal's slow economic progress to delayed policy implementation following political transitions. Industrialist and lawmaker Binod Chaudhary highlighted the private sector's challenges despite compliance with legal frameworks, advocating for supportive economic policies.

The conclave concluded with a consensus that Nepal's democratic system requires systemic reforms, accountability, and adaptation to modern challenges. Leaders and experts called for collective efforts to strengthen institutions and ensure democracy serves the people effectively. [The Kathmandu Post 1] [The Kathmandu Post 2]

## Nepal: Constitutional amendment debate reignites political discourse

(dg) A recent agreement between the the ruling Nepali Congress and Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist) (CPN-UML) to address constitutional amendments has reignited political debate across

Nepal. The consensus government has committed to reviewing the constitution's strengths and weaknesses since its implementation, aiming to address deficiencies and enact necessary reforms to ensure political stability.

During a program organized by the Institute for Strategic and Socio-Economic Research (ISSR) and the Constitutional Watch Group, leaders and experts discussed the implications of potential amendments.

Nepali Congress leader Dr. Minendra Rizal emphasized that the constitution, a product of the Constituent Assembly, must remain within its political framework and cannot be amended at the whim of a few leaders. He also expressed concerns about proportional representation and the potential impact of raising the electoral threshold on smaller parties.

CPN-UML Deputy General Secretary Pradeep Gyawali argued against transitioning to a directly elected executive system, citing Nepal's current political climate. He affirmed that any amendments would be approached cautiously, focusing on improving governance and upholding the constitution's foundational principles.

RSP MP Sobita Gautam criticized the government for weak constitutional implementation, highlighting inefficiencies in Nepal's bureaucratic system. She warned against focusing on amendments at the expense of strengthening the constitution's application.

Former administrator Khemraj Regmi echoed concerns about administrative instability caused by frequent political changes, while Congress MP Sita Gurung stressed safeguarding the rights of marginalized communities during any amendment process. [Khabarhub]

## Nepal: Lamichhane case expands amid anti-corruption efforts and mounting public pressure

(lm) The investigation into cooperative fund misappropriations involving Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) chair and former home minister Rabi Lamichhane has intensified, with police probing alleged fraud in Kathmandu, Kaski, and Rupandehi districts. Lamichhane, currently in police custody in Pokhara, faces accusations of diverting NPR 19.6 million (USD 145,000) in personal loans from Supreme Cooperative to Gorkha Media Network Pvt Ltd, a media

company he co-founded. The broader case implicates several cooperatives and involves an estimated NPR 1.11 billion (USD 8.2 million) in embezzled funds.

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The parliamentary special investigation committee has identified Lamichhane, Rai, Ramtel, and Joshi as primary suspects in cooperative mismanagement cases. Based on its findings, courts have granted police authority to arrest 24 individuals linked to Swarnalaxmi Cooperative fraud. Police estimate that 645 depositors have been affected by the misappropriations, highlighting systemic vulnerabilities in Nepal's cooperative sector. [The Kathmandu Post 2]

The case has sparked protests in Bhairahawa, where over 50 victims demanded justice under the banner of the Supreme Cooperative Victims' Group. Demonstrators called for the return of their deposits and an impartial investigation into the large-scale fraud. [The Kathmandu Post 3]

Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli, addressing the issue during the Kantipur Conclave 2024, reaffirmed his government's commitment to tackling corruption. He emphasized that all involved in misconduct will face police investigations and proper judicial processes. Oli also highlighted recent political stability, confirming his agreement to transfer the premiership to Sher Bahadur Deuba in 18 months as part of the coalition government's agreement. [The Kathmandu Post 3]

## Nepal: Provinces push prime minister over delayed reforms and powers

(lm) Nepal's seven provincial chief ministers have called on Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli to urgently address their 17-point charter of demands, which they argue are essential for effective governance at the provincial level. The demands, first presented in July

last year, remain largely unmet, causing frustration among provincial leaders.

Key issues include integrating Nepal Police into provincial forces and enacting the Federal Civil Service Act to grant provinces control over law and order, a responsibility constitutionally delegated to them. Provinces also seek authority over land and buildings used by provincial entities, along with coordinated deployment and transfer of civil servants to prevent disruptions caused by unconsulted federal actions.

Additional demands include amendments to laws to facilitate land acquisition for development projects, improve revenue sharing from natural resources, and enable provinces to manage national forests. The Madhesh government has filed a Supreme Court writ seeking authority over forest management, but the case remains unresolved. Provinces have also requested the repeal of the Urban Area Public Transport (Management) Authority Act-2022 to allow them to collect revenue from traffic violations.

The provincial leaders highlighted the need for federal support in addressing the impact of natural disasters and expediting permits for development projects. Delays in obtaining forest ministry approvals were cited as a significant hindrance to progress.

In response, Prime Minister Oli acknowledged the challenges and pledged to address the provinces' grievances. He emphasized the importance of balancing environmental conservation with development objectives and reiterated his administration's commitment to fostering effective governance, modernizing agriculture, and creating a private sector-friendly environment to boost productivity and trade. [The Kathmandu Post 1] [The Kathmandu Post 2]

## Nepal: Supreme Court accepts contempt petition against RSP leaders

The Supreme Court has approved a contempt of court petition against two dozen leaders of the Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) for allegedly obstructing justice through protests and demonstrations against the arrest of party president Rabi Lamichhane. The petition, initially rejected by joint registrar Achyut Kuikel, was accepted following a ruling by Justice Binod Sharma on Tuesday.

Advocate Anupam Bhattarai, who filed the petition on October 30, claims the RSP's actions, including street

protests led by senior leaders Dol Prasad Aryal and Swarnim Wagle, violate Article 128(4) of Nepal's Constitution, which prohibits acts that obstruct justice. Bhattarai plans to register the petition against RSP central committee leaders, lawmakers, and provincial leaders involved in protests.

The controversy stems from Lamichhane's arrest on October 19 for alleged involvement in cooperative fraud and organized crime. Investigations revealed misappropriation of NPR 142.9 million (USD 1.06 million) from the Butwal-based Supreme Cooperative, with funds allegedly diverted to Gorkha Media Network Pvt Ltd, co-founded by Lamichhane. Other implicated figures include Cooperative manager Sagar KC, vice-chairman Chhabilal Joshi Banjade, and chairman Om Prakash Gurung.

Protests have intensified in response to Lamichhane's extended remand and transfer to Bhairahawa, where further investigations are underway. The Supreme Court Act of 1991 allows for up to one year of imprisonment, fines of up to NPR 10,000 (USD 75), or both, for those convicted of contempt of court. [The Kathmandu Post]

## Nepal: Deadline extended for transitional justice commission applications

(lm) The deadline to apply for positions at Nepal's two transitional justice commissions, tasked with investigating conflict-era human rights violations and disappearances, has been extended by five days to accommodate more applicants. Initially, 76 individuals, including conflict victims, retired judges, bureaucrats, lawyers, and human rights activists, submitted applications for chairperson and member roles in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Commission of Investigation on Enforced Disappeared Persons.

The extension followed requests from stakeholders, including victims' representatives, citing concerns over inadequate publicity and limited time for the initial application period. The selection committee, led by former chief justice Om Prakash Mishra, announced plans to broaden outreach via national television, radio, and newspapers to ensure greater participation.

Eligibility for commission leadership positions includes retired supreme and high court judges, secretary-level bureaucrats, or those qualified to serve as top court justices. Applicants must not belong to any political

party at the time of application and should have expertise in human rights, conflict resolution, or law.

The selection process includes individual applications, organizational recommendations with the nominee's consent, and direct nominations by the committee if necessary. After evaluating resumes and conducting background checks, the committee will release a shortlist of candidates, inviting public feedback and requiring candidates to make presentations. Stakeholders have called for mandatory public hearings for shortlisted candidates to ensure transparency.

The commissions have been inactive since July 2022, when their terms were extended without retaining their leadership. Although the government pledged to make new appointments based on an amended transitional justice law, political delays postponed the amendment until recently.

The amended law grants the commissions four-year terms to investigate cases and recommend prosecution or reparation, with provisions for term extensions if necessary. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission has received 63,718 complaints, while the Commission on Disappearances handles around 2,400 cases. A recent amendment allows an additional three months to collect new complaints, which is expected to increase the workload. [The Kathmandu Post]

## Nepal: NEA sets 15-day deadline for industrialists to settle dues amid power restoration

(dg) The Nepal Electricity Authority (NEA) has given industrial firms 15 days to clear outstanding electricity dues, failing which recovery actions will be initiated. Managing Director Kulman Ghising emphasized that the directive follows government orders, with the Council of Ministers and the Ministry of Energy pledging support for the recovery process. This ultimatum comes after NEA restored power to several firms whose supply was cut on October 24 due to unpaid bills.

The firms owe between NPR 6.65 billion (USD 49 million) and NPR 8.25 billion (USD 61 million), with a 25 percent penalty. Initially, the total dues were estimated at NPR 22 billion (USD 163 million) but were later revised based on recommendations from a government-appointed commission. The dispute centers on electricity use via dedicated and trunk lines between 2015 and 2020, during which industrial firms

received uninterrupted power while other consumers faced outages.

The NEA board's decision to reinstate power followed a Cabinet directive. The Cabinet also mandated implementing the Lal Commission report and collecting overdue tariffs based on time-of-day meter readings. Despite protests from the NEA Employee Welfare Council, which argued that restoring power to defaulters harms the institution, the board moved forward with the decision.

A writ petition challenging the Cabinet's order was filed in the Supreme Court, with preliminary hearings underway. Critics argue the decision undermines NEA's integrity. Meanwhile, Ghising has faced scrutiny for defying earlier government warnings by cutting power in October and has failed to provide clarifications sought by the Ministry of Energy, further intensifying tensions between him and the government.

Amid the controversy, at least 14 firms, including two state-owned cement factories, have paid installments, leading to the restoration of their power supply. The NEA insists that resolving the dispute and recovering dues are vital to addressing the long-standing issue. [The Kathmandu Post 1] [The Kathmandu Post 2] [Khabarhub 1] [Khabarhub 2]

## Nepal: 410 candidates file nominations; Election Code of Conduct enforced for December 1 by-elections

(rs) A total of 410 candidates have registered nominations for 44 local positions in Nepal's upcoming by-elections on December 1, as confirmed by the Election Commission. Of the nominees, 342 are men, 66 women, and two others.

For rural municipality and municipality leadership roles, 84 candidates are competing, including 35 women. Additionally, 323 candidates are vying for 34 vacant ward chair positions, comprising 293 men, 29 women, and one other. The by-elections, involving 25 political parties including the Rastriya Swatantra Party, aim to fill positions left vacant since the 2022 local elections.

The Election Commission has enforced the Election Code of Conduct, 2022, effective November 17. It prohibits symbolic materials displaying party affiliations, restricts rallies to disciplined formats, and limits campaign expenditures. Spending caps range from NPR 450,000 (USD 3,330) for mayoral candidates

to NPR 150,000 (USD 1,110) for rural ward chairs. Notably, the four rural municipality vice-chairperson positions are restricted to women candidates, promoting gender inclusivity.

The final list of candidates and poll symbols will be published on November 20, following a review of objections and withdrawals. [Online Khabar] [The Kathmandu Post 1] [The Kathmandu Post 2]

## Nepal: Cabinet Committee approves two long-pending civil aviation bills

(dg) Nepal's Cabinet committee has approved two long-pending civil aviation bills, paving the way for their introduction in Parliament. The bills aim to split the Civil Aviation Authority of Nepal (CAAN) into two entities: a service provider and a regulator. This move is essential for removing Nepal from the European Commission's air safety list, which has hindered the country's aviation industry. The legislation is crucial for addressing Nepal's poor aviation safety record, which has seen multiple fatal crashes in recent years.

The bills, first proposed in 2007, have faced delays due to political changes. However, the recent approval marks significant progress. The European Union has emphasized that passing these bills would lead to the lifting of the EU's ban on Nepali airlines. The tourism ministry is now set to finalize the bills for Parliament, with discussions expected to continue. [The Kathmandu Post]

## Nepal: Ministry to tighten foreign affiliations of Nepali colleges

Nepal's Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology is moving to regulate foreign-affiliated colleges to ensure high academic standards. Following expert panel reviews that revealed widespread issues, the ministry aims to revise directives governing these institutions. Proposed changes include restricting affiliations to universities ranked in the global top 1,000 by Times Higher Education. Currently, only 8 of Nepal's 59 foreign-affiliated colleges meet this benchmark.

The recommendations, led by former secretary Shankar Koirala and Tribhuvan University's Binil Aryal, suggest stricter standards for admissions, scholarships, and infrastructure. They propose

mandatory full scholarships for 10 percent of students, limiting admissions to twice yearly, and allowing five years for compliance. Non-compliant colleges risk closure under a proposed legal framework, with affiliations granted only after evaluation by university professors.

The reforms, while aimed at improving education, face criticism from college managers, who allege bias and a lack of consultation. The International Education Providers Association, Nepal, has challenged the ministry's actions in the Supreme Court. [The Kathmandu Post]

## Nepal: Press Council urges accountability on social media to combat misinformation

(lm) Press Council Nepal has called for greater accountability on social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube to address rising misinformation. The council emphasized ethical standards, requiring administrators to disclose names and addresses, and it monitors affiliated and unregistered media-like accounts for compliance. Cases of harmful or false content are referred to law enforcement, while individual users face counseling for misinformation complaints.

Critics, including digital rights advocate Santosh Sigdel, argue that the council's actions overstep its legal mandate, infringing on freedom of expression. A 2021 survey revealed that 92 percent of Nepal's social media users encountered misinformation, with Facebook and YouTube as major sources.

Former police official Rajib Subba highlighted the need for a balanced approach, urging registration and compliance for commercial platforms while preserving free expression. The council defends its actions as vital to restoring trust in media, though some suggest using existing laws like the Electronic Transactions Act, 2006 to address the issue without overreach. [The Kathmandu Post]

## Nepal: Landslide-displaced families disrupt education as they shelter in school

(lm) Three families displaced by September’s landslides in Kavrepalanchok remain sheltered at Shankheshwari

Basic School, disrupting classes since Tihar. Despite initial support, the school urges relocation to restore learning.

The disasters killed 78 people, destroyed over 3,000 houses, and displaced many. While most victims have left temporary shelters, these families await government aid for resettlement. Dhulikhel Mayor Ashok Byaju Shrestha cited funding delays, promising action once budgets are allocated. District officials stress the urgency of providing alternatives to ensure uninterrupted education for children. [The Kathmandu Post]

## Nepal: Foreign Minister highlights challenges in coordinating with migrant workers and encouraging investment

(lm) Foreign Minister Arzu Rana, addressing the "Prosperity Beyond Borders" session at the Kantipur Conclave, emphasized the hurdles in managing Nepali migrant workers abroad and attracting investment from Non-Resident Nepalis (NRNs). She pointed out that complex domestic laws discourage investments and hinder Nepal's economic development.

Rana highlighted significant challenges in assisting Nepali workers in conflict-prone areas like Lebanon and Iraq. Despite setting up a help desk and launching a registration website for the estimated 1,400 Nepalis in Lebanon, only 97 have registered, complicating potential rescue operations. In Iraq, around 20,000 Nepalis are working despite restrictions, drawn by the promise of higher wages—an average annual income of NPR 532,000 (USD 3,930) compared to NPR 90,000 (USD 660) in Nepal.

She stressed the importance of balancing foreign employment opportunities with local job creation to reduce the risks associated with outmigration.

Rana also announced plans to issue student visas for foreign nationals, with growing interest from countries like the Maldives, particularly in medical education. However, she acknowledged that frequent changes in Nepal's government create a negative impression on international investors.

The minister revealed ongoing efforts to amend key laws to address NRNs' concerns, including the Non-Resident Nepali Act, 2008; the Foreign Investment and Technology Transfer Act, 2019; and the Nepal Rastra Bank Foreign Investment and Foreign Loan Management Bylaw, 2021. A task force at the foreign

ministry is working on these drafts, with amendments expected within a few months.

She pledged to create a more welcoming investment environment by simplifying regulations, setting up a dedicated division within the foreign ministry, and accelerating reforms to enhance Nepal's economic prospects. [The Kathmandu Post]

## Nepal: Free HPV vaccination to 1.7 million adolescent girls against cervical cancer

(rs) The government is set to launch a nationwide Human Papillomavirus (HPV) vaccination campaign for adolescent girls, aimed at preventing cervical cancer. The campaign will begin on February 5, 2025, coinciding with Cancer Day, and will run for 15 days. The vaccination will be free of charge for approximately 1.7 million girls aged 7 to 14. [The Rising Nepal Daily]

## Nepal: CIB investigates Nirmala Pant's rape-and-murder case from new angle

(rs) The investigation into the 2018 rape and murder of 13-year-old Nirmala Pant in Kanchanpur, Nepal, has taken a new direction. For the past month, the Central Investigation Bureau (CIB) has been re-examining the case through a fresh approach, led by a team under AIG Deepak Thapa. The investigation includes reviewing past reports and questioning individuals involved in the case.

The case, which has remained unsolved for six years, gained national attention, with protests demanding justice. Nirmala's body was found in a sugarcane field in Salghari after she went missing on July 26, 2018. Despite several arrests and investigations, no conclusive results have emerged until now.

Recently, Nawaraj Aryal, who made controversial remarks about the case in a TV interview, was arrested and later released, while the interviewer, Rishi Dhamala, was also questioned. [The Rising Nepal]

## Nepal: Youngsters lead cyber fraud surge

(rs) In Nepal, a surge in cyber-enabled fraud is being driven by young individuals, with 70 percent of

suspects aged between 19 and 30. The Financial Intelligence Unit-Nepal's report indicates that fraud, particularly involving social media impersonation, money-doubling scams, and cryptocurrency investments, has increased by 63 percent in the first half of 2024 compared to last year. Digital wallets, online platforms, and social media are frequently used to execute these scams.

The fraudsters often use "money mule" accounts, typically operated by illiterate or inexperienced individuals, to carry out transactions. Fraud schemes, including lottery scams and unauthorized access to bank accounts, are also common. Social media platforms, particularly WhatsApp and Facebook, are used for impersonation, with scammers creating fake accounts of prominent figures to deceive victims into transferring money.

The central bank has recommended stronger Know-Your-Customer (KYC) practices, including biometric verification and multi-factor authentication, to prevent fraud. Additionally, the use of wallet and card insurance is being promoted to protect consumers from digital fraud losses. [The Kathmandu Post]

## Pakistan: Political standoff intensifies as main opposition PTI is set to protest on November 24

(lm/ja/sn) The political landscape in Pakistan remains fraught with tensions as the government intensifies its crackdown on the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and its jailed leader, former Prime Minister Imran Khan. With newly released evidence concerning the May 9 riots, an impending protest march, and mounting legal battles against Khan, the divide between the government and the opposition shows no sign of narrowing.

Despite a two-month ban on public gatherings in Islamabad under Section 144 of the Pakistan Penal Code, PTI has announced its intention to proceed with a protest march on November 24. The party aims to highlight alleged rigging in the February 8 elections, demand the release of political prisoners, and advocate for judicial independence. PTI leaders have described the demonstration as peaceful and essential to restoring democratic principles. [Arab News 1]

The government has justified the ban, citing risks of riots, sectarian tensions, and disruptions to public peace. Officials maintain that recent constitutional amendments, including the contentious 26th amendment, aim to streamline judicial processes

rather than undermine them. The PTI, however, accuses the government of using these measures to suppress dissent and consolidate power. [Arab News 2]

In response to the PTI's forthcoming protests, the Pakistani government recently unveiled CCTV footage and other evidence linking PTI leaders and supporters to the May 9, 2023 riots. The violence erupted following Khan's arrest, leaving eight people dead and causing extensive damage to military and government installations, including the General Headquarters in Rawalpindi and Radio Pakistan in Peshawar.

Information Minister Attaullah Tarar, showcasing the evidence in a press conference, accused PTI of orchestrating the attacks as part of a "well-organized conspiracy" and labeled the party as "Tehreek-e-Inteshar" (Movement for Chaos). The military has termed the riots as "Black Day," vowing strict accountability under the Army Act. While the government demands PTI apologize, the party has denied all allegations, asserting its protests were peaceful. [The Indian Express]

Additionally, Khan himself is set to be formally indicted on November 25 in the May 9 riots case. The Anti-Terrorism Court (ATC) in Rawalpindi has declared 23 individuals, including senior PTI figures Shehbaz Gill and Murad Saeed, as absconders and ordered the confiscation of their properties. The government alleges the riots were premeditated to target military and state institutions, claims the PTI denies. [Pakistan Today]

While PTI's protests persist, high-level talks between PTI and the government have reportedly begun, focusing on de-escalating tensions. The dialogue, described as positive, remains confidential, with sources indicating that any agreements will require military approval. If discussions progress constructively, PTI may consider calling off its protest in exchange for assurances regarding its demands. [Geo News]

However, the military has ruled out any concessions for Khan, emphasizing that he must face his court cases, which range from bribery to terrorism. Senior military officials accused Khan of evading accountability while expecting leniency, asserting that "rule of law applies to everyone." [The Guardian]

While efforts for reconciliation continue, Khan's legal challenges persist. A trial court recently rejected his acquittal plea in the Toshakhana case, which accuses him and his wife, Bushra Bibi, of purchasing state gifts

at undervalued prices during his premiership. Charges in the case, involving items valued at over EUR 380,000, are set to be framed. These legal troubles add to the hurdles Khan faces in staging a political comeback ahead of the February 8 elections. [Arab News 1]

The government rejects allegations of election rigging and unfair treatment of Khan, asserting that recent judicial amendments are meant to streamline court processes. The Election Commission has also dismissed claims of electoral fraud. Meanwhile, Khan has accused the military of backing the current government, though the military denies any involvement in politics. [Arab News 2]

Amid these developments, Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) leader Nawaz Sharif has criticized Khan's tenure as prime minister, accusing him of leaving a legacy of poor governance. Sharif dismissed Khan's protest calls as hollow, claiming PTI's confrontational tactics have undermined Pakistan's democracy and economic stability. [tribune.com.pk]

## Pakistan: PPP Chairman Bilawal's outburst against PML-N shakes coalition's stability

(tf) Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) Chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari has criticized the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N)-led federal government, accusing it of breaching agreements and disregarding coalition commitments. Speaking in Karachi, Bilawal underscored that "true politics is based on respect" and urged the ruling coalition to honor its promises.

Bilawal's dissatisfaction highlights growing tensions within the ruling alliance, where the PPP's numerical strength in parliament remains vital for the PML-N's governance. His remarks raise questions about the coalition's stability, as the PPP signals increasing frustration with the government's handling of key issues and adherence to coalition agreements.

Bilawal expressed specific grievances, including the PML-N's unilateral approval of new canals from the Indus River, a project lacking national consensus and opposed by the PPP. He also reiterated calls for equitable representation in constitutional benches, citing Sindh's underrepresentation in the judiciary.

The PPP leader highlighted broader issues, including strained Pakistan-United States relations, the need for a revamped National Action Plan to address terrorism, and the federal government's disregard for PPP's input

on critical policies, such as internet governance and economic reforms. He condemned attacks on Chinese citizens in Karachi, advocating for stronger counterterrorism measures in collaboration with international partners.

On US-Pakistan ties, Bilawal described relations as worse than during his tenure as foreign minister and stressed the importance of improving diplomatic ties for the benefit of Pakistan's economy and geopolitical standing. Additionally, he criticized poor internet policies, underscoring the tech sector's potential role in boosting exports and economic growth. [The Express Tribune]

## Pakistan: Government bans VPNs, highlights misuse amid digital crackdown

(lm) The Pakistan government has escalated its efforts to regulate Internet use by banning unauthorized Virtual Private Networks (VPNs), citing their misuse for militant activities, obscured communications, financial transactions, and access to banned content, including pornography and blasphemy. The Ministry of Interior directed the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) to block illegal VPNs while urging users to register authorized ones via a streamlined process. [Arab News 1] [Arab News 2]

The ban has triggered significant criticism from digital rights activists, businesses, and lawmakers, who argue it stifles free speech and economic growth. The PTA disclosed that over 20,000 companies and freelancers have registered their VPNs, including software houses, banks, and embassies. [Arab News 3]

However, internet users have reported disruptions, and critics have accused the government of using Internet restrictions, including a proposed national firewall, to suppress dissent. The blocking of social media platform X (formerly Twitter) following February's general elections further underscores these concerns.

The Council of Islamic Ideology (CII) supported the ban, declaring the use of VPNs "un-Islamic" if used for accessing immoral or blasphemous content, undermining national security, or character assassination. CII Chairman Raghib Hussain Naeemi likened VPN regulation to laws governing loudspeaker use, emphasizing that the morality of VPN use depends on its purpose. Constructive uses, such as education or positive criticism, were deemed permissible.

Dr. Naeemi cited PTA data showing that over 15 million indecent websites are accessed daily using VPNs. However, his remarks have drawn backlash, with the Senate Standing Committee on Information Technology labeling the CII's stance "unreasonable" and suggesting a focus on regulation rather than outright bans.[DAWN]

The Senate IT committee highlighted the adverse effects of Internet restrictions on Pakistan's estimated 2.5 million freelancers. Committee chair Senator Palwasha Mohammad Zai Khan criticized the disruptions for hindering livelihoods and called for a legal review of the Interior Ministry's directive. The absence of the IT minister from discussions, marking the third consecutive instance, drew further ire, with the committee resolving to escalate the issue to Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif.

PREDA, Pakistan's first membership-based professional body, has appealed for stable digital policies to promote economic growth. The organization emphasized the need for an ecosystem that fosters innovation and global competitiveness amid mounting online restrictions. [Arab News 4]

## Pakistan: Women's rights under scrutiny amid protests and brutal domestic violence case

(lm) Women's rights in Pakistan remain under scrutiny following two starkly contrasting events—a rally in Karachi against honor killings and a brutal domestic violence case in Punjab's Sialkot district.

Hundreds of women, led by Sindhiyani Tehreek, marched in Karachi to condemn the prevalence of Karo-Kari (honor killings), forced marriages, and rising extremism, particularly in Sindh. Sindhiyani Tehreek, a women-led movement active since 1980, has long advocated for women's rights, social justice, and the preservation of Sindhi culture while resisting authoritarian policies. Protesters also opposed amendments to the Indus River System Authority Act, which they claimed could deprive Sindh of its rightful water share. [Arab News 1]

Meanwhile, in Punjab, four family members were arrested for the murder of a 30-year-old woman, whose dismembered body was discovered in Daska. The victim had reported violence and mistreatment by her in-laws, who later confessed to the crime, citing personal disputes and accusations of witchcraft. [Arab News 2]

## Pakistan: WHO and officials cite ‘immunity gap’ and fake markings in polio resurgence

Pakistan’s polio eradication efforts face critical challenges due to a widening "immunity gap" and fake finger markings during immunization campaigns. The World Health Organization (WHO) and local health officials link the resurgence of polio, with 49 cases reported this year, primarily in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, to low vaccination coverage, security threats, and vaccine hesitancy.

Fake finger markings, often done in collusion with health workers, obscure true vaccination rates and undermine eradication efforts. In Balochistan alone, 60 polio team members were terminated in August for such practices. WHO emphasized high-quality campaigns to bridge immunity gaps, vaccinating 45 million children recently, with another campaign planned in December.

Health officials also attribute setbacks to conflict-induced displacement and inconsistent healthcare in affected regions. Despite Pakistan’s polio cases dropping from 20,000 annually in the 1990s to just one in 2021, the current spike highlights the fragility of earlier gains. International donors have set a June 2025 target for eliminating the virus, with officials committed to overcoming these challenges to protect public health. [Arab News 1] [Arab News 2]

## Pakistan: Prime Minister launches diabetes prevention program as 33 million diagnosed

(lm) Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has launched the Prime Minister’s Program for Prevention and Control of Diabetes Mellitus to tackle the escalating diabetes crisis in Pakistan, where over 33 million people are diagnosed with the disease and millions more remain undiagnosed or at risk.

The program, under the Ministry of National Health Services, aims to improve healthcare capacities, provide universal health coverage, and raise awareness for prevention and lifestyle changes. Sharif reaffirmed the government’s commitment to addressing the crisis and improving health outcomes.

Diabetes, a chronic disease caused by insulin deficiency or resistance, affects Pakistan disproportionately due to lifestyle, environmental, and genetic factors, placing the country among the top nations with the highest diabetic populations. [Arab News]

## Pakistan: Punjab launches smog mitigation plan and conducts artificial rain trial amid crisis

(lm) Amid a worsening air pollution crisis, the Punjab government has launched a 10-year smog mitigation plan and conducted an artificial rain trial to address toxic smog blanketing Lahore and 17 other districts. The provincial capital recently recorded the world's worst air quality, prompting urgent measures to combat pollution.

Under the mitigation plan, 5,000 subsidized super seeders will be distributed by July 2025 to reduce stubble burning, a major contributor to smog. Additionally, 800 polluting brick kilns have been demolished, and over 90 industries have installed environmental control systems with provincial loans. Efforts to increase Lahore's forest cover from 3 percent to 36 percent are also underway. Authorities have extended school closures until November 17, restricted heavy transport vehicles in Lahore, and banned access to public spaces to protect residents.

The artificial rain trial, using cloud-seeding technology, was conducted in Jhelum, Chakwal, Talagang, and Gujar Khan, resulting in rainfall in some areas within hours. Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz Sharif hailed the trial, conducted with the support of the Pakistan Army and other institutions, as a breakthrough in leveraging technology to combat pollution.

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has called on the nation to perform Istisqa prayers, a traditional Islamic ritual for rain, urging Islamic scholars to lead the prayers nationwide. Sharif emphasized the need for divine intervention to improve the environment and mitigate health risks, with over 40,000 people seeking treatment for respiratory illnesses in Punjab.

The UN has warned that 11 million children in Punjab are at risk due to air pollution, which is fueled by stubble burning, vehicle emissions, and construction dust. The Pakistan Meteorological Department has forecast light rain from November 14-16, offering some hope of relief. However, the broader crisis highlights the region's chronic pollution problems, with

studies indicating that South Asia's air pollution could reduce life expectancy by more than five years. [Arab News 1] [Arab News 2] [Arab News 3]

## Pakistan: IMF stresses reforms as energy sector woes and privatization challenges deepen

(ja/lm) The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has intensified its push for economic reforms in Pakistan, highlighting pressing issues in the energy sector, fiscal management, and privatization of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) under the country's USD 7 billion loan program. Amid persistent economic difficulties, including a PKR 190 billion (USD 685 million) revenue shortfall and a USD 2.5 billion external financing gap in the first quarter of the fiscal year, the government faces mounting pressure to stabilize the economy.

*Energy sector inefficiencies strain economy*

The energy sector is at the heart of Pakistan's economic challenges, with SOEs such as Pakistan State Oil (PSO), Sui Northern Gas Pipelines Limited (SNGPL), and Sui Southern Gas Company Limited (SSGCL) collectively incurring annual losses exceeding PKR 400 billion (USD 1.44 billion). The IMF has raised concerns over potential defaults of these entities, which could undermine the loan program's core objective of reforming SOEs to improve service delivery and sector viability.

Gas shortages have worsened the situation, with reduced domestic production and a looming surplus of imported liquefied natural gas (LNG) due to proposed supply cuts to inefficient industrial captive power plants (CPPs). A hybrid solution is being considered, allowing efficient CPPs to use imported LNG while transitioning others to the electricity grid. However, mounting liabilities in the gas sector, exacerbated by financial burdens shifted from the power sector, continue to strain PSO and related entities. [DAWN] [Arab News 1]

*Privatization hurdles: PIA and beyond*

Moreover, efforts to privatize Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) have faced significant setbacks. The Cabinet Committee on Privatization (CCOP) recently rejected a USD 36 million bid from Blue World City for a 60 percent stake in PIA, far below the government's minimum price of PKR 85 billion (USD 304 million). With liabilities exceeding PKR 250 billion (USD 896

million), unattractive terms and legacy issues have deterred investors. [Arab News 2]

Privatization Minister Abdul Aleem Khan compared PIA's drawn-out process to Air India's privatization, which succeeded on its fifth attempt after more than a decade of government subsidies. Khan acknowledged the need for significant reforms to make PIA viable for sale, including hiring a new consultant to address operational and financial challenges. [Arab News 3]

Amid these challenges, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) has renewed its interest in acquiring PIA. KP's Board of Investment and Trade (KP-BOIT) expressed its intent to surpass the sole bid received during the privatization process, citing the airline's strategic and symbolic significance as a national asset. [Arab News 4]

Beyond PIA, the government plans to privatize three power distribution companies (Discos) by January 2025, a task Khan admitted would be even more challenging. The sale of PIA's Roosevelt Hotel in New York is also being considered to address the airline's liabilities. [Arab News 3]

*Fiscal challenges and IMF recommendations*

Additionally, Pakistan's fiscal management remains under scrutiny, with the IMF criticizing missed provincial surplus targets. Punjab's overspending of PKR 160 billion (USD 576 million) derailed the national surplus goal of PKR 350 billion (USD 1.26 billion). To address revenue shortfalls, Punjab has enacted an agricultural income tax law, with other provinces expected to follow suit.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has called for equitable tax compliance across all sectors, aiming to raise the tax-to-GDP ratio from 9 percent in 2023-24 to 13 percent over three years. Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb has reassured the public that the government will rely on enforcing existing tax laws rather than introducing new measures to meet IMF conditions. [Arab News 4]

Sharif is also expected to unveil a "home-grown agenda" for economic development, emphasizing transparency and stakeholder consultation. Finance Minister Aurangzeb emphasized that recent IMF discussions focused on taxation, energy reforms, SOE privatization, and climate resilience. While the IMF lauded Pakistan's commitment to economic reforms, the upcoming review of the loan program in early 2025 will critically assess progress. [DAWN] [Arab News 1] [Arab News 5]

## Pakistan: Stock market poised for growth as current account surplus signals slight economic recovery

(lm) Pakistan's economy is showing first, modest signs of recovery, with a robust performance in the stock market and a current account surplus signaling improved stability.

The benchmark KSE-100 Index is projected to grow by 27–34 percent by December 2025. The market has already gained over 50 percent in 2024, making it the second-best performing globally, driven by easing inflation, declining interest rates, and a stable currency.

The State Bank of Pakistan has cut interest rates for four consecutive meetings, reducing the benchmark rate to 15 percent, the lowest in two years. Brokerage firms predict a 37 percent return on equities, including a 10 percent dividend yield, citing economic stability, reduced bond yields, and improving macroeconomic indicators. [Arab News 1]

Meanwhile, Pakistan’s external current account posted a USD 349 million surplus in October 2024, its highest this year and the third consecutive month of surplus. This marks a sharp turnaround from the USD 290 million deficit in October 2023.

The surplus reflects higher exports and record remittances from overseas Pakistanis, which reached USD 11.8 billion in the first four months of the fiscal year—a 35 percent year-on-year increase. Reforms tied to Pakistan's USD 7 billion IMF loan program, including measures to broaden the tax base and reduce energy sector deficits, have also played a critical role. [Arab News 2]

## Pakistan: Power loom closures in Faisalabad leave thousands jobless

(lm) Over 50,000 power looms have shut down in Faisalabad over the past two years, rendering more than 200,000 workers jobless. Industry representatives cite soaring electricity costs—rising from PKR 19 to PKR 55 per unit—along with taxes and high interest rates as the primary reasons for the closures.

Saeed Ahmad of the All Pakistan Cotton Power Looms Association urged the government to lower tariffs and

provide financial support to save the industry, which produces 91 percent of Pakistan's grey cloth and supports textile exports.

Government adviser Javed Iqbal Malik acknowledged rising costs but pledged to explore solutions. Economist Khurram Shahzad noted that while recent interest rate reductions and promised tariff cuts may provide relief, the sector remains under severe strain. Without immediate action, further closures may deepen economic and employment challenges. [Arab News]

## Pakistan: Surge in militancy and violence strains security

(sn/tf/lm) Pakistan faces a surge in militant violence, with escalating attacks in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan posing severe challenges to national security. Recent incidents underscore the growing threat from groups like Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Islamic State Khorasan (IS-K), and the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), targeting both civilians and state representatives.

In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, seven policemen were abducted on November 18 from a checkpoint in Bannu district by an estimated 40 armed gunmen. The attackers seized weapons and equipment before retreating. This year alone, militant violence in the province has claimed the lives of 75 police officers and injured 113 others. Authorities attribute many of these attacks to the TTP, which Islamabad accuses of operating from safe havens in Afghanistan. [Arab News 1]

A separate incident in South Waziristan saw a blast targeting senior Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI) leader Maulana Shehzad Wazir. The explosion killed Mufti Ijaz Wazir and injured six others, including the JUI leader. The attack, suspected to be the work of the TTP, highlights increasing threats against political leaders ahead of Pakistan's February 8 general elections. [Arab News 2]

Adding to the violence, IS-K operatives in Bajaur killed Jamaat-e-Islami leader Sufi Hameed, accusing religious parties of opposing their ideology. IS-K's intensified operations in the region have claimed 39 lives this year. [Arab News 3]

In Balochistan's Harnai district, an operation against militants claimed the lives of an army officer and a soldier, alongside three insurgents. The clash followed

a suicide bombing at Quetta railway station, which killed 28 people, including soldiers. The attack was claimed by the BLA, a separatist group opposing the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). In response, mobile internet services were suspended across several districts, disrupting education and commerce, while authorities have remained silent on the duration of these restrictions. [Arab News 2] [Arab News 3]

At the same time, Balochistan equally remains a hotspot for insurgent activity. In Harnai district, a military operation against militants resulted in the deaths of an army officer, a soldier, and three insurgents. This followed a suicide bombing at Quetta railway station, claimed by the BLA, which killed 28 people, including soldiers.

The BLA continues to oppose the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), targeting infrastructure projects to disrupt economic progress. In response to these attacks, authorities suspended mobile internet services across several districts, affecting education and commerce.

Pakistan's security forces have intensified counterinsurgency efforts. Recent operations in North Waziristan and Balochistan resulted in the deaths of 12 militants, including Sana, alias Baru, a key recruiter of suicide bombers. The military's ongoing campaign against the TTP has escalated since the breakdown of a ceasefire in 2020. [The Express Tribune] [The Indian Express] [Arab News 4]

In addition, mishandled explosives intended for bomb-making caused a fatal house explosion in Mir Ali, killing two children, while a suicide bomber in Charsadda prematurely detonated explosives, killing himself. [Arab News 5] [Arab News 6] [Arab News 7]

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has convened an apex committee meeting to address the escalating militancy. October alone saw 48 terrorist incidents across 28 districts, resulting in 100 deaths. The government remains committed to counterterrorism efforts, but the rising violence underscores the formidable challenges in maintaining security and fostering stability. [DAWN]

## Pakistan: IDEAS-2024 defense expo opens in Karachi amid tight security

(lm) The 12th International Defense Exhibition and Seminar (IDEAS-2024) began in Karachi on November 19, running until November 22. The event, launched in

2000, has become a key platform for showcasing defense technologies and fostering global collaborations. This year's edition will feature over 550 exhibitors, including 340 international companies from 55 countries.

In light of Karachi's security challenges, including a recent bombing near the airport, authorities have imposed Section 144, banning public gatherings of more than five people from November 18 to 24. The Expo Center has been fortified, and traffic management plans are in place to ensure smooth access. [Arab News] [Geo News]

## Pakistan: 65-year-old leader of 'rickshaw dacoits' arrested in Karachi

(lm) Karachi police have arrested a 65-year-old alleged leader of the so-called "Rickshaw Gang," responsible for robbing traders at gunpoint using rickshaws. The suspect, previously imprisoned for 20 years for a PKR 7 million (USD 25,000) bank heist in 1998, formed the gang after his release in 2018, according to police officials.

Karachi, Pakistan's largest and wealthiest city, continues to grapple with violent crime despite a military-backed crackdown launched in 2013. So far this year, nearly 100 people have been killed during armed muggings, highlighting ongoing security challenges in the metropolis. [Arab News]

## Seychelles: National Biodiversity and Action Plan under review

(axc) On November 14, Seychelles launched the review of its National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP) with an initial stakeholder meeting. This effort aims to align Seychelles' biodiversity targets with the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF).

The NBSAP outlines activities and targets to meet the objectives of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), though it lacks legal status. Key species and habitats identified in the plan require separate legal protections. Indira Gamatis, Seychelles' national CBD focal point, stated that work is underway to finalize the revised NBSAP by 2025.

Approximately 40 participants from government, NGOs, and biodiversity experts contributed to

discussions on risk reduction, rehabilitation, and implementation facilitation. The process is funded by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) under the Global Biodiversity Framework Early Action Support project, implemented in partnership with the UNDP and the Ministry of Agriculture, Climate Change, and Environment (MACCE).

Seychelles' new NBSAP will expand its scope beyond ecosystem and species conservation, addressing sustainable resource use, biodiversity finance, and capacity building. It builds on past NBSAPs (2016–2020) that aligned with the Aichi biodiversity targets adopted in Japan in 2010. The revised plan will incorporate the KMGBF's objectives and relevant Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). [Seychelles News Agency]

## Seychelles: Finance and Public Accounts Committee reviews 2025 budget with Auditor General

(lm) On November 6, the Finance and Public Accounts Committee (FPAC), chaired by ebastien Pillay, met with Auditor General Gamini Herath to review the proposed 2025 budget for the Office of the Auditor General (OAG). The budget is part of the Appropriation Bill, 2025, currently under consideration in the National Assembly.

The meeting, part of a series of consultations held throughout the year, aligns with Section 25 of the Auditor General's Act 2010, which mandates FPAC's involvement in budget reviews and recommendations. Auditor General Herath expressed appreciation for the Committee's support in achieving a balanced budget proposal.

Committee members emphasized the importance of ongoing collaboration between the FPAC and OAG, a practice consistent with international standards for Public Accounts Committees. [SC National Assembly]

## Seychelles: Second national workshop on AfCFTA implementation

(mt) On November 13, Seychelles held its second workshop on the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) to advance its implementation strategy. Building on the first workshop in September, participants reviewed and provided input on the draft

strategy, which aims to align Seychelles' efforts with the agreement's objectives.

Ratified by Seychelles in 2021, the AfCFTA seeks to create a single continental market for goods and services, promote free movement, and pave the way for a customs union. Finance Minister Naadir Hassan emphasized the strategy's importance in fostering industrialization, job creation, and investment, aligning with Seychelles' National Development Strategy 2024-2028.

Facilitated by UNECA, UNDP, and GIZ, the workshop included contributions from institutions like the Fair Trading Commission and Seychelles Revenue Commission. UNDP's Sujitha Sekharan highlighted the AfCFTA's potential to open a market of over 1.3 billion people for Seychellois businesses, boosting the economy and enabling regional integration.

As of August 2024, 54 African nations have signed the agreement, with 48 ratifying it. Seychelles aims to maximize opportunities through effective implementation. [Seychelles News Agency]

## Seychelles: International Affairs Committee reviews Nuclear Terrorism Convention

(lm) As per reporting on November 12, the International Affairs Committee (IAC), chaired by Waven William, had met with the Foreign Affairs Department (FAD) on October 22 to review the International Convention for the Suppression of Acts of Nuclear Terrorism (ICSANT). Discussions emphasized the importance of the convention in addressing nuclear terrorism and enabling international assistance. FAD representatives highlighted Seychelles' compliance with International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) protocols through its Radiation and Safety Unit.

A follow-up meeting on October 25 included stakeholders from various governmental agencies to discuss national radiation safety mechanisms and the revision of the Radiation Safety and Security Act, 2014. These efforts aim to strengthen regulations and policies for radiation source management and public protection.

On October 30, a motion by William to ratify the ICSANT was debated and approved by the National Assembly, authorizing Seychelles' accession to the convention. [SC National Assembly]

## Seychelles: New fishing observation ship commissioned

(axc) On November 15, the Seychelles Fisheries Authority (SFA) launched Surveillance 2 to strengthen oversight of national waters amid rising illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing.

SFA Chief Executive Jan Robinson noted a "threefold increase" in IUU detections this year. Minister Jean-Francois Ferrari emphasized the vessel's role in safeguarding Seychelles' marine resources and ensuring sustainability. [Seychelles News Agency]

## Sri Lanka: President Dissanayake's NPP secures landmark parliamentary majority, forms new government

(lm) Sri Lanka's political landscape has undergone a seismic shift as President Anura Kumara Dissanayake's National People's Power (NPP) coalition secured a landmark two-thirds majority in the November 15 parliamentary elections, winning 159 out of 225 seats. This historic victory, the first under the proportional representation system adopted in 1977, dismantled decades of dominance by traditional political parties and granted Dissanayake a sweeping mandate to implement his ambitious reform agenda.

The election results, described as a "political tsunami," signal widespread public frustration with past governments over economic mismanagement and corruption. The NPP also achieved a significant breakthrough in the northern Jaffna district, traditionally dominated by Tamil nationalist parties, reflecting a shift in voter priorities from ethnic concerns to national and economic issues. [Associated Press] [Nikkei Asia] [Voice of America]

*New Cabinet and leadership*

President Dissanayake's new Cabinet was sworn in on November 18 at the Presidential Secretariat. The 25-member Cabinet and 28 deputy ministers emphasize expertise over personal connections, a move NPP officials described as "scientific." Deputy ministers have been strategically assigned to provide additional support to larger ministries.

Dr. Harini Amarasuriya was reappointed as prime minister, continuing her role from the interim

government. The first woman to lead Sri Lanka's national government in 24 years, Amarasuriya will also oversee the ministries of education, higher education, and vocational training.

Key appointments include veteran legislator Vijitha Herath as foreign minister, Ananda Wijepala as public security and parliamentary affairs minister, and Bimal Rathnayake as transport, highways, ports, and civil aviation minister. [Daily News] [Al Jazeera]

*Ambitious reform agenda*

With a two-thirds majority, the NPP has the authority to pass legislation independently, including a referendum on a new constitution—a central campaign promise. At the swearing-in ceremony, Dissanayake stressed that the power granted by the people must be exercised responsibly to address long-standing economic and political grievances.

Dissanayake's coalition, which includes the Marxist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), trade unions, women's organizations, and youth movements, faces the challenge of balancing diverse interests while delivering on its promises. A cornerstone of the NPP's platform is eradicating corruption and recovering stolen assets, raising high public expectations for transformative governance.

*Economic recovery amid fiscal challenges*

However, Sri Lanka's new government faces the daunting task of steering the country out of its worst economic crisis, marked by a 2022 bankruptcy and sovereign default due to severe foreign currency shortages. A USD 2.9 billion International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout under the previous administration helped stabilize the economy, reduce inflation, and strengthen the rupee. However, austerity measures, including tax hikes and higher electricity costs, alienated voters and set the stage for the NPP's rise to power.

While President Dissanayake initially criticized the IMF program as burdensome, his administration has committed to its conditions. Analysts warn that fiscal constraints within the IMF framework will limit flexibility as the government works to deliver economic relief to a public eager for accountability.

The administration's immediate priority is preparing a 2025 budget aligned with IMF reform programs. An IMF delegation is currently in Sri Lanka to review progress and discuss plans with the new leadership. With the economy contracting by 7.3 percent in 2022

and 2.3 percent in 2023, the government must balance recovery efforts with the pressing demands of its citizens.

## Sri Lanka: SLPP nominates Namal Rajapaksa, vows resilience after losses

(LM) The Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) has nominated Namal Rajapaksa, its National Organiser and son of former President Mahinda Rajapaksa, for its National List seat following a major electoral defeat. The party secured only two district seats and one National List seat in the 2024 parliamentary elections, a stark decline from its previous dominance.

Former President Mahinda Rajapaksa acknowledged the losses but maintained that the results were expected, praising the public for their decision. Commenting on the rise of the National People's Power (NPP), he said, "Maybe [they will] succeed, maybe [they will] collapse."

Rajapaksa dismissed rumors of political retirement, asserting, "The SLPP will never give up, and I will not retire from politics." Despite its diminished presence, the SLPP aims to remain active in Sri Lanka's evolving political arena. [Daily News] [adaderana.lk]

## Sri Lanka: Election Commission warns of legal action over delayed expenditure reports

(lm) The Election Commission of Sri Lanka has announced that it will take legal action against candidates, political parties, and independent groups who fail to submit their expenditure reports within 21 days of the election, as mandated by the Election Expenditure Regulation Act.

The announcement follows the recently concluded 2024 parliamentary elections, which saw 8,888 candidates vying for seats. In addition to expenditure reports, candidates are also required to submit their asset and liability statements to the Commission. [Daily News]

## Sri Lanka: Vital certificates to be issued abroad through embassies in new pilot program

(mt) The Sri Lankan government has introduced a new initiative allowing expatriates to obtain birth, marriage, and death certificates through Sri Lankan embassies. This pilot project will be launched across seven foreign missions in Kuwait, Japan, Qatar, Australia, Canada, Italy, and Dubai, offering greater convenience for the Sri Lankan diaspora.

The program will be supported by the ongoing enhancement of the e-BMD (electronic Birth, Marriage, and Death) database, managed jointly by the Registrar General's Department and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, enabling certificates to be issued through these embassies. [Daily News]

## Sri Lanka: Former ministers' official residences returned to the government

(mt) The Ministry of Public Administration, Provincial Councils, and Local Government has confirmed that all official residences provided to former ministers and state ministers have been returned to the government.

Official documentation and inventories of the furniture in these residences are currently underway. A total of 28 government bungalows were used as official residences by former ministers and state ministers. The Army has been deployed to secure these bungalows until further action is taken. [Daily News]

## Sri Lanka: Rise in viral infections and dengue cases among children

(axc) There has been an increase in fever cases, viral infections, and dengue among children. Hand, foot, and mouth disease (HFMD) is also on the rise, with symptoms overlapping with influenza.

Dengue remains a major concern, with a mortality rate of 0.1 percent. Early testing and treatment are crucial for recovery. [Daily Mirror]

## Sri Lanka: Rupee projected to remain stable with reserves set to exceed USD 12 billion by 2029

(sl) Bingumal Thewaratantri, Chairman of the Sri Lanka Bankers Association (SLBA) and CEO of Standard Chartered Sri Lanka, expects the Sri Lankan rupee to

remain resilient, predicting a favorable outlook for the currency in the coming years.

As of November 1, the Sri Lankan rupee was the best-performing currency among emerging markets, appreciating by 10.56 percent against the US dollar since the end of last year. Thewaratantri emphasized that, with the support of two key inflows—tourism receipts and employee remittances—Sri Lanka can easily cover its trade deficit, which has recently risen to about USD 600 million per month, leaving a balance of USD 5.3 billion.

He further highlighted that in 2025, an additional USD 3 billion of this balance could be allocated to vehicle imports, commitment fees, accumulated interest, and payments to multilateral organizations, resulting in a projected surplus of USD 2.3 billion. The SLBA chairman also noted that more revenue streams are expected to flow in after the external debt restructuring process.

Even with a potential USD 20 increase in crude oil prices due to escalating tensions in the Middle East, Thewaratantri pointed out that Sri Lanka could absorb approximately USD 1 billion in additional costs annually while still maintaining a comfortable buffer. According to preliminary estimates, by December 2028, Sri Lanka's reserves are projected to reach USD 12-13 billion, with major debt repayments (capital payments) only scheduled for 2029. [Daily Mirror]

## Sri Lanka: Liquor companies face license suspension over USD 20.4 million tax arrears

(lm) Five major liquor manufacturers risk having their licenses suspended if they fail to settle LKR 6 billion (USD 20.4 million) in unpaid excise taxes by November 30. The Supreme Court heard a petition filed by 17 individuals demanding immediate license suspension and recovery of dues. Petitioners accused the Excise Department of renewing licenses despite the arrears, urging stricter compliance to prevent revenue losses.

The case will be reviewed again on January 22, 2025. The government seeks to enforce accountability while recovering lost revenue. [Daily News]

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

## Brunei: High court dismisses bid to disqualify defendant's lawyers in land dispute

(ga) The High Court dismissed an application that sought to disqualify Yusof Halim and Partners (YHP) from representing the defendant in a land development dispute in Mukim Kilanas dsitrict. The plaintiffs claimed that YHP's previous representation of them in related proceedings created a conflict of interest, raising ethical concerns under the Legal Profession (Professional Conduct and Etiquette) Rules, 2013.

The case originates from a 2009 development agreement, where the plaintiffs had initially sought assistance from YHP's predecessor firm, Messrs Cheok Sankaran Halim, to reclaim land from a relative. The plaintiffs argued that YHP's past involvement might compromise its impartiality and independence in representing the defendant, Sinar Hijau company. [Borneo Bulletin]

## Brunei: High court rejects case consolidation bid due to procedural issues

(ga) The High court dismissed an application by plaintiff Joko Santoso to consolidate his High Court case with an Intermediate Court case. The Judicial Commissioner cited procedural issues and jurisdictional limitations, noting that no request had

been made to transfer the Intermediate Court case to the High Court – a prerequisite for consolidation.

The case involves workplace injuries from separate incidents in 2019 and 2020, complicating damage assessments. The court further stated that consolidating the cases now could lead to delays and additional expenses, as liability in the Intermediate Court case remains unresolved. The dismissal was granted with costs awarded to both the defendant and LSL company, which is not a party in the High Court proceedings. [Borneo Bulletin]

## Brunei: Minister of Health launches campaign, urges early cancer detection for men

(ga) Minister of Health launched the 2024 Movember Men's Health Awareness Month campaign urging men to take proactive steps in early cancer detection. In Brunei, 1 in 4 men is at risk of cancer, with the most common types being colorectal (23%), lung (14.4%), and prostate (10.9%) cancers. Prostate cancer cases have increased from 22 in 2020 to 56 in 2022, while testicular cancer cases also rose.

The government, through the National Health Screening Programme, offers screenings for colorectal cancer for those aged 50-75. The Brunei Cancer Centre provides early detection services and collaborates with national and international organizations to advance cancer prevention. The mInistry further affirms the need for men to maintain a healthy lifestyle and care for their mental well-being. [Borneo Bulletin]

## Brunei: Police issue warning of impersonation scams targeting bank customers

(ga) The Royal Brunei Police Force (RBPF) has warned the public about rising impersonation scams targeting individuals through phone calls. Scammers pose as bank officials or police officers and claim there are suspicious transactions in the victim's bank account. Victims are then connected to a fake police officer who demands sensitive personal information, such as card details and spending habits.

The scammers intimidate victims with false accusations of criminal activity, alleging their names are on arrest warrants, and instruct them to keep the

communication confidential, often using the Telegram app.

The RBPF's Cyber Crime Investigation Division urges the public to avoid sharing personal information, photographs, or banking details with unknown individuals over the phone or social media. Suspicious calls using such tactics should be reported immediately. The police remind everyone to stay vigilant and take steps to protect personal information, as they continue to combat scams like phishing and the 'Macau Scam.' [Borneo Bulletin]

## Cambodia: Civil society demands transparent oversight of land concession program

(mfr) The government has established the "National Committee for Leading the Implementation of the Social Land Concession Programme for Joint Forest Protection and Sustainable Development" to oversee the allocation of land to disadvantaged citizens and ensure the protection of surrounding forests. The committee, overseen by the prime minister, includes leaders from various ministries, national institutions, provincial governors, and security forces. Its role is to allocate land to landless citizens for housing or agriculture, support community development, and safeguard nearby forests in a sustainable manner.

The committee is tasked with creating policies, selecting land locations, approving eligible recipients, and overseeing development plans within concession areas. It will also review land use requests, approve budgets, and handle citizen complaints.

Civil society leaders, however, have called for transparent oversight, pointing out past issues with land concessions, such as fraudulent applications, land seizures, and delays in title issuance. They recommend third-party involvement to ensure accountability and prevent misuse of land concessions. [The Phnom Penh Post]

## Cambodia: New law aims to cut wastewater discharges by 50 percent by 2030

(mfr) The Cambodian Senate has approved a draft law aimed at reducing wastewater discharges into public waterways by 50 perrcent by 2030, aligning with the

United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. The law, which was initially approved by the Council of Ministers and passed by the National Assembly, was signed by the Senate on November 13. Developed by the Ministry of Public Works and Transport over the past decade, the law is designed to manage the development, operation, and maintenance of wastewater systems to ensure their effectiveness, environmental protection, and public health benefits.

The legislation includes 16 chapters and 113 articles, addressing key issues such as sewage systems, wastewater treatment, recycling, and pollution reduction.

This move follows incidents of illegal wastewater dumping, such as the fines imposed on businesses like Mong Reththy's coconut oil factory and Phoenix Industrial for polluting water sources. [The Phnom Penh Post]

## Cambodia: National assembly to vote on foreign minister appointment and key amendments

(mfr) The National Assembly of Cambodia will reconvene its third session of the 7th legislature on November 20, 2024. The session will address significant legislative matters, including government appointments and amendments.

The Assembly is set to vote on the appointment of Prak Sokhonn as the new Minister of Foreign Affairs, replacing Sok Chenda Sophea. Additionally, the agenda includes the approval of amendments and two new government appointments.

Key legislative discussions will focus on three draft laws: the withdrawal of the Agreement on the Trade Promotion and Facilitation for the Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam Development Triangle Area, the Payment of the General State Budget for 2023, and Budget Management for 2025. These deliberations mark critical steps in Cambodia's governance and legislative planning for the coming years. [Khmer Times]

## Cambodia: Father of opposition activist arrested in drug case

(mfr) Sok Sunnareth, a 66-year-old military official and father of opposition activist Sorn Dara, was arrested on

November 13 in Kampong Speu province on charges of illegal drug possession. The arrest occurred in Dak Por village, Svay Kravan commune, where Sunnareth was found with two packages containing 15.52 grams of methamphetamine and another package with 13.78 grams of an unidentified substance. He was placed in pre-trial detention following an investigation by the Kampong Speu Provincial Court.

The Royal Army of Cambodia emphasized that the arrest was purely related to criminal drug charges, with no political or military involvement. Opposition figures, including Dara, have called for Sunnareth's release, likening the situation to misdirected anger. The case is under continued investigation, with legal proceedings underway. [The Phnom Penh Post]

## Indonesia: Former president Jokowi backs Central Java gubernatorial candidate Ahmad Luthfi

(mu) Former President Joko Widodo has publicly expressed his support for Central Java gubernatorial candidate Ahmad Luthfi and his running mate, Taj Yasin Maimoen, stating confidence that they will win the upcoming local executive elections on November 27. This endorsement is seen as a move to boost the candidates' electability. [Kompas, in Indonesian] [Tempo.co, in Indonesian]

Ahmad Luthfi is facing tough competition from Andika Perkasa, the former commander of the Indonesian Armed Forces, who is backed by the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), a party with which Jokowi has distanced himself. Widodo's support is viewed as part of his ongoing rivalry with PDI-P, a party that once supported his presidential bid.

In addition to Widodo's backing, Ahmad Luthfi, a former Central Java Police chief and the candidate nominated by the current coalition, has emphasized that he also enjoys the support of President Prabowo. [Jakarta Globe]

## Indonesia: Constitutional Court rules on punishment of regional officials, military, and police over violation of neutrality provision

(mu) The Constitutional Court (MK) has ruled in case number 136/PUU-XXII/2024 that regional officials, as

well as members of the military and police, can be subject to criminal penalties if they interfere with or violate neutrality in regional head elections.

With Indonesia's simultaneous 2024 Regional Head Elections scheduled for November 27, the issue of neutrality remains a key concern. [DetikNews, in Indonesian]

Prior to this ruling, the wording of Article 188, as regulated in Article 71, Law No. 10 of 2016, did not include the terms "regional officials" or "military (TNI)/police (Polri)" [Antara, in Indonesian] [Tempo.co, in Indonesian]

## Indonesia: Ministry seeks stronger domestic violence law

(mu) The Women Empowerment and Child Protection (PPPA) Ministry plans to propose a revision to the country's law on the Elimination of Domestic Violence, noting its shortcomings in addressing persistently high domestic violence cases. Eni Widiyanti, the ministry's Deputy Assistant for Women's Rights Protection in Vulnerable Situations, said during a press conference on November 19. [Jakarta Globe] [RRI, in Indonesian]

Eni highlighted several challenges in enforcing the law as many are often resolved through restorative justice with investigations stopped if victims withdraw their complaints. Eni also noted how domestic violence is treated as a complaint-based offense and difficulties in applying the law to victims in unregistered (siri) marriages due to differing interpretations, leaving legal loophole in protection.

According to the ministry's data system in 2024, out of 22,916 domestic violence cases (as per November 17, 2024), 19,868 victims were women. Approximately 74 percent of violence against women occurs unfortunately within households. [Ministry of Women Empowerment and Child Protection, in Indonesian]

## Indonesia: 75 GW of renewable energy to be developed over the next 15 years

(ft) Indonesia plans to offer international investors opportunities to develop 75 gigawatts (GW) of renewable energy over the next 15 years as part of its commitment to achieving carbon neutrality by 2060. This announcement was made by Hashim

Djojohadikusumo, Indonesia's climate envoy, during the COP29 summit.

The country aims to phase out coal-fired power plants and replace them with renewable sources such as solar, hydro, geothermal, and potentially nuclear energy. This initiative is part of a broader strategy to add 100 GW of new energy capacity, with 75 GW coming from renewable sources. Indonesia also plans to implement a new green transmission line and explore carbon offset projects to reduce emissions.

However, the transition to renewables presents challenges, including existing coal subsidies that make renewable energy less competitive for investors. [Reuters]

## Indonesia: Peatland management enhanced to reduce emissions

(ft) Indonesia is strengthening its peatland management to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, aiming to cut emissions by 29 percent by 2030. Peatlands, which play a key role in carbon storage and biodiversity, have been adversely affected by economic activities like drainage, leading to land subsidence and increased greenhouse gas (GHG)emissions.

In response, the government has launched initiatives like the establishment of the Peatland and Mangrove Restoration Agency and the Peat-IMPACTS project, which promotes sustainable peatland management, improves farming practices, and builds stakeholder capacity in South Sumatra and West Kalimantan.

These efforts include training for local communities and government agencies, developing a digital platform for peat knowledge, and integrating peat conservation into business models, all aimed at mitigating climate change and supporting Indonesia's broader environmental goals. [Antara]

## Indonesia: Tech giants collaborate to drive country's digital future

(ft) Tech giants GoTo Group, Tencent Holdings, and Alibaba Cloud have teamed up to accelerate Indonesia's digital transformation, focusing on enhancing cloud infrastructure and developing a skilled workforce.

Under agreements signed during the recent Indonesia-China Business Forum in Beijing, Tencent Cloud will invest USD 500 million by 2030 to build a third Internet Data Center in Indonesia, while Alibaba Cloud plans to train 800,000 people in cloud computing and AI by 2033, with a dedicated skills center at Universitas Indonesia.

The partnership seeks to strengthen existing cloud service agreements between the companies and GoTo Group, ensuring data security within Indonesia, while also supporting the growth of micro, small, and medium enterprises through advanced technologies like AI, data analytics, and cybersecurity. [tnglobal] [w.media]

## Indonesia: 188 terror suspects arrested over last two years

(gk) Indonesia's National Police Chief, Listyo Sigit Prabowo, announced that 181 terror suspects have been arrested over the past two years as part of preemptive operations. These operations were carried out by the counter-terrorism squad Detachment 88, in collaboration with the Mobile Brigade Corps (Brimob), a police paramilitary unit.

Speaking at the 79th anniversary of Brimob, Listyo highlighted that these extensive anti-terror efforts are aimed at achieving the government's "zero attack target." This ambitious goal seeks to prevent any terrorist attacks in Indonesia by strengthening national security and safeguarding citizens through proactive and comprehensive counter-terrorism measures. He further explained that the anti-terror operations have prioritized preventive actions, including early interventions to disrupt potential terror plots when there is sufficient evidence.

Additionally, the National Counter-Terrorism Agency (BNPT) reported that Indonesia has not experienced any public terror attacks since 2023. [Jakarta Globe]

## Indonesia: Police investigates bomb threat at a graduation ceremony

(mu) The West Java Regional Police are investigating a bomb threat targeting Parahyangan Catholic University's graduation ceremony in Bandung.

According to Senior Commissioner Jules Abraham Abast, the threat was made via a flyer received by the

university ahead of the event scheduled for November 15-17.

Although no evidence of a bomb was found, police have heightened security by deploying 100 officers to the campus. [Antara] [Tempo.co]

## Indonesia: 45 Soldiers detained over attack on residents in Deli Serdang

(mu) The Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) has announced that it will soon identify suspects in the case involving an attack by its soldiers on residents in Sibiru-biru District, Deli Serdang Regency. Army Chief of Staff General Maruli Simanjuntak stated that investigations are ongoing into the 45 soldiers involved in the incident. On November 13, these soldiers were detained.

The attack occurred on November 8, when soldiers from the 2/105 Kilap Sumagan Field Artillery Battalion clashed with residents of a village in Deli Serdang, North Sumatra. Dozens of residents were injured, and one person was killed. The incident began when soldiers reprimanded a group of young people, allegedly motorcycle gangs, for dangerous driving. This escalated into an argument and eventually a mass brawl. [Tempo.co, in Indonesian] [Kompas, in Indonesian]

## Laos: National Assembly convenes for 8th Ordinary Session to address critical national issues

(cc) The Lao National Assembly commenced its 8th Ordinary Session on November 18. Lawmakers are poised to tackle a range of pressing challenges that will shape the country's trajectory in the coming years.

Navigating the current global economic climate will be a key focus for the Assembly. This includes managing public debt, identifying opportunities to attract foreign investment, and charting a course for sustainable economic growth. Effective measures in these areas will be instrumental in ensuring the Lao PDR's long-term economic stability.

Legislative reform figures prominently on the agenda. Lawmakers will scrutinize and potentially revise key laws impacting healthcare, education, and intellectual property rights. This process aims to create a modern

and robust legal framework that fosters development across vital sectors.

The Assembly also recognizes the importance of social development. Discussions on reforming the education system, addressing public health concerns, and strengthening social protection mechanisms will be crucial for building a more resilient and skilled workforce. Additionally, prioritizing climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies will be essential for safeguarding the Lao PDR's future. [Lao News Agency] [The Laotian Times]

Recent high-level policy dialogues between the Lao PDR government, the United Nations (UN), and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) underscore the importance of collaboration. Insights gleaned from these dialogues can serve as valuable resources to guide the Assembly's decision-making processes throughout the session. [United Nations Development Programme]

## Laos: Ban on unregistered, unlabeled food products Laos to be enforced in 2025

(dql) The Lao Ministry of Industry and Commerce has introduced new regulations requiring all pre-packaged food products to carry proper registration, Food and Drug Department (FDD) numbers, and Lao-language labeling, effective 1 January 2025.

In the first phase, beginning in January 2025, any food products lacking FDD registration or Lao-language labels will be banned from import and sale. During this phase, companies can temporarily comply by using adhesive stickers with FDD numbers and Lao-language labels.

The second phase, starting in July 2025, will require all packaging to display FDD registration numbers and Lao-language labeling directly printed by manufacturers. Adhesive stickers will no longer be permitted, and companies must transition to fully compliant packaging during production.

Failure to adhere to these regulations will result in penalties, including fines, confiscation of goods, and potential suspension or revocation of business licenses. [The Laotian Times]

## Malaysia: Bersatu files lawsuit against five MPs in bid to lose their seats

(oc) Opposition Bersatu, the Malaysian United Indigenous Party, has filed a lawsuit against five Members of Parliament (MPs) seeking to have them lose their seats. The five MPs in question were elected under Bersatu in the 2022 general elections but have recently become independent and aligned themselves with Anwar Ibrahim's government.

The MPs named in the lawsuit, who were originally part of the federal opposition and the Perikatan Nasional coalition, are Zahari Kechik, Mohd Azizi Abu Naim, Abdul Khalid, Dr. Zulkafperi Hanapi, and Abdul Fasal. Additionally, the Speaker of Parliament, Johari Abdul, has also been named as a defendant in the case.

The primary charge against the accused MPs stems from an interpretation of Article 49A(1)(a)(ii) of the Federal Constitution. According to this article, an MP loses their seat when the Speaker of Parliament declares the seat vacant. Bersatu argues that this provision applies when an MP is elected as a member of a political party but later disassociates from that party. [Edge Malaysia] [Malay Mail]

## Malaysia: Unity Government formula forms basis for BN-PH cooperation in Sabah election

(ga) The Unity Government formula at the federal level will guide Barisan Nasional (BN) and Pakatan Harapan (PH) in their cooperation for the upcoming Sabah state election. Parti Bersatu Rakyat Sabah (PBRS) president Datuk Arthur Joseph Kurup confirmed this after a recent meeting between Sabah BN and PH, emphasizing the importance of political stability for the people. [Bernama]

## Malaysia: PKR yet to decide on voting mechanism change

(ga) People's Justice Party (PKR), part of Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's Unity government and with 31 seats in the House of Representatives a key component of the Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition, has not made a final decision on switching its voting system from the 'one member, one vote' model to a delegate-based system, according to Information Chief Fahmi Fadzil. Speaking at a press conference, he clarified that while the matter has been discussed, no conclusions have been reached, urging against speculation or sharing unverified information.

The statement comes after reports of a division leader opposing the proposed change, arguing it could limit members' voting rights and weaken grassroots support.

PKR is scheduled to hold its next party elections in May 2025. [Bernama]

## Malaysia: Ex-Perlis StateChief Minister denies government funds misappropriation charges

(ga) Former Perlis State Chief Minister Azlan Man pleaded not guilty to five alternative charges of misappropriating Perlis government funds and five main charges related to falsified claims. The alleged offenses occurred between 2013 and 2017. The funds were reportedly deposited into his personal bank accounts.

The misappropriation charges, under Section 403 of the Penal Code, carry a penalty of up to five years imprisonment, whipping, and a fine. Azlan is also accused of submitting false documents for overseas travel claims, charged under Section 18 of the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission Act 2009, which provides imprisonment of up to 20 years and a fine of at least five times the false claims' value or MYR 10,000, whichever is higher.

Additionally, Azlan faces five charges under the Anti-Money Laundering Act for receiving MYR 1.06 million (USD 222,600 from travel companies and an individual through cheques and cash. These charges carry a maximum sentence of 15 years imprisonment and a fine of at least five times the value of the proceeds or MYR 5 million (USD 1.5 million). The court has set February 3, 2025, for the hearing continuation and December 6, 2024, for case management. [Bernama] [Free Malaysia Today]

## Malaysia: Ex-Manager detained fraudulent claims

(ga) The Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) has detained a former senior engineering manager of an essential goods manufacturing company over suspected fraudulent claims totaling MYR 2 million (USD 420,000). The suspect was arrested on November 12 at MACC headquarters in Putrajaya after giving his statement.

Investigations revealed that the suspect allegedly approved false claims for repair works submitted by an associate's company and embezzled company funds by sharing internal bid price information. He is also accused of misleading his employer regarding procurement needs for machinery repairs.

The offenses are believed to have taken place between 2019 and 2024. The suspect has been remanded until Nov 16 for further investigation under Section 16(a)(A) of the MACC Act 2009. [The Star]

## Malaysia: Action required to tackle water security challenges

(oc) The National Water Services Commission (SPAN) has emphasized the need to address water security challenges across the country amid the difficulties posed by climate change.

On November 13, SPAN Chairman Charles Santiago highlighted the urgency of the issue at the Sustainability Environment Asia 2024 conference, noting that the increasing unpredictability of weather patterns has made water supplies more volatile.

He warned that this is a long-term problem that will worsen without intervention. Santiago predicted that by 2050, Malaysia will experience approximately 200 days of extreme heat, which will strain water supplies and negatively affect public health and agriculture.

To address these challenges, Santiago proposed several solutions, including rainwater harvesting systems and a zero-discharge policy in industrial zones to reduce water waste and promote recycling. He also advocated for the implementation of a water conservation surcharge.

Santiago stressed the seriousness of the issue, pointing out that a third of the country's water is wasted. He called for a range of measures to safeguard Malaysia's water resources in the future. [Free Malaysia Today]

## Malaysia: Government close to implementing vocational training reforms

(oc) Deputy Prime Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi announced that the government is close to introducing a Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) program for younger people. This initiative

mirrors similar proposals already implemented in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Currently, the TVET program is part of the national education system for students aged 16 and above. However, in the UAE, TVET is available to students as young as 11. Extending TVET to a younger age group in Malaysia would allow vocational training to begin before the age of 16, Ahmad argued. [Bernama]

## Myanmar: Military regime launches legal training program for teachers

(tl) The military regime in Myanmar's Mon State has launched a teacher training program that ran from November 4 to 15 at Basic Education High School No. 8 in Mawlamyine Township and aimed to reach 98 instructors, including high school educators and principals.

According to sources, the training instructs teachers to promote the junta's activities, presenting them as "national progress" to students. The program also prepares teachers to integrate new subjects, such as constitutional law, military law, and "anti-terrorism" laws, into the curriculum for Grades 11 and 12.

Critics, including political activists, argue that this approach diverts from traditional educational systems, where legal studies are reserved for higher education. The Burma Affairs & Conflict Study group has highlighted the use of schools and universities by the military junta to disseminate propaganda, raising concerns about the erosion of independent education. [Burma News International][Mon Independent News Agency]

## Myanmar: Severe food insecurity and humanitarian crisis in Thandwe township

(anl) Thousands of displaced people are facing severe food insecurity in Thandwe Township, Arakan State, due to ongoing clashes between Myanmar's military regime and the Arakan Army (AA). The crisis is exacerbated by widespread unemployment, rising commodity prices, and limited humanitarian aid.

Local aid groups report that while private individuals are providing some assistance, the overwhelming number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) makes it difficult to meet their needs. With winter approaching, there is an urgent need for warm clothing and

healthcare services. IDPs with chronic illnesses are particularly vulnerable due to a shortage of medicines and soaring prices.

Although the AA has seized control of Thandwe Township, frequent airstrikes by the regime prevent IDPs from returning home. Since the February 2021 coup, over 680,000 people in Arakan State have been displaced, many of whom urgently require food and medical support. [DMG]

## Myanmar: Central bank sells USD 1 billion in foreign currencies

(anl) Since April, the Central Bank of Myanmar (CBM) has been selling foreign currencies to support importers and exporters, totaling USD 1 billion over the seven months leading up to October. The CBM has primarily sold foreign exchange to importers of fuel oil and cooking oil through an online trading platform.

Despite these sales, critics argue that domestic prices continue to rise, with no significant impact on businesses, and people continue to face hardships. [Mizzima]

## Myanmar: Junta tightens grip on overseas workers with new conscription rules

(sc/tl) The Ministry of Labor has mandated overseas workers' conscription eligibility, pressuring employment agencies to ensure workers' compliance reported on November 15. Agencies must now secure agreements from workers and their foreign employers, allowing recall for military service, adding significant burdens to agencies and workers alike. The law applies after two years abroad but could be enforced arbitrarily. In February 2024, the junta enacted a conscription law requiring men aged 18-35 and women aged 18-27 to serve up to three years, prompting a mass exodus of young people to countries like Thailand. [Myanmar Now] [Radio Free Asia] [The Irrawaddy].

Since the 2021 coup, military conscription laws have caused widespread emigration, particularly among youth. Amid growing resistance, the junta also demands remittances from workers abroad, further tightening control over Myanmar's labor force. [Radio Free Asia]

## Myanmar: Junta soldiers surrender to Arakan Army

(anl) During ongoing clashes in Ann Township, approximately 300 junta soldiers have reportedly surrendered to the Arakan Army (AA) in Rakhine State. Since the third week of September, the AA has launched an offensive aimed at capturing Ann.

Local residents and military sources have noted that AA flags have been raised at several government offices in the area. While the AA has not released any official updates on the battle for Ann, local sources suggest that the AA has not yet fully secured control of the town due to intensified airstrikes by the junta.

As fighting continues to escalate, military sources indicate that the situation is critical for the Military Council, with even senior leaders acknowledging the severity of the conflict. [Mizzima]

## Myanmar: Airstrike on church in Kachin state leaves eight dead, including children

(sc) An airstrike on a church in Kone Law village, Kachin State, killed at least seven children and one adult, injuring others as they played football in the compound on November 15. The church was destroyed, and another airstrike hit nearby Mayekhathaung village, both home to camps for Internally Displaced Persons fleeing the conflict between the Myanmar military and the Kachin Independence Army (KIA). The ongoing violence has displaced over 3.4 million people nationwide, according to the UN. [Democratic Voice of Burma] [Voice of America]

The KIA's offensive since March has intensified clashes, particularly in border towns like Loije and Pangwa, with the military responding through relentless airstrikes. Between July and September, 452 airstrikes were recorded, and over 1,000 civilians have been killed in armed conflict since July, highlighting the escalating humanitarian crisis in Myanmar. [Democratic Voice of Burma]

## Myanmar: Junta detains civilians in Southern Shan State, Rakhine State

(anl) Local sources reported that the military has detained more than 200 civilians in the Pinlaung-Pekon

area of southern Shan State, starting on November 11. Among those detained, over 140 remain in custody, while others have been released after paying a fee. An information officer from the Karenni National Defense Force (KNDF) stated that the military council has been demanding a payment of MMK 30,000 (USD 14.27) per person for release, with approximately one-third of the detainees freed after paying the fee.

The Interim Executive Council (IEC) and the KNDF have expressed concerns over the junta's actions, including the use of civilians as human shields and the potential recruitment of detainees into military service. Additionally, the KNDF reported that military operations in the Pinlaung-Pekon region have resulted in widespread looting, the burning of homes, and extensive destruction in villages. These operations, which include airstrikes by the military, have caused significant civilian casualties. [Mizzima]

Meanwhile, the AA (Arakan) Humanitarian and Development Coordination Office (HDCO) reported that the military regime arrested 703 civilians in Arakan (Rakhine) State between November 13, 2023, and November 13, 2024, amidst ongoing clashes between the Junta and AA. Of those detained, 505 remain in custody, while 198 have been released. Among the detainees are 24 children under 18.

Residents report that some detainees have been sentenced on political charges, others face ongoing trials, and some have lost all contact with their families since their arrest. During the recent fighting in Arakan, the military regime has been accused of targeting civilians, arbitrary arrests, unjust sentences, and indiscriminate attacks on villages using airstrikes and artillery, which acts constitute potential war crimes. Human rights activists in Arakan claim the regime uses arrests and killings as a tactic to instill fear and suppress dissent. Civilians, especially those in junta-controlled areas, live in constant fear of violence and persecution. [DMG]

## Philippines: President Marcos Jr. confirms stance on ICC probe into Duterte's drug war

(alm/lm) Amid rising tensions between former President Rodrigo Duterte and his successor, Ferdinand Marcos Jr., the latter has confirmed that his administration will not obstruct an International Criminal Court (ICC) investigation into Duterte's anti-narcotics campaign, provided the former president consents to cooperate. Marcos clarified that while the

Philippines, which withdrew from the ICC in 2019 under Duterte's directive, will not actively assist the investigation, it will not interfere if Duterte chooses to cooperate.

Meanwhile, during recent congressional and Senate hearings, Duterte defended his anti-narcotics campaign, which official figures attribute to over 6,000 deaths, though human rights groups estimate the toll exceeds 12,000. While he acknowledged responsibility for the campaign, Duterte denied involvement in extrajudicial killings and invited the ICC to expedite its probe, stating, "If I am found guilty, I will go to prison and rot there for all time." [Reuters] [Associated Press]

In parallel, the Philippine Department of Justice (DOJ) is conducting its own investigation into Duterte's anti-drug campaign, exploring potential violations under domestic laws, including Republic Act No. 9851 on International Humanitarian Law. Justice Secretary Jesus Crispin Remulla emphasized the principle of "complementarity," stating that the DOJ's efforts would align with, but remain independent from, the ICC's investigation.

The DOJ task force is also reviewing possible charges under the Revised Penal Code and other domestic laws, focusing on extrajudicial killings linked to Duterte's campaign. Remulla clarified that any charges pursued domestically would not overlap with the ICC's jurisdiction. [ABS-CBN News]

This intensified legal scrutiny comes as Duterte seeks a political comeback by running for mayor of Davao City, his political base. Analysts view this move as an attempt to solidify the Duterte family's political defenses, particularly amid a fractured alliance with the Marcos family. Legal challenges, including corruption allegations against Duterte's daughter, Vice President Sara Duterte-Carpio, have further eroded the Dutertes' political standing, compounded by diminishing public support for Duterte's controversial policies. [CNN]

The ongoing ICC investigation, alongside domestic probes, continues to overshadow Duterte's political legacy. Recent polls show that 59 percent of Filipinos now support the ICC's investigation, a shift in public sentiment that may hinder the Dutertes' future political ambitions, including a potential presidential bid in 2028.

However, for President Marcos, the situation equally presents a delicate balancing act. While distancing himself from Duterte's policies, Marcos has stressed adherence to the rule of law and clarified that his

administration would not block the ICC investigation if Duterte consents to cooperate. However, analysts warn that full engagement with the ICC could set a precedent that might expose the Marcos family to accountability for past human rights abuses during Ferdinand Marcos Sr.'s dictatorship. [South China Morning Post]

## Philippines: 'Drug war' key witness, daughter detained in United States

(lm) Former Philippine Charity Sweepstakes Office (PCSO) General Manager Royina Garma, a key witness in the investigation into the Duterte administration's drug war, was detained in the United States after her visa was canceled. Garma and her daughter were arrested on November 7, upon arrival in San Francisco. The Department of Justice (DOJ) has initiated plans to facilitate her repatriation.

Garma testified about a reward system for extrajudicial killings during former President Duterte's crackdown on drugs. She has been implicated in several cases, including the 2020 ambush of a PCSO official. Despite no pending charges in the Philippines, Garma's testimony remains crucial to ongoing investigations, and the government plans to offer her protection upon her return. [Inquirer]

## Philippines: Government calls for mining sustainability with new research findings

(lm) The Philippine government, through the Department of Science and Technology (DOST), is pushing for sustainable practices in the mining industry. A three-year study, Project Pamana, aims to address mine waste issues and protect the environment. The study, funded by the UK Natural Environment Research Council and DOST, focuses on abandoned mines in critical river basins across the Philippines.

The study, worth PHP 15 million (USD 255,000), will be presented at the Philippine Mine Safety and Environment Association conference. In addition, the Philippines Remediation of Mine Tailings (PROMT) project, valued at PHP 17 million (USD 289,000), seeks solutions for handling mine wastes, recovering additional metals, and improving operational efficiency for mining companies.

Dr. Enrico Paringit of DOST emphasized that these initiatives aim to balance mining's economic contribution with environmental responsibility. The UK and Canada have also supported sustainable mining programs, reinforcing the importance of international cooperation in addressing these challenges. [Inquirer]

## Philippines: Macquarie Capital considers selling stake in telco tower business

(rv) Macquarie Capital, an Australian multinational investment banking and financial services firm, is reportedly exploring the sale of its 45 percent stake in one of the Philippines' largest independent tower companies. This company was formed through the merger of PhilTower Consortium and Miescor Infrastructure Development Corporation's tower assets.

The sale could be valued at between USD 700 million and USD 800 million, with the tower portfolio comprising over 3,300 operational towers and 2,100 more in committed orders. Macquarie Capital has been involved in the Philippines' telecommunications sector for over two decades, with past investments, including the 2022 acquisition of 1,350 towers from Globe Telecom in a USD 340 million deal. [Data Center Dynamics]

## Philippines: Ezpeleta appointed new Philippine Navy chief

(rv) President Marcos Jr. appointed Rear Admiral Jose Ma. Ambrosio Ezpeleta as the new Flag Officer in Command of the Philippine Navy on November 15. Ezpeleta took over from VADM Toribio Adaci Jr. following his retirement. Before his appointment, Ezpeleta served as the Navy's Vice Commander, Chief of Naval Staff, and Commander of the Philippine Naval Forces Southern Luzon. [ABS-CBN News]

## Philippines: Typhoon Man-yi leaves 7 dead, worsens ongoing crisis from back-to-back storms

(alm) Typhoon Man-yi (local name: Pepito) has caused widespread destruction and loss of life in the Philippines. The super typhoon, which made landfall in Catanduanes on November 16, with winds of up to 195

kilometers per hour, left at least seven people dead in a landslide in Nueva Vizcaya. Thousands of residents were displaced, and over 500,000 people were evacuated ahead of the storm's landfall. Man-yi is one of six major storms to hit the country in less than a month, following the deaths of at least 160 people from earlier storms.

Man-yi continued to wreak havoc as it moved across Luzon, bringing torrential rains, damaging buildings, uprooting trees, and downing power lines. Officials warned of "life-threatening" storm surges and flooding, particularly in landslide-prone areas. Northern Luzon, including the capital Manila, was expected to receive heavy rainfall, with up to 200mm forecast, increasing the risk of mudslides. The storm's powerful winds, which reached gusts of 305 kilometers per hour, left widespread destruction and caused significant disruptions to daily life, including the cancellation of flights and suspension of inter-island ferry services.

More than a million people were affected by Man-yi and previous storms, with nearly 700,000 seeking shelter. The storm damaged over 7,000 homes and caused widespread power outages. In the worst-hit areas, like Camarines, officials have requested additional help as basic services like electricity, water, and communications were severely disrupted.

The government and international allies, including the United States and neighboring Southeast Asian nations, have provided humanitarian assistance. However, many areas remain in need of food, water, and construction materials to rebuild homes and infrastructure. With extensive damage to farmlands and infrastructure, the Philippines may face the prospect of importing more rice to meet its needs.

Man-yi is the sixth major storm to hit the country in just three weeks, adding to the ongoing strain caused by the country's vulnerability to natural disasters. [Associated Press] [BBC] [Inquirer]

## Singapore: Oil tycoon OK Lim sentenced to 17 years in jail

(lm) Lim Oon Kuin, commonly known as OK Lim, the 82-year-old founder of Hin Leong Trading Ltd, has been sentenced to 17.5 years in prison for cheating HSBC Holdings Plc and instigating forgery. The sentencing, handed down by Judge Toh Han Li at Singapore's State Courts, highlights a significant case in the city-state's commodity trading sector, which has seen banks incur substantial losses.

Lim, who once led one of Asia's largest suppliers of diesel and shipping fuel, was convicted earlier this year on three charges, part of more than 100 initially filed against him. The charges involve fraudulent activities amounting to close to SGD 12 million (approximately USD 8.88 million).

Hin Leong Trading's downfall follows other major scandals in Singapore's commodity sector, such as the collapses of Noble Group Ltd and Agritrade International Pte.

In a separate civil case in September, Lim and his children agreed to pay USD 3.6 billion to Hin Leong's liquidators and creditor HSBC, signaling bankruptcy filings. [Bangkok Post]

## Singapore: Fugitive lawyer Charles Yeo arrested in United Kingdom, extradition hearing pending

(fi) Charles Yeo Yao Hui, a fugitive lawyer and former chairman of the Reform Party, was arrested in the United Kingdom on November 4 following Singapore's extradition request in October 2023. Yeo, who absconded in July 2022 while on bail for criminal charges, is accused of abetting cheating related to settlement funds at his law firm.

The UK Crown Prosecution Service is handling the case in accordance with UK extradition laws, with judicial proceedings underway. The Attorney-General's Chambers of Singapore declined further comment due to the pending legal process.

Yeo, 31 at the time of his charges in January 2022, faced six counts of wounding the religious feelings of the Christian community and making abusive remarks about a police officer on social media between November 2020 and February 2021.

In July 2022, Yeo was permitted to leave Singapore for Vietnam to meet a witness for a trial but failed to return. He later claimed on social media that he was seeking asylum in the UK. His $15,000 bail, posted by his mother, was forfeited in September 2022.

The UK courts will now determine the next steps in the extradition process. [The Online Citizen] [The Straits Times]

## Singapore: Parliament approves amended motion on hawker reforms

(lm) Parliament unanimously passed an amended motion on November 13 to enhance support for hawkers and sustain Singapore's hawker culture. Proposed by the two lawmakers of the opposition Progress Singapore Party (PSP), the motion initially called for a review of hawker policies, phasing out social enterprise hawker centers, flexible rental models, and manpower support.

Senior Minister of State Dr. Koh Poh Koon defended the existing social enterprise model and the hawker stall bidding system, emphasizing recent government measures such as allowing long-term visit pass holders to assist hawkers from January 2025.

An amendment proposed by a lawmaker from the ruling People's Action Party focused on continued policy reviews to sustain hawker culture while supporting fair livelihoods. The PSP supported the changes, emphasizing unity in backing hawkers. [Asia One]

## Singapore: Over 500 overstayers remain unarrested, says Shanmugam

(lm) Home Affairs Minister K. Shanmugam disclosed that 500 to 600 foreigners remain unarrested after overstaying their visit passes, less than 0.001 percent of Singapore's annual visitor arrivals.

Around 450 overstayers are arrested yearly, though tracking them is challenging as they may change contact details or residence. Overstayer arrests rose 52 percent from 357 in 2022 to 542 in 2023 but remain below pre-pandemic levels of 940 in 2018.

Overstaying for over 90 days can lead to six months' jail and three strokes of the cane, or fines for women and older men. Two recent cases saw offenders jailed for six months and fined up to USD 2,960 (SGD 4,000).

The ICA conducts regular enforcement and urges public vigilance in verifying the legal status of foreign tenants and employees, warning that harboring offenders can result in fines of up to USD 4,440 (SGD 6,000) or two years' imprisonment. [The Straits Times]

## Singapore: Enhanced support measures for adult citizens in December 2024

(fi) The Singapore government will provide a range of benefits in December 2024 to address cost-of-living pressures, offset healthcare expenses, and strengthen retirement savings for eligible citizens.

Under the Assurance Package (AP), approximately 2.9 million Singaporeans aged 21 and above in 2025 will receive cash payouts between SGD 200 and SGD 600 (approximately USD 148 to USD 442). Additionally, 1.4 million citizens born between 1974 and 2003 will receive a one-time MediSave top-up of SGD 300 to SGD 500 (approximately USD 221 to USD 368).

For those born in 1973 or earlier, the Majulah Package offers enhanced benefits, including a MediSave Bonus of SGD 1,250 or SGD 2,000 (approximately USD 920 or USD 1,474) to offset rising healthcare costs and a Retirement Savings Bonus of SGD 1,000 or SGD 1,500 (approximately USD 737 or USD 1,105) for approximately 800,000 eligible seniors. [Ministry of Manpower]

## Singapore: Parliament approves raising issuance limit for securities and T-bills to USD 1.12 trillion

(lm) Singapore's Parliament has approved increasing the issuance limit for government securities and Treasury bills (T-bills) by SGD 450 billion (USD 337 billion), bringing the total cap to SGD 1.515 trillion (USD 1.12 trillion) until 2029.

Over 60 percent of the increase will fund Special Singapore Government Securities (SSGS), which are fully guaranteed bonds issued to the Central Provident Fund (CPF) Board. These bonds help the CPF Board meet obligations to its members, as CPF balances are projected to grow due to rising wages and policy changes, including higher contribution rates for senior workers.

The remaining allocation will support the issuance of T-bills, Singapore Savings Bonds, and market development securities to strengthen Singapore's government securities market and meet demand for high-quality liquid assets.

This adjustment follows the previous cap increase to SGD 1.065 trillion (USD 788 billion) in 2021, which is expected to be reached by 2025. [The Online Citizen]

## Singapore: Tougher policies target ransomware, discourage payouts

(fi) Singapore has reduced ransomware attacks by 20 percent this year through stricter regulations and enhanced cybersecurity measures. An inter-agency task force and upgraded strategies, including zero-trust architectures and a “one-stop platform” for decryption and response, are central to its approach.

The Cyber Security Agency (CSA) reports Singapore still faces the world’s highest cyber incident rates, prompting new regulations for service providers and data centers. Officials strongly discourage ransom payments, citing risks of further attacks and data leaks.

Key sectors targeted by ransomware include healthcare, finance, and education. Businesses are urged to adopt robust backup systems and a zero-trust mindset for effective recovery without paying ransoms. [Singapore Business Review]

## Thailand: Political controversies test government stability

(acs/msz/lm) Thailand’s political landscape is grappling with intertwined issues that challenge the stability of the Pheu Thai Party-led coalition government. [Bangkok Post 1]

*Referendum deadlock on charter amendments*

Thailand’s push to amend its junta-era constitution faces hurdles, primarily due to stringent referendum requirements. The current double-majority rule demands over 50 percent voter turnout and majority approval for referendum results to be binding. Critics, including the main opposition People’s Party, argue this stifles democratic reform, prompting the House of Representatives to propose a single-majority rule. However, the Senate opposes this change, citing the need for broad consensus on critical national issues. [Bangkok Post 2]

A joint House-Senate committee has been established to mediate the dispute, but the process may be protracted, risking delays that could extend beyond the current government’s term. The People’s Party has also called for removing the Senate from the amendment process, which currently requires one-third Senate approval under Section 256. They propose limiting the process to a two-thirds House majority

while also seeking reforms to Sections 106 and 50, addressing House leadership and mandatory military service, respectively. [Bangkok Post 3]

The joint committee is exploring alternatives to the double-majority rule, including a "one and a half" majority proposal that requires more than 50 percent of eligible votes in a referendum without needing a majority of votes cast. Nikorn Chamnong, the committee secretary, defended the idea as a fair compromise, though critics, including Pheu Thai MP Prayut Siripanich, argue it resembles the current rule.

Stakeholders like the Election Commission and Thailand Post are being consulted, particularly on voting by mail. House Speaker Wan Muhammad Noor Matha has also scheduled a November 27 meeting with the House committee on political development to discuss streamlining the referendum process by reducing the required referendums from three to two. [Bangkok Post 4]

*2001 MoU with Cambodia*

Public scrutiny has also intensified over the 2001 MoU with Cambodia, signed during the administration of Thaksin Shinawatra – the de facto leader of the ruling Pheu Thai Party and father of incumbent premier Paetongtarn Shinawatra. The MoU outlines a framework for resolving disputes in the overlapping claim area (OCA), a 26,000-square-kilometer zone believed to contain rich fossil fuel reserves.

Public skepticism centers on the MoU's perceived weaknesses. Critics argue the agreement was hastily crafted, leaving Thailand vulnerable to Cambodia's unilateral delineation of territorial claims, which allegedly encroach on Thailand's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and Koh Kut Island. The opposition, including the Thai Pakdee Party, has rallied against the MoU, collecting over 100,000 signatures demanding its revocation.

A recent NIDA Poll revealed that most Thais lack understanding of the MoU and related territorial disputes. Public distrust in the government's ability to handle the issue is further compounded by suspicions of Thaksin's influence. Analysts warn that Thaksin's close ties to former Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen could lead to resource-sharing agreements that prioritize economic gains over national security. Speculation about proposed projects, including a casino-entertainment complex, has deepened skepticism. [Bangkok Post 5 ]

Meanwhile, senior government figures, including Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra, Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister Phumtham Wechayachai, and Foreign Affairs Minister Maris Sangiampongsa, have sought to reassure the public of Thailand's sovereignty over Koh Kut. [Bangkok Post 6] [Bangkok Post 7]

To advance discussions, the government plans to establish a Joint Technical Committee (JTC) composed of experts from agencies such as the Royal Thai Navy's Hydrographic Department. Phumtham, widely tipped to lead the JTC, emphasized the importance of leveraging high-caliber expertise to address technical and legal aspects of the dispute.

However, the JTC's formation has faced delays. Scheduled for cabinet approval on November 19, the appointment may be postponed due to logistical issues. Critics argue that these delays hinder progress in resolving the decades-long dispute. [Bangkok Post 8]

## Thailand: Legal scrutiny mounts against former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra

(msz/lm) Former Thai prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra faces a series of legal and political challenges, ranging from allegations of undue influence over the ruling Pheu Thai Party – headed by his daughter, incumbent Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra – to accusations of preferential treatment during his detention. These developments highlight mounting scrutiny over Thaksin's involvement in Thailand's political and legal affairs.

*Allegations of control over Pheu Thai*

The Constitutional Court is set to decide on November 22 whether to accept a case accusing Thaksin of exerting influence over Pheu Thai, in violation of laws prohibiting non-party members from meddling in party affairs. Filed by lawyer Teerayut Suwankesorn, the case alleges that Thaksin's actions contravene Section 49 of the Constitution, which bars efforts to overthrow the democratic system with the King as Head of State.

Pheu Thai officials, including Secretary-General Sorawong Thienthong, have denied Thaksin's involvement in party affairs, dismissing the allegations as politically motivated. [Bangkok Post 1]

*Preferential hospital treatment under investigation*

Thaksin's six-month stay at Police General Hospital (PGH) during his detention is also under scrutiny. The House committee on state security will convene on November 22 to question Thaksin and other officials, including the Justice Minister and the directors of the Department of Corrections and PGH.

The inquiry follows allegations that Thaksin received special treatment on the hospital's VIP floor without adequate medical justification. Critics have noted the absence of medical records, video evidence, and functioning CCTV cameras during his stay. The National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC) is conducting a parallel investigation, which could lead to disciplinary actions against involved officials if preferential treatment is confirmed. [Bangkok Post 2] [Bangkok Post 3]

*Campaign remarks and election law concerns*

Thaksin's remarks during Pheu Thai's campaign for Provincial Administrative Organisation (PAO) elections have raised legal questions. While campaigning in Udon Thani, Thaksin told voters to "vote for Thaksin" if they could not recall the candidate's name. Former election commissioner Somchai Srisutthiyakorn claimed this could violate Section 65(5) of the Local Councillors and Local Executives Act, which prohibits misleading statements about a candidate's popularity.

Violators risk imprisonment of 1–10 years, fines of THB 20,000–200,000 (USD 580–5,800), and a 20-year ban from elections. Thaksin's involvement in the campaigns has drawn attention as a test of Pheu Thai's influence in traditional strongholds like Udon Thani and Surin. [Bangkok Post 4]

*Dispute over Section 112 remarks*

Progressive Movement leader Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit criticized Thaksin for his comments linking the Move Forward Party's (MFP) stance on Section 112, the lese majeste law, to the failure of coalition talks. Thanathorn denied that Section 112 was a factor in coalition negotiations, accusing Thaksin of using the issue as a pretext to deflect attention from other reasons for the breakdown.

Thanathorn also expressed disappointment, urging Thaksin to address Thailand's systemic issues constructively rather than perpetuate political conflicts. [Bangkok Post 5]

*Political stability and party cohesion*

Despite the controversies, Thaksin has expressed confidence that the Pheu Thai-led coalition government will complete its term. He downplayed allegations of his influence and dismissed concerns about a potential rift with coalition partner Bhumjaithai over a land dispute in Buri Ram's Khao Kradong area. [Bangkok Post 6]

## Thailand: Former Senator urges Prime Minister Paetongtarn to return land to monastery

(lm) Former senator Somchai Sawangkarn has sent a third open letter to Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra, urging her to expedite the return of a 924-rai monastic land plot in Pathum Thani, currently under Alpine Golf Course, to Wat Thamikararam Worawihan. Somchai emphasized the need for the government to act transparently and uphold good governance.

The land was originally willed by its former owner, Neum Chamnanchartsakd, to the temple upon her death in 1971. The Council of State previously ruled that the transfer of the land to private entities, including Alpine Real Estate and Alpine Golf and Sports Club—linked to Khunying Potjaman Damapong, the prime minister's mother—was invalid. Somchai called on Paetongtarn to resolve the issue in accordance with the law and in the public interest. [Bangkok Post]

## Thailand: Deputy Premier denies coalition rift as State Railway disputes land ownership in Buri Ram

(msz) The dispute over 5,083 rai (approximately 813 hectares) of land in Buriram's Khao Kradong area has become a focal point of legal and political contention, involving the State Railway of Thailand (SRT), the Department of Lands (DoL), and influential political figures. Despite assurances from Deputy Prime Minister Phumtham Wechayachai of the ruling Pheu Thai Party that the conflict would not strain the coalition with the Bhumjaithai Party, the issue continues to draw intense scrutiny.

The land, originally designated as SRT property, has been at the center of a dispute since the DoL issued title deeds to private individuals. A 2021 Supreme Court ruling, supported by a subsequent Central Administrative Court decision, affirmed the SRT's

ownership and directed the DoL to collaborate with the SRT to define boundaries. However, the DoL's Article 61 committee unanimously decided against revoking the disputed title deeds, citing insufficient evidence from the SRT to confirm boundaries.

Nuth Wongniam, a public-law expert, highlighted a 1970 document in which Chai Chidchob, a prominent political figure from Buriram, acknowledged the land as SRT property and sought permission to reside there temporarily. This document, Nuth argued, underscores the land's status as public property, making its subsequent classification as private land legally questionable. [The Nation]

The dispute has political overtones, with critics pointing to the alleged involvement of the Chidchob family, a powerful political clan associated with the Bhumjaithai Party. Transport Minister Suriya Jungrungreangkit, a Pheu Thai representative, has appealed the DoL committee's decision and acknowledged reports linking the Chidchob family to parts of the contested area. Interior Minister Anutin Charnvirakul, leader of Bhumjaithai and head of the DoL, has denied protecting private interests.

Deputy Prime Minister Phumtham dismissed speculation about coalition tensions, emphasizing that the issue would be resolved through legal channels. However, opposition figures, including People's Party MP Jullapong Yooket, have raised concerns about potential bias in the DoL committee's decision, which they say undermines public trust in the judicial process.

The SRT is prepared to pursue further legal action to protect public assets and enforce court rulings. Nuth proposed a legal strategy for the SRT to submit documentation directly to the DoL's director general, challenging the committee's decision and potentially reviving the case. [Bangkok Post 1] [Bangkok Post 2]

## Thailand: Allegations of extortion shake The iCon Group investigation

The ongoing investigation into The iCon Group, a direct marketing company accused of operating a pyramid scheme, has widened, implicating high-profile figures and uncovering allegations of extortion and corruption.

Singer and actor Rattapoom "Film" Tokongsup has resigned from his position in the opposition Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP) amid allegations of extortion

tied to The iCon Group case. His resignation, submitted to the Election Commission (EC) on November 15, follows accusations that he and Kritanong Suwannawong demanded THB 20 million (approximately USD 581,000) from The iCon Group's CEO, Warathaphon "Boss Paul" Waratyaworrakul, to secure an appearance on a popular television program.

Rattapoom has denied the allegations, claiming his involvement was limited to communications consulting and asserting that he was misled into referencing the figure in a recorded conversation. [Bangkok Post 1]

Meanwhile, Kritanong, chairwoman of the Online Network Promotion Coordination Centre and a prominent advocate for victims of fraudulent schemes, was arrested on November 16 in Pathum Thani. Police allege she extorted money from Warathaphon and other executives while managing 89 compensation claims tied to The iCon Group, valued at approximately THB 10 million (around USD 291,000).

Investigators claim Kritanong collected a 20 percent cut from recovered funds and demanded an additional THB 750,000 (approximately USD 21,800) from Warathaphon. Evidence, including voice recordings and bank transfers, indicates that Warathaphon transferred THB 450,000 (around USD 13,100) to her account and later paid an additional THB 300,000 (around USD 8,700) to prevent further complaints from a victim.

Kritanong, who is also the leader of the Suvarnabhumi Party, initially gained attention as a whistleblower against The iCon Group. However, police now suspect her of collaborating with company executives to mitigate the scandal, undermining her advocacy role. This development adds complexity to the investigation, which has already led to the detention of Warathaphon and 17 others on charges of public fraud and running a pyramid scheme. [Bangkok Post 2]

## Thailand: Jailed lawyer Sittra questioned over Senate candidacy

(lm) Election officials questioned lawyer Sittra Biabungkerd at Bangkok Remand Prison over allegations he was unqualified to run for the Senate. Sittra, held on fraud charges, is accused of failing to meet the requirement of at least 10 years of social welfare work to stand as a Senate candidate.

Sittra, from Samut Sakhon, contested Senate polls in June 2024 but was not elected, placing fourth in the reserve list for Group 17, which represents legal professionals. Officials, under a deadline from the Election Commission (EC), interviewed him in prison as he had previously postponed questioning and stated he would not seek bail.

If the EC finds Sittra knowingly violated Senate election laws, he could face up to 10 years in prison, a fine of THB 20,000–200,000 (USD 580–5,800), and a 20-year election ban. The investigation report will be reviewed by the EC after questioning concludes. [Bangkok Post]

## Thailand: Election Commission sets February 1 for Provincial Administrative Organisations polls

(lm) The Election Commission (EC) has scheduled Provincial Administrative Organisation (PAO) elections for February 1, 2025, ensuring compliance with laws requiring polls to conclude within 45 days of the incumbents' term ending on December 19, 2024. Candidate registrations will be open from December 23–27, with over 90,000 polling stations set nationwide, except in provinces that recently held by-elections. [Bangkok Post 1]

Meanwhile, the main opposition People's Party (PP) has announced candidates for 12 key PAO chairmanships, aiming to secure regional influence. Provinces include Chiang Mai, Lamphun, Mukdahan, Phuket, and Nonthaburi, with early polls in Surin and Udon Thani this November.

At a press briefing, PP leader Natthaphong Ruengpanyawut highlighted the party's policies, such as clean water access, improved public transit, enhanced healthcare, and skills-focused education. He emphasized that these site-specific strategies were developed in consultation with local communities.

This election cycle is crucial for the PP, seeking to transform its national opposition momentum into local governance victories following the Move Forward Party's dissolution earlier this year. [Bangkok Post 2]

## Thailand: New alcohol control bill to be submitted to parliament in December

(acs) Thailand is preparing to submit a new Alcoholic Beverage Control Bill to parliament by mid-December, with the legislation expected to be prioritized in the upcoming parliamentary session beginning December 13. The bill, which integrates proposals from five different drafts, aims to address societal and public health concerns related to alcohol consumption.

Key features of the proposed bill include decentralizing authority to provincial alcohol control committees, granting them greater power to set zoning areas and specific regulations. Youth representatives and provincial administrative organization chairpersons will be included in these committees to ensure broader participation in decision-making.

The legislation also focuses on stricter sales controls, particularly targeting promotions that encourage excessive consumption. Measures include heightened penalties for selling alcohol to minors or intoxicated individuals and increased accountability for sellers. These changes aim to mitigate alcohol-related issues such as health risks and traffic accidents.

If passed, the legislation is expected to be enacted by January. [Bangkok Post]

## Thailand: Government pushes labor rights reforms amid protests and layoffs

(acs/msz/bk) The Thai government is accelerating efforts to amend the Labour Relations Act and the State Enterprise Labor Relations Act to align the country's labor rights with international standards. Labour Minister Phiphat Ratchakitprakarn has directed the swift revision of these laws to comply with International Labour Organization (ILO) Conventions No. 87 (1948) and No. 98 (1949), which pertain to workers' rights to collective bargaining.

In addition to legal reforms, the government has also committed to raising the daily minimum wage to THB 400 (USD 11.76) starting next year. This initiative, delayed from its original October timeline, is expected to be finalized in December. Currently, the daily wage ranges between THB 330 and THB 370, with plans to reach THB 600 (USD 17.64) by 2027, fulfilling campaign promises made by the ruling Pheu Thai party. [Bangkok Post 1]

While labor reforms are underway, wage disputes have sparked significant unrest. On November 12, hundreds of workers from subcontractor firms protested outside Government House, demanding immediate

intervention. Representing at least 28 subcontractor firms involved in Chon Buri's Clean Fuel Project, the Federation of Subcontractors revealed that over 10,000 workers have gone unpaid for eight months.

The main contractor—a consortium including Petrofac South East Asia, Saipem Singapore, and Samsung E&A—has failed to pay subcontractors despite project completion, leaving THB 7 billion (USD 205 million) in overdue wages. The delay has severely affected workers' livelihoods, prompting calls for government action. [Bangkok Post 2]

Adding to Thailand's labor challenges, over 800 workers lost their jobs when Funai (Thailand) Co. in Nakhon Ratchasima abruptly shut down. The closure follows the Japanese parent company's bankruptcy declaration, which disrupted supply chains and forced the factory to cease operations. Workers terminated on November 14 are registering for unemployment benefits, but concerns linger over delayed compensation. Although the company promised payouts within 90 days, doubts remain about its ability to fulfill legal obligations amid financial difficulties. [Bangkok Post 3]

Thailand's labor sector faces broader structural challenges, particularly among its informal workforce. According to the Social Security Office, 52.3 percent of workers operate outside formal protections, lacking pensions and social security benefits. This includes over 1 million platform workers, such as ride-hailing and food delivery drivers, who remain excluded from labor laws.

At a recent forum hosted by the Just Economy and Labor Institute (JELI) and the House Committee on Labour, experts highlighted the urgent need to extend legal recognition and protections to these workers. [Bangkok Post 1]

## Thailand: Online scams and fake job offers lead to significant financial losses

(lm/msz) The Digital Economy and Society Ministry and the Department of Employment (DoE) have raised alarms over a surge in online scams and fraudulent job offers that have caused substantial financial losses across Thailand over the past year.

According to the Digital Economy and Society Ministry, online scams caused over THB 19 billion (approximately USD 552 million) in total damages from November 2023 to November 2024. Facebook

emerged as the primary platform for fraud, accounting for THB 718 million (approximately USD 20.84 million) in losses from 26,804 cases. Other channels included call center scams (22,299 cases with THB 945 million in damages), fraudulent websites (16,510 cases with THB 1.1 billion in losses), and TikTok (994 cases with THB 65 million in damages).

The Anti-Online Scam Operation Center (AOC) addressed more than 1.17 million complaints, leading to the suspension of 348,006 suspicious Facebook accounts. Bangkok recorded the highest number of incidents, with 84,241 cases and 48,558 accounts suspended. Other affected provinces included Samut Prakan, Nonthaburi, Chon Buri, and Pathum Thani.

Victims aged 20–49 were the most targeted demographic, suffering 145,302 cases and THB 8.2 billion (approximately USD 238 million) in losses, mainly through fraudulent job offers and online investment schemes. Those aged 50 and older reported 41,901 cases and nearly THB 7.8 billion (approximately USD 226 million) in damages, primarily due to investment fraud. [Bangkok Post 1]

Meanwhile, the Department of Employment (DoE) has cautioned against fraudulent job offers on social media, particularly targeting individuals seeking employment overseas. Scammers have been advertising high-paying farming jobs in Australia, promising wages of THB 90,000–120,000 (approximately USD 2,610–3,480) per month along with work permits lasting three to five years.

Victims are required to pay an "operation fee" of THB 100,000–200,000 (approximately USD 2,900–5,800) and provide personal information such as ID cards and passports. However, once payments are made, the scammers cut off communication.

In the past year, 608 individuals fell victim to 452 overseas employment scams, incurring damages of THB 44 million (approximately USD 1.28 million). [Bangkok Post 2]

## Thailand: Rising concerns over treatment of migrants amid investigations into trafficking and abuse

(lm) Thailand faces mounting scrutiny over its handling of migrant-related cases, including alleged abuse, trafficking, and detentions, as investigations reveal troubling incidents involving Myanmar nationals.

In Tak province, Thai soldiers are under investigation for allegedly torturing and killing a Myanmar migrant earlier this year. According to Fortify Rights, the victim, a volunteer member of a Thai village security patrol, was beaten to death in an abandoned military bunker. A Myanmar accomplice was convicted in September and sentenced to five years in prison but did not identify the soldiers involved. The Thai army stated it is investigating the case, reaffirming its commitment to human rights. [Bangkok Post 1]

Meanwhile, authorities in Chon Buri arrested three individuals—two Thai nationals and one Myanmar citizen—for trafficking a 10-year-old girl from Myanmar. The girl, smuggled into Thailand via Tak province, was forced into domestic servitude, enduring abuse and confinement. She escaped in February 2024, leading to her rescue and the uncovering of a trafficking operation. Another girl was found during the arrests, and evidence suggests a third child may have been trafficked. Investigations are ongoing. [Bangkok Post 2]

Separately, Thai authorities detained 70 suspected Rohingya migrants, including 30 children, on an island in the south. The migrants, reportedly fleeing persecution in Myanmar, stated they were heading to Malaysia or Indonesia. Authorities are working to confirm their identities amid rising numbers of Rohingya arrivals in Southeast Asia, with recent boats landing in Indonesia. [Bangkok Post 3]

## Thailand: Seven arrested in Yasothon for alleged child exploitation

(lm) Police in Yasothon province arrested seven transgender women accused of luring boys to perform in obscene videos, which were sold to private online groups. The suspects allegedly approached their victims at local concerts and coerced them into indecent acts, secretly recording the incidents.

Some videos reportedly showed gang-rape. Police seized eight mobile phones used for distribution, and all suspects confessed during questioning. They face charges of human trafficking and producing obscene media featuring minors. [Bangkok Post]

## Thailand: Ambitious plans to enhance research, education, and international collaboration

(acs/lm) Thailand's Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research, and Innovation (MHESI) aims to position Thailand among the top 10 countries globally for scientific analysis and research by 2029. This initiative is part of the government's strategy to transform the country into a hub for high-tech industries.

Rungrueng Kitphati, director-general of the Department of Science Services (DSS), announced the directive from Minister Supamas Isarabhakdi, emphasizing the importance of upgrading the nation's research laboratories to meet internationally recognized accreditation standards. Representatives have been sent to study accreditation frameworks in the Russian Federation, endorsed by global bodies such as the Asia Pacific Accreditation Cooperation and the International Laboratory Accreditation Cooperation.

The DSS will collaborate with international organizations to evaluate and enhance the quality of Thai laboratories. Rungrueng expressed optimism that achieving global recognition in scientific analysis and applied science would foster innovation, improve citizens' quality of life, and strengthen the nation's competitiveness. [Bangkok Post 1]

In parallel, the MHESI is also focusing on strengthening ties with Italian universities, particularly in energy science and medical technology innovation. During a ministerial conference on fusion energy in Rome, attended by over 30 countries, Minister Supamas Isarabhakdi discussed opportunities for scholarships, training programs, and joint research initiatives.

This collaboration aims to enhance the skills of Thai researchers in addressing global challenges such as clean energy, food security, and health innovations. It also seeks to establish a European network for Thai researchers, providing access to advanced technologies and expertise to bolster Thailand's scientific and economic development. [Bangkok Post 2]

Meanwhile, addressing the issue of school dropouts, the Digital Economy and Society Ministry has launched the "Learn to Earn" initiative. This program allows children to earn money while studying, combining practical experience with education. The initiative seeks to reverse a trend that has left over one million children outside the formal education system.

Deputy Prime Minister Praser emphasized the need for collaboration with private-sector partners to establish mutually beneficial mechanisms for this initiative. Key government agencies, including the Ministry of

Finance, the Thai Chamber of Commerce, and the Federation of Thai Industries, are supporting the program. The Thailand Zero Dropout Committee is also working to encourage children to return to school while equipping them with professional skills for future employment. [Bangkok Post 2]

## Thailand: Euro 6 standards for petrol vehicles to take effect January 1, 2025

(bk) Thailand will enforce Euro 6 emission standards for petrol internal combustion engines (ICE) starting January 1, 2025, as part of its efforts to reduce particulate matter (PM2.5) emissions. The decision, made by the National Environment Board (NEB) during its third meeting of the year, has the full support of the Industry Ministry, which raised no objections to applying the standards to petrol engines.

The Euro 6 standards, introduced in the European Union in 2014, are the most stringent exhaust-emission regulations for new vehicles, requiring significant reductions in pollutants such as nitrogen oxide (NOx), carbon monoxide (CO), and particulate matter (PM).

However, deliberations on applying Euro 6 standards to diesel engines remain unresolved. The Industry Ministry expressed concerns about the potential economic impact on the diesel-vehicle production sector, which has already been affected by an economic slowdown. The implementation of Euro 6 standards for diesel engines would require the adoption of AdBlue-based selective catalytic reduction (SCR) systems. These systems use a chemical reaction to convert harmful nitrogen oxides into harmless nitrogen and water vapor, which would add significant costs to diesel vehicle production.

The Industry Ministry warned that the additional costs associated with the SCR systems could lead to large-scale job losses, potentially affecting 45,000 workers in the automotive sector and 800,000 more in supply chains. As a result, further discussions are expected to weigh the economic risks against the environmental benefits before finalizing the decision on diesel engine standards. [The Nation]

## Thailand: Comprehensive stimulus plan expanded with focus on elderly in second phase of digital wallet scheme

(lm/bk) The Thai government, led by Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra, is advancing a comprehensive economic stimulus package designed to bolster growth in 2024. Central to this initiative is the continuation and expansion of the 10,000-baht (approximately USD 290) digital wallet cash handout program, which aims to stimulate domestic economic activity. Deputy Finance Minister Julapun Amornvivat confirmed that the Finance Ministry would present the plan to the economic stimulus policy committee on November 19 for review.

Marketed as a "New Year's gift" for the Thai people, the stimulus plan encompasses tax measures, debt-relief programs, and soft loan schemes aimed at enhancing access to financial assistance through interest rate reductions. Targeted support for key sectors, such as lending for pickup trucks and the property market, is also part of the proposal. A recently approved 55-billion-baht (approximately USD 1.59 billion) loan program offers low-interest loans for purchasing, building, or repairing homes, replacing the Happy Home Housing Loan Project.

The stimulus package features a blend of short-, medium-, and long-term measures to address immediate economic concerns while fostering sustainable growth. A budget of THB 180 billion (approximately USD 5.22 billion) has been set aside for the digital wallet scheme, with funding drawn from diverse sources rather than the annual budget alone.

The second phase of the digital wallet scheme will prioritize Thai citizens aged 60 and above, recognizing their limited employment opportunities. Deputy Finance Minister Paopoom Rojanasakul emphasized that eligible individuals will need to register via the Thang Raj application to receive the handout. Those who benefited from the first phase will not qualify for the second.

The first phase, launched in September, targeted 14.5 million state welfare cardholders and disabled persons, initially aiming to distribute funds through a digital platform to promote a cashless society. However, delays in the platform's readiness necessitated direct bank account transfers instead. Despite these challenges, the first phase reportedly boosted economic activity, particularly in the fourth quarter, with GDP expected to grow by 4.3–4.4 percent. [Bangkok Post] [The Nation]

## Thailand: Commerce Ministry launches crackdown on foreign business

## malpractice, substandard imports

(bk/lm) The Thai Commerce Ministry has unveiled an integrated strategy targeting two critical issues: the circumvention of Thai business laws by foreign companies using local nominees and the influx of substandard foreign goods, particularly through e-commerce platforms. These efforts aim to protect domestic industries, uphold consumer safety, and strengthen the country's economy.

The ministry has prioritized cracking down on foreign businesses that exploit Thai nominees to bypass the Foreign Business Act of 1999. This malpractice undermines local businesses and distorts fair competition. During a recent meeting with various government agencies, the ministry outlined a three-pronged approach comprising short, medium, and long-term measures.

In the short term, authorities will intensify investigations and legal actions against companies suspected of using Thai nominees, leveraging existing laws to prosecute offenders. The Department of Business Development is tasked with launching a nominee detection system within six months as part of the medium-term strategy. For the long term, the ministry is considering amending the Foreign Business Act to impose harsher penalties on violators and empower authorities to revoke business registrations of high-risk entities identified under anti-money laundering regulations.

To encourage transparency, the government is urging Thai individuals involved in nominee schemes to cooperate, offering protection for whistleblowers and reduced penalties for those who come forward. Officials have emphasized that combating nominee practices is essential to safeguarding the economy and supporting legitimate local businesses. [The Nation]

In tandem with addressing nominee practices, the Commerce Ministry is taking action against the proliferation of low-quality foreign goods entering Thailand. A particular focus has been placed on e-commerce platforms, where such products often reach consumers.

The ministry's strategy involves categorizing products into agricultural, consumer, and industrial goods. Agricultural imports will undergo rigorous checks for origins and pesticide residues, while consumer goods, especially those sold through platforms like Temu and Lazada, will face enhanced safety and quality inspections. Industrial imports will need to meet the standards set by the Thai Industrial Standards

Institute. Foreign e-commerce operators will be required to register offices in Thailand under the digital platform service law by January 2025, ensuring compliance with local regulations.

The ministry also aims to increase the GDP contribution of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) from 35.2 percent to 40 percent by 2027. This includes supporting SMEs through training, funding, business matching activities, and enhanced access to online marketplaces. By 2025, the ministry plans to expand Thai products' reach both domestically and internationally through trade shows and international exhibitions.[Bangkok Post]

## Thailand: Pita Limjaroenrat urges action to stop nation's brain drain

(lm) Pita Limjaroenrat, senior adviser to the Progressive Movement and prime ministerial candidate-turned campaign assistant for the main opposition People's Party (PP), called for transforming Udon Thani into a city of opportunity to retain local talent and prevent workers from seeking jobs abroad. Campaigning for PP candidate Kanisorn Khurirang in the Udon Thani Provincial Administration Organisation (PAO) election, Pita outlined plans to use a THB 1.2 billion (USD 35 million) annual budget to improve transport, education, public health, and attract skilled workers back to the region.

Pita criticized former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, a key figure in the rival Pheu Thai Party, for aligning with the military establishment-affiliated Palang Pracharath Party despite blaming military takeovers for Thailand's challenges. The November 24 PAO election, he said, is an opportunity for Udon Thani residents to shape their future. [Bangkok Post]

## Thailand: Tech start-ups receive increased funding, generating billion-baht returns

(lm) Thailand's Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation Ministry has announced a nearly 20 percent increase in funding for technology-based projects in 2025, allocating over THB 273 million (approximately USD 7.92 million) to support 270 new ventures.

Prof. Supachai Pathumnakul, permanent secretary and chairman of the Technology and Innovation-based

Enterprise Development Fund (TED Fund) leading the initiative, emphasized the importance of decentralizing financial support to ensure nationwide access for students, recent graduates, and entrepreneurs seeking to commercialize their innovations. In 2024, the TED Fund provided over THB 232 million (around USD 6.73 million) to support 264 projects across Thailand.

TED Fund manager Tipawan Vetchakarunyakorn noted that the fund's 2024 initiatives have generated over THB 1 billion (approximately USD 29 million) in social and economic benefits. For 2025, the fund plans to support projects in 13 innovative sectors, reflecting its alignment with the government's medium- and long-term strategies to drive Thailand's digital economy forward. [Bangkok Post]

## Thailand: Transport Ministry eyes four mega projects in 2024

(msz) On November 13, Transport Minister Suriya Juangroongruangkit announced that there are four mega projects ready for the cabinet's deliberation in 2024. The projects are two electric train projects – Red Line extension 1 from Rangsit to Thammasat University's Rangsit Campus and Red Line extension 2 from Siriraj to Taling Chan and Salaya – and two motorway projects – Motorway No 5 (M5) extension from Rangsit to Bang Pa-in and Motorway No 9 (M9), the 38 kilometer long Bang Khun Thien-Bang Bua Thong section and the 35 kilometer Bang Bua Thong-Bang Pa-in section. The four projects are worth a combined investment budget of THB 124 billion in order to stimulate the economy. [The Nation]

## Thailand: Transport Ministry to utilize London Model for congestion fees

(acs) The Transport Ministry is planning to implement the UK's model, known as the London model, for issuing traffic congestion fees on the prominent roads of Bangkok.

The Transport Ministry aims to find an accurate model to implement congestion fees on the roads of Bangkok by investigating the instances of implementations in Sweden, England, Italy, Singapore, and Stockholm. In this regard, Minister Suriya Jungrungreangkit appointed the Office of Transport and Traffic Policy and Planning to examine methods and ways of implementing the project in various countries.

Along with the expectation of completing the study within six months, the minister emphasized the importance of releasing comprehensive information about the project due to increasing public displeasure. At this juncture, Jungrungreangkit stressed the necessity of recreating the legal framework for the project, implying that the government should have the authority to collect the congestion fees. In addition, the project entails collaboration with the Ministry of Finance on the deposit and usage of fee income for subsequent infrastructural projects. [Bangkok Post]

## Thailand: BOI approves cloud data projects as prime minister bolsters digital economy commitments

(msz) Thailand is advancing its digital transformation with the approval of major cloud data service projects and strategic partnerships with global tech giants.

The Board of Investment (BOI) has greenlit two cloud service center projects in Chon Buri worth over THB 60 billion (USD 1.74 billion). Quartz Computing, an Alphabet Inc. affiliate, will invest THB 32 billion (USD 928 million) to establish Google's fifth cloud center in Asia. Digitalland Services, linked to China's GDS Holdings, plans a THB 28 billion (USD 812 million) project, set to begin operations in 2026. These investments align with Thailand's "Cloud First Policy," which encourages cloud adoption across public and private sectors. [Thai PBS World]

Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra, during the APEC Economic Leaders' meeting in Peru, reaffirmed the government's commitment to digital development. She welcomed Google's additional THB 34.8 billion (USD 1 billion) data center project, projected to create 14,000 jobs and generate THB 139 billion (USD 4 billion) in economic value by 2029.

Meetings with TikTok and Microsoft focused on supporting small businesses, boosting tourism, and enhancing AI and digital skills among Thai workers. Microsoft also discussed further cloud investments, reinforcing Thailand's ambition to become a regional digital hub. The prime minister also discussed future investment opportunities in Thailand with Irving Tan, chief executive officer designate of Western Digital (WD, a leading US-based manufacturer of hard disk drives and storage devices. The WD is also planning to open a new research and development center in Bangkok and cooperate with Thai local universities in improving the skills of Thai workers and students. [Bangkok Post]

## Thailand: Cocoa added to special agricultural watchlist

(lm) Thailand's Agriculture and Cooperatives Ministry has included cocoa in the special watchlist managed by the sub-committee on horticultural crops. This move aims to support cocoa farmers, promote the crop, and address related challenges, alongside other crops like coffee, tea, pepper, and longan.

Deputy Agriculture Minister Narumon Pinyosinwat has also approved restructuring the sub-committee to include representatives from the Marketing Organisation for Farmers (MOF) to enhance its problem-solving capabilities.

Global demand for cocoa is rising, with market value expected to surpass USD 20 billion by 2028, up from USD 6 billion last year, according to the EU's Centre for the Promotion of Imports from Developing Countries. Prices have surged due to supply disruptions caused by the El Nino phenomenon, reaching USD 6.6 per kilogram in January, an 83.3 percent year-on-year increase.

Cocoa production in Thailand, though small at 0.02 percent of global output, increased from 1,256 tons in 2022 to 3,360 tons in 2023, reflecting growing interest in the crop's potential for the Thai agricultural sector. [Bangkok Post]

## Thailand: Thai police arrests Briton for drug trafficking

(msz) The immigration police in Chiang Mai, Thailand, arrested a British national identified as "Daniel" for alleged possession and intention to sell illegal narcotics, including 21.61g of methamphetamine tablets, ten ecstasy (MDMA) pills, and 10.10g of ketamine. According to the police, the suspect allegedly partnered with a Thai national with a permit to sell cannabis in operating a cannabis shop in the Chang Moi area of downtown Chiang Mai. The police added that the suspect, who entered Thailand with a tourist visa, had been under police surveillance for selling illegal narcotics to foreign tourists for around six months. There is also a probability that he was involved in smuggling cannabis from Thailand to clients in other countries. If found guilty, he will be deported and blacklisted for 10 years after serving a prison sentence. [Thai PBS World]

## Thailand: Government monitors whooping cough outbreak in Bangkok school, urges vaccination

(bk) The government reassured parents on November 14 that it is actively monitoring the spread of whooping cough (pertussis). Monitoring efforts began after two students at Srinakarinwirot University Demonstration School Pathumwan in Bangkok tested positive for the disease, prompting the school to cancel in-person classes from November 13 to November 27 to contain the outbreak.

Whooping cough is a highly contagious respiratory infection that spreads through coughing or sneezing, primarily affecting unvaccinated children. The disease starts like a common cold but can develop into severe coughing fits, vomiting, and a "whooping" sound when breathing.

The Education Ministry has issued circulars to all schools, urging them to remain vigilant and monitor for any signs of the disease to prevent further outbreaks. The government has also instructed relevant agencies to closely track the disease, particularly among vulnerable groups, including infants under one year old and the elderly. Older adults, especially those with pre-existing respiratory conditions or weakened immunity, are at higher risk for severe complications. Children and other vulnerable populations must be vaccinated to protect against this highly contagious infection. [The Nation] [Bangkok Post]

## Thailand: Two Myanmar men fatally shot in Ratchaburi

(lm) Two Myanmar men from Samut Sakhon were found shot dead on a narrow road in Suan Phung district, Ratchaburi, last week. One suffered gunshot wounds to the stomach and head, while the other was shot in the back.

The victims had left Samut Sakhon with friends the previous night, but their phones went unanswered. Police suspect the attackers were familiar with the area and are reviewing CCTV footage to identify them. The motive remains unknown. [Bangkok Post]

## Thailand: Defense minister urges DTI to spearhead defense industry development

(lm) Defense Minister Phumtham Wechayachai has called on the Defense Technology Institute (DTI) to collaborate with the armed forces and private sector to strengthen Thailand's defense industry. This initiative aims to boost national security and contribute to economic growth by reducing reliance on imports and enhancing local capabilities.

During a visit to the DTI, Phumtham praised its potential to meet the needs of the military and security agencies, stressing the importance of setting clear objectives and adhering to international standards. He highlighted the possibility of exporting advanced defense technology and hardware, which would increase Thailand's competitiveness in the global defense market.

The minister also emphasized the need for skill development among Thai defense researchers and proposed hosting a seminar to address key military priorities and emerging threats. He reviewed DTI's public safety projects and visited the DTI-UTC, Thailand's first training center for unmanned aerial vehicles certified by the Civil Aviation Authority. [Bangkok Post]

## Timor-Leste: 33 Years of Santa Cruz Tragedy

(mu) On November 12, Timor-Leste commemorated National Youth Day and the 33rd anniversary of the Santa Cruz Tragedy. During a solemn ceremony held in front of the Santa Cruz Cemetery, President José Ramos-Horta urged citizens to reflect on the lessons of the past and strive to make Timor-Leste a global model of reconciliation.

In his remarks, President Ramos-Horta emphasized the importance of learning from the events of 1975, which led to a civil war, and fostering cooperation with Indonesia. Highlighting Indonesia's status as a key member of the G20 and ASEAN, he underlined the strategic significance of strong relations with Indonesia as a cornerstone of Timor-Leste's national policy. Ramos-Horta called for mutual support between the two nations to ensure shared progress and prosperity.

The Santa Cruz Tragedy occurred on November 12, 1991, during Indonesia's occupation of Timor-Leste (formerly East Timor). A peaceful protest at the Santa

Cruz Cemetery in Dili, commemorating the death of a pro-independence activist, turned into a massacre when Indonesian troops opened fire on unarmed demonstrators. The event resulted in over 250 deaths and drew international condemnation, galvanizing global attention to Timor-Leste's struggle for independence. [Tatoli]

## Vietnam: National Assembly streamlines administrative units in 12 localities

(lm) The National Assembly (NA) Standing Committee has approved the reorganization of district and commune-level administrative units in 12 provinces and cities, including Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Ha Tinh, Quang Ngai, and Phu Tho. The restructuring aims to streamline administrative systems for efficiency and alignment with national development plans.

The plan will establish six new district-level units and 361 commune-level units while reducing one district-level unit and 161 commune-level units. Five localities, including Hanoi and Quang Tri, proposed exceptions for certain districts due to historical, cultural, and logistical considerations, such as remote locations and national security concerns.

The resolutions, passed by the NA Standing Committee, will take effect at the start of 2025, except for Son La Province, where changes will begin in February 2025. [Viet Nam News]

## Vietnam: Social media users face tighter controls

(lm) Vietnam has introduced stricter regulations for global internet platforms like YouTube and Facebook, requiring users to verify accounts with phone numbers or ID cards. Companies must provide user data to authorities upon request. Users failing to comply within 90 days will lose posting privileges. Critics argue these measures curb freedom of expression and mirror China's restrictive internet policies.

Freedom House rated Vietnam 22/100 in its Freedom of the Net index, highlighting increasing censorship. Intellectual property rules now demand platforms collaborate with Vietnamese news sites when sharing content. Activists warn the laws enable the government to silence dissent and restrict international news.

Additionally, high-profile censorship incidents include takedown requests for content about top officials and corruption allegations. Prominent cases include the sentencing of a YouTuber to 12 years under anti-state propaganda charges. [Radio Free Asia]

## Vietnam: Followers of 'barefoot monk' question call for social media silence

(lm) Thich Minh Tue, widely known as the "barefoot monk," has resurfaced in his hometown after a four-month absence, sparking curiosity and skepticism.

Minh Tue, whose real name is Le Anh Tu, is an independent ascetic who practices 13 Buddhist austerities but is not part of a government-recognized religious order. The monk became a viral sensation for his walking tours across Vietnam, which drew large crowds and government intervention earlier this year, forcing him into retreat.

A handwritten letter, allegedly from Minh Tue, requests the public to avoid gathering in large crowds or posting about him online, citing disruption to his studies and peace. The letter also calls on authorities to act against unauthorized social media posts about him.

Critics question the letter's authenticity, noting its tone contradicts Minh Tue's previous open attitude towards public interaction and media presence. Thus, observers suggest the letter might be an effort by authorities to isolate Minh Tue from his growing online following, as independent social movements are often viewed warily in Vietnam. [Radio Free Asia]

## Vietnam: Suspect arrested for alleged plot to overthrow government

(hn) A suspect linked to the Provisional National Government of Vietnam, a group designated as a terrorist organization by Vietnamese authorities, has been arrested in Ho Chi Minh City. The individual is accused of engaging in activities aimed at overthrowing the government under Article 109 of Vietnam's 2015 Penal Code.

The suspect is alleged to have worked under the direction of the group's leader, Dao Minh Quan, who is based in the United States. Authorities claim the suspect's actions posed a significant threat to political security and social order in Vietnam.

This arrest is part of a broader investigation into the organization's activities, including attempts to incite protests and disrupt public order during Vietnam's National Day celebrations on September 2. Previous arrests have included individuals distributing leaflets with protest-inciting content. [VOV] [VnExpress, in Vietnamese]

## Vietnam: MoH proposes including dengue vaccine in national immunization program

(cc) The Ministry of Health (MoH) has proposed adding the dengue vaccine to Vietnam's expanded immunization program to reduce cases, hospitalizations, and deaths. With 80,000 cases and 12 deaths recorded as of September 2024, the vaccine could be offered free of charge, pending evaluation of safety, efficacy, and cost-effectiveness.

Dengue fever, now a year-round concern across Vietnam, has seen a shift from the southern regions to northern areas. The Qdenga vaccine, licensed earlier in 2024, is currently available on a paid basis. Global dengue cases have surged, with over 12.3 million reported worldwide in 2024, prompting WHO to coordinate a global response plan. [Viet Nam News] [Vietnam.vn]

## Vietnam: Government to restart nuclear power projects and reform electricity sector for energy security

(hn/lm) Vietnam is set to resume its nuclear power program, a pivotal move approved by the Politburo and integrated into the Power Development Plan VIII (PDP VIII). This initiative, spearheaded by the Ministry of Industry and Trade (MoIT), aims to address significant electricity shortages anticipated during 2026–2030 and bolster long-term energy security while aligning with net-zero emission targets by 2050.

The revival of nuclear power includes the reconsideration of the Ninh Thuan nuclear project, suspended in 2016, with an initial investment of VND 200 trillion (USD 7.9 billion). Nuclear energy is expected to play a vital role in reducing reliance on fossil fuels and diversifying Vietnam's energy mix. The MoIT has assured compliance with the Law on Atomic Energy and alignment with Party and State directives,

emphasizing safety, waste management, and security regulations already enshrined in existing laws.

To ensure successful implementation of nuclear power projects, Vietnam has sent over 450 students to Russia and Japan for nuclear energy studies since 2006. [Viet Nam News 1]

*Electricity sector reforms*

Amendments to the Law on Electricity are being proposed to attract investments, streamline regulatory frameworks, and support renewable energy and gas-fired power projects. Vietnam's electricity demand is projected to grow at an annual rate of 12–13 percent, nearly doubling its capacity to 150,524 MW by 2030 and potentially quintupling by 2050. Minister of Industry and Trade Nguyen Hong Dien highlighted the urgency of developing renewable energy sources, such as offshore wind and solar, while completing key infrastructure projects like the 500kV Quang Binh-Hung Yen transmission line.

Independent estimates suggest Vietnam will need USD 12 billion annually in energy investments by 2030, rising to USD 18–24 billion annually from 2030–2050. However, a lack of a detailed legal framework has delayed critical projects, such as offshore wind and LNG power, which are essential to achieving the government's target of 6,000 MW of offshore wind capacity by 2030. [Viet Nam News 2]

*Short-term energy challenges*

The MoIT projects that electricity demand in 2025 will be met but warns of potential supply strains during peak dry season months. [Pune.news]

## Vietnam: Agri-export growth in 2024, but need for green transformation poses challenge

(cc) Vietnam's agri-export sector has flourished in 2024, driven by rising global demand and strategic government support. The country's total trade turnover reached USD 647.87 billion by October, with exports up 15 percent. Fruit and vegetable exports, especially durian, surged 33 percent, totaling USD 6.4 billion. Vietnam is on track to meet its USD 7 billion export target by year-end, bolstered by strong demand from China and other markets like Thailand and South Korea.

Despite this growth, challenges remain. Competition from other tropical nations, meeting international quality standards, and overcoming technical barriers could hinder further expansion. The Vietnam Fruit and Vegetable Association advocates for dedicated production zones and improved infrastructure to streamline compliance with global standards. [Vietnam Briefing]

Adding to these challenges, Vietnam faces the need for a green transformation in agricultural and food production to comply with European Union (EU) market demands. A November 2024 workshop highlighted the importance of adopting sustainable practices in line with the European Green Deal (EGD) and EU regulations, such as the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) and the Deforestation Regulation (EUDR). Experts stressed that while these regulations pose challenges, they also present opportunities for Vietnam to integrate further into global supply chains, especially with its rich natural resources and commitment to green development.

To support this transformation, the Ministry of Industry and Trade (MoIT) is assisting domestic businesses in adopting environmental, social, and governance (ESG) standards and promoting green technology investment. The MoIT is also exploring digital platforms to enhance the competitiveness of Vietnam's agri-export businesses. [Vietnam Plus]

## Vietnam: Chipmakers shift production amid US-China tensions, boosting local semiconductor sector

(hn) Vietnam is emerging as a major hub for chip packaging and testing as global semiconductor companies shift operations away from China due to escalating trade tensions with the United States. The back-end chip manufacturing segment, involving assembly, testing, and packaging, is growing rapidly in Vietnam, which is expected to account for 8–9 percent of global capacity by 2032, up from 1 percent in 2022, according to the US Semiconductor Industry Association and Boston Consulting Group.

South Korea's Hana Micron plans to invest USD 930 million by 2026 to expand packaging operations for legacy memory chips in Vietnam. Meanwhile, US-based Amkor Technology is executing a USD 1.6 billion project to establish a state-of-the-art semiconductor packaging facility near Hanoi, partially sourcing equipment from Chinese factories.

Intel also maintains its largest back-end chip factory in Vietnam, underscoring the country's strategic importance in the global semiconductor supply chain. Local firms, including tech giant FPT and investment group Sovico, are contributing to the sector's growth, with FPT set to open a testing factory in early 2025 and Sovico exploring co-investment opportunities in Danang.

Vietnam is also making moves into front-end chip manufacturing. State-owned Viettel is reportedly planning the nation's first semiconductor foundry, targeting at least one operational facility by 2030. [asia financial]

## Vietnam: Central bank revises deposit interest rate framework

(hn) The State Bank of Vietnam (SBV) has announced adjustments to deposit interest rates effective November 20, in response to mounting liquidity pressures within the banking sector. The maximum annual interest rate for Vietnamese dong (VND)-denominated deposits with terms of one to six months is now capped at 4.75 percent, while deposits under one month are limited to 0.5 percent. Rates for deposits exceeding six months will continue to be determined by market dynamics. Additionally, the SBV maintained a zero percent interest rate for US dollar (USD)-denominated deposits.

This policy shift comes as credit growth, at 10.08 percent in the first ten months of 2024, has significantly outpaced deposit growth of 4.79 percent, creating a liquidity gap that has intensified competition among banks. To attract deposits, eight banks, including Agribank and Techcombank, raised their deposit rates earlier this month. Some banks have also issued bonds to supplement lending capital, though deposits remain the primary funding source for the sector. [Viet Nam News 1]

The SBV's move aligns with its broader strategy to stabilize the financial system while addressing the credit-deposit imbalance. Analysts suggest these adjustments, coupled with a recent easing of monetary policy, could support business performance by lowering borrowing costs and fostering stable financial conditions. However, persistent liquidity challenges underscore the need for effective implementation of these measures. [Viet Nam News 2]

## Vietnam: Debate intensifies over proposed VAT on fertilizers

(lm) A proposed 5 percent value-added tax (VAT) on fertilizers has sparked debate in Vietnam, with proponents arguing it could strengthen domestic production and sustainability, while opponents fear increased costs for farmers.

Since 2014, fertilizers have been exempt from VAT, aimed at reducing costs for farmers. However, critics say this policy has inadvertently disadvantaged local manufacturers. Unable to claim input tax refunds, domestic producers face higher costs, reducing competitiveness against cheaper imports. Data from the Vietnam Fertiliser Association shows imports range between 3.3 to 5.6 million tons annually, threatening agricultural self-sufficiency and food security.

Proponents argue that reinstating a 5 percent VAT would level the playing field for local manufacturers, drive eco-friendly innovations, and align with international trends. Countries like China and Brazil impose VAT on fertilizers to support domestic industries and encourage sustainable practices. Tax experts suggest that a phased introduction of VAT could ease the transition for farmers.

Opponents warn that the tax could burden farmers, who already face low profit margins, potentially raising food prices and impacting rural economies. They advocate maintaining the exemption to keep farming costs low and ensure food security. [Viet Nam News]

## Vietnam: Ho Chi Minh City aims to become ASEAN's healthcare hub by 2030

(cc) Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), Vietnam's largest city and economic hub, has launched a plan to transform into a leading healthcare center in the ASEAN region by 2030. The project, approved by the People's Committee, focuses on improving medical services and health outcomes for residents.

The initiative sets clear goals, including increasing the healthcare workforce to 23 physicians and 40 nurses per 10,000 residents, and providing 42 hospital beds per 10,000 people. Regular medical checkups and disease screenings will be available to all residents, supported by the implementation of electronic health records.

The plan aims to boost life expectancy to 77 years by 2030 and promote medical tourism. Key to success will be investments in healthcare workforce development, improved infrastructure, and enhanced medical research. Achieving these objectives will position HCMC as a competitive healthcare destination within ASEAN. [Tuoi Tre News] [Vietnam News]

## Vietnam: Domestic e-commerce revenues drop as foreign platforms expand

(lm) Vietnamese e-commerce platforms experienced significant revenue declines in Q3 2024, with Lazada down 70.5 percent, Tiki 32.1 percent, and Sendo 65.3 percent, according to Metric. Meanwhile, foreign platforms saw strong growth, with TikTokShop up 110.6 percent and Shopee 11.3 percent.

Shopee remained the most popular e-commerce platform in Vietnam in 2023, favored by 81 percent of internet users, followed by Lazada (42 percent), TikTok (34 percent), and Sendo (8 percent), highlighting a rapidly shifting market.

Vietnam, ranked first in Southeast Asia for e-commerce growth, is projected to see e-commerce revenue grow from USD 20.5 billion in 2023 to over USD 27 billion in 2024, and USD 35 billion in the coming years, driven by increasing foreign competition and market potential. [Viet Nam News]

## Vietnam: Gold prices drop sharply after US election

(lm) Following Donald Trump's election victory, Vietnamese gold prices plunged by over 5 percent on November 7, rebounding slightly by 1 percent the next day. The drop caused panic selling among investors, driven by uncertainty about global market reactions. Analysts linked the volatility to fears over geopolitical and economic implications of Trump’s presidency.

Vietnamese investors traditionally favor gold as a safe haven, especially amid economic instability. This year, gold demand surged due to the Vietnamese dong's depreciation against the USD. Gold prices in Vietnam also remain higher than global benchmarks due to market controls and thriving underground trading, which handles 50–60 metric tons annually.

In response to the volatility, the State Bank of Vietnam announced plans to explore a gold exchange to

manage price stability. [Radio Free Asia]

### Vietnam: Prime Minister Chinh pushes expressway and smart border gate projects

(hn) Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh has ordered the acceleration of the Dong Dang-Tra Linh and Huu Nghi-Chi Lang expressways in Lang Son and Cao Bang provinces, aiming for completion by 2025. These projects, spanning 121 km and 60 km respectively, are vital for regional connectivity and ties with China, with investments totaling over VND 34 trillion (USD 1.34 billion).

The Prime Minister also reviewed plans for smart border gates at Huu Nghi and Tra Linh crossings, approving expanded cargo transport facilities and urging swift collaboration with Chinese counterparts. Funds from the 2024 budget will support these initiatives, key to Vietnam's infrastructure goals of 3,000 km of expressways by 2025 and 5,000 km by 2030. [Viet Nam News]

### Vietnam: Police raid dismantles armed drug trafficking gang at Cambodia border

(hn) Over 100 police officers raided a drug trafficking gang in Tay Ninh Province on November 16, arresting seven suspects and seizing nearly 60 kilograms of drugs, firearms, and vehicles. Authorities uncovered the operation, which used armed guards and transported drugs via car to Ho Chi Minh City and other provinces. The gang reportedly earned USD 800 per kilogram. Investigations into the network are ongoing. [VN Express]

## International Relations, Geopolitics and Security in Asia

## Chinese President Xi criticizes protectionism at APEC summit

(alk) Chinese President Xi Jinping addressed the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Lima, warning against rising unilateralism and protectionism, while advocating for economic globalization.

In a speech delivered by Commerce Minister Wang Wentao at the APEC CEO Summit, Xi highlighted the challenges facing global economic integration, stating, “The world has entered a new period of turmoil and change; unilateralism and protectionism are spreading, and economic fragmentation has intensified.” He warned that hindering cooperation and promoting isolation “is reversing the course of history.” [State Council, China]

Xi outlined China’s recent measures to attract foreign investment, including expanded access to various industries and visa exemptions for visitors. He emphasized China’s commitment to “independent and unilateral opening-up policies” and plans to broaden its network of high-standard free trade zones.

Xi’s remarks emphasized the challenges posed by rising protectionism, geopolitical tensions, and resistance to globalization, implicitly contrasting China’s stance with the inward-focused policies of U.S. President-elect Donald Trump. Xi criticized isolationism and efforts to block globalization, describing them as regressive. He called for inclusive, dynamic, and sustainable growth that benefits all nations, rather than favoring a select few – a thinly veiled criticism of U.S. "America-first" policies. Xi urged confidence and greater commitment to advancing economic globalization despite current challenges. [South China Morning Post]

Xi’s remarks come as the world anticipates Donald Trump’s upcoming presidency, marked by promises of significant tariffs on Chinese imports. Beijing hopes that Trump’s protectionist stance may strain US

relations with its allies in Europe and Asia, potentially enabling China to bolster its global influence and trade partnerships.

However, analysts note that China's image as a counterbalance to a protectionist US has dimmed since Trump's 2016 election, pointing out that China's own protectionist practices, such as state subsidies and industrial overcapacity, raise concerns.

Xi was accompanied by hundreds of Chinese business leaders on the trip, aiming to deepen ties with resource-rich Latin America. Business attendees at the APEC CEO Summit noted the significant Asian presence, surpassing that of the US, Canada, and Australia. A Peruvian businessman remarked that Chinese representatives "vastly outnumbered" others. [Reuters] [France 24]

## Chinese President Xi Jinping holds bilateral meetimgs at G20 Summit

(to) On the sidelines of the G20 summit in Rio de Janeiro, Chinese President Xi Jinping held a series of bilateral meetings with world leaders. Discussions focused on strengthening relations, economic collaboration, and addressing mutual challenges.

*UK Prime Minister seeks stronger UK-China relations*

UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer emphasized the need for "consistent, durable" UK-China relations during his meeting with Xi. This marked the first encounter between UK and Chinese leaders since 2018, reflecting a notable shift from the UK's previously more confrontational stance toward China.

Starmer highlighted key areas for cooperation, including trade, climate change, technology, health, and education. While addressing differences candidly on topics such as human rights and Hong Kong, he expressed a commitment to fostering economic and bilateral collaboration to bolster the UK economy. [Reuters 1]

*Xi discusses trade and climate cooperation with Australian Prime Minister*

Similarly, Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese met with Xi on the sidelines of the summit, marking their third meeting in a year and signaling a continued thaw in relations after years of tension. Albanese praised progress in stabilizing trade ties, which had been strained in recent years, and emphasized mutual

opportunities in climate change and energy transitions. Xi, in turn, highlighted the positive momentum in the relationship and called for a fair, non-discriminatory business environment for Chinese companies operating in Australia. [Reuters 2]

*China and Mexico agree to strengthen ties*

In another meeting, Xi and Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum discussed deepening China-Mexico relations. Xi emphasized the complementary strengths of the two economies and the importance of enhancing exchanges to strengthen their partnership.

Both leaders agreed on advancing practical cooperation in various areas to promote mutual growth and further solidify bilateral ties. [Reuters 3]

## EU pressuring China for alleged supply of drones for Russia

(alk) The European Union (EU) has announced that it has obtained “conclusive” evidence that armed drones are being produced in China’s Xinjiang region for Russia's military, prompting demands for clarification from Beijing. This announcement adds to already strained EU-China relations over Brussel’s increased tariffs on electric vehicles produced in China.

EU foreign ministers are set to discuss the intelligence at an upcoming meeting in Brussels, with several member states calling for serious repercussions if the claims are confirmed. While it remains uncertain whether Beijing authorized this production, sources noted that such operations would likely need central government approval.

Diplomats described the evidence as “credible” and “convincing,” underscoring the need for consequences if proven true. The EU aims to determine if Beijing was aware of the factory’s activities and whether this constitutes direct military cooperation with Russia.

The issue suggests the EU’s stance on China may harden following Donald Trump’s re-election as US president.

The upcoming Brussels meeting will prioritize the drone production issue, with EU diplomats keen to assess whether China is shifting from its public position of neutrality on the Ukraine conflict. Beijing has consistently maintained that it is not a party to the conflict.

While potential EU actions remain unspecified, one option could be adding Chinese companies to the bloc's sanctions list, as was done with Iran for supplying weapons to Russia. The EU is following a similar investigative approach with China. [South China Morning Post] [Politico]

## Japan, U.S., and South Korea conduct joint military drill, deepen military coordination

(hs) Japan, the U.S., and South Korea launched the three-day joint military exercise "Freedom Edge," in the East China Sea. This drill, conducted on November 13, was a follow-up to one held in June, and aimed to improve interoperability between the nations amid rising regional tensions. The exercise includes maritime, aerial, and cyber operations, focusing on countering North Korean ballistic missile threats, anti-submarine warfare, and cyberdefense.

Key participants include the U.S. Navy's USS George Washington, South Korea's F-35 fighter jets, and Japan's F-15 fighters and destroyer Haguro. The exercise's cyber component is particularly important due to North Korea's increasing reliance on cyberattacks to fund its nuclear program. To address these cyber threats, the three countries established a working group in 2023.

Japan's Self-Defense Forces stated that the drills serve as a reassurance of the nations' ability to operate together at the highest level in response to any threat. However, concerns about the future of trilateral cooperation have emerged due to the return of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency. Trump has previously shown interest in direct talks with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, which could disrupt the deterrence strategy currently followed by the Biden administration.

A Japanese defense official raised doubts, noting that while Trump is expected to adopt a tough stance on China, it is uncertain how he would handle relations with North Korea, which could affect the continuation of the Freedom Edge initiative. Japan remains committed to strengthening trilateral ties and focuses on continued cooperation among the three countries, especially given the shifting international landscape. [The Asahi Shimbun]

In a related development, Japan, the U.S., and South Korea announced the creation of a secretariat to coordinate their policies and actions more effectively,

underscoring their commitment to trilateral cooperation. This decision was made during a meeting between Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba, U.S. President Joe Biden, and South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol on the sideline of the APEC summit in Lima on November 15. The leaders emphasized their shared goal of fostering a stable, secure Indo-Pacific region, with Ishiba highlighting the increasing importance of the trilateral partnership in tackling complex global challenges. [Kyodo News]

The leaders' joint statement condemned North Korea's missile development, malicious cyber programs, and troop deployment to Russia's war in Ukraine, labelling these actions as destabilizing. They also reaffirmed opposition to coercive maritime activities in the South China Sea. The establishment of the secretariat builds on efforts to institutionalize trilateral collaboration, a key focus of Biden's administration, and reflects their shared intent to bolster long-term regional stability. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan]

## Japanese troops to train with US and Australian military forces

(hs) Defence ministers from Australia, Japan, and the United States announced plans to enhance military cooperation in response to increasing concerns over China's military activities in the Indo-Pacific. The agreement, unveiled during a trilateral meeting in Darwin on November 17, includes joint training exercises, troop deployments, and expanded surveillance activities.

From 2025, Japanese forces will participate in trilateral amphibious training with US Marines and Australian troops in northern Australia, starting with Exercise Talisman Sabre. Japan's elite Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade will also be stationed in Darwin for regular training. This collaboration aims to bolster interoperability among the three nations and strengthen regional defence capabilities.

Australian Defence Minister Richard Marles described the partnership as a "fantastic opportunity" for national defense, emphasizing that it focuses on building relationships with allies rather than antagonizing Beijing. The ministers also reiterated the importance of maintaining peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, highlighting shared concerns over China's actions in the East and South China Seas, including its military conduct against the Philippines.

Canberra will also join Exercise Orient Shield in Japan next year, marking its first involvement in the US-Japan field training program.

US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin reaffirmed support for the AUKUS pact, under which Australia is set to acquire US nuclear-powered submarines and collaborate with the US and UK on a new class of submarines. Austin stressed the need for continuity in defense agreements amid the transition to President-elect Donald Trump's administration.

The trilateral defense partnership reflects growing efforts to counter China's influence in the Indo-Pacific, with a focus on enhancing intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance activities. It underscores the allies' commitment to a "free and open Indo-Pacific," as tensions continue to rise in the region. [Al Jazeera] [DW]

## Japan eyes fresh sanctions against Russia and North Korea

(hs) The Japanese government is considering tougher sanctions on North Korea and Russia as their military cooperation grows amid the ongoing war in Ukraine. Tokyo views this collaboration as a breach of international law and a serious threat to global peace, particularly in Europe and the Indo-Pacific region.

In a meeting on November 16 during an unannounced visit to Kyiv, marking his first trip to Ukraine since being appointed to the post in September, Japanese Foreign Minister Iwaya Takeshi and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy expressed concern over the involvement of North Korean soldiers in Russia's military operations.[The Kyiv Independent]

The Japanese government is weighing measures like expanding asset freezes for both countries, aiming to align with the Group of Seven nations on this issue.

Japan has already imposed sanctions on North Korea due to its nuclear and missile activities and has also targeted Russia with various economic restrictions since the invasion of Ukraine. [NHK World] [The Kyiv Independent]

## Italy ratifies global combat Air Program agreement with Japan and UK

(hs) Alongside Japan (see AiR No. 46, November/2024, 2), Italy has officially joined the UK-led Global Combat Air Program (GCAP), to develop a sixth generation optionally manned fighter aircraft and advanced aerial systems. With the Italian Parliament's ratification of the treaty on November 13, the three nations are now legally bound to collaborate on this ambitious defense project.

The GCAP aims to deliver a cutting-edge multirole fighter by 2035, addressing emerging threats from near-peer adversaries such as China and Russia. Key players in the program include the UK's BAE Systems, Italy's Leonardo, and Japan's Mitsubishi Heavy Industries (MHI), which are currently concluding the concept and assessment phase.

The program, initially known as Tempest in the UK, will replace Japan's F-2 and the Eurofighter Typhoon used by the UK and Italy. It will enhance air superiority capabilities amidst increasing challenges posed by fifth-generation stealth fighters like China's Chengdu J-20 and Russia's Sukhoi Su-57.

Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton of the UK Royal Air Force emphasized the program's strategic importance in countering advanced aerial threats and maintaining air superiority. Speaking at the Royal United Services Institute, Knighton stressed that the RAF must adapt to conflicts against well-equipped and skilled adversaries, a departure from recent engagements in the Middle East and Afghanistan.

This partnership shows the commitment of Japan, the UK and Italy to combine know-how and stay at the forefront of aviation technology, ensuring robust defense capabilities against evolving global threats. [The National Interest]

## North Korea's Lazarus hacker group test new macOS trojan

(mc) Cybersecurity officials from Singapore-headquartered cybersecurity company Group-IB have claimed that North Korea's Lazarus Group was testing a new macOS trojan called 'RustyAttr' that uses unique extended file attributes to smuggle malicious code.

The Tauri program engine uses the trojan, which allows attackers to send and execute malicious scripts via special metadata attributes, helping steal essential data.

Experts stated that they aim to update their threat detection programs by analyzing the file attributes obtained to adapt to this trojan horse virus introduced by the North Korean group and to prevent malware distribution strategies. [SC Media]

## South Korean President Yoon holds bilateral meetings on sidelines of Peru APEC summit

(mc/jb/alk) On the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Summit, which was held in Peru between November 15-16, South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol held bilateral meetings to strengthen South Korea's ties and cooperation with various nations.

*South Korea and Peru agree on defense and mineral sector cooperation*

Yoon and Peru's President Dina Boluarte met to extend the bilateral cooperation between both nations to the defense industry, where South Korean companies are already engaged in shipbuilding on Peruvian shores.

As Peru is a significant partner for South Korea owing to its abundant mineral reserves, South Korean company HD Hyundai Heavy Metal Industries also signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with Peru's Servicios Industriales de la Marina, a state-owned shipyard, to collaborate in submarine production.

Hyundai has already secured a contract to the tune of USD 463 million with the Peruvian Navy to develop four naval vessels. The contract, which was signed earlier this April, included one 3400-ton Frigate, one 2200-ton Offshore Patrol Vessel (OPV) and two 1400-ton Landing Craft Units (LCUs). The ships are intended to be delivered to the Peruvian Navy by 2029.

The APEC summit also saw Korea Aerospace Industries sign an MOU with SEMAN Peru, SAC, which is a state-run aircraft maintenance organization, to produce KF-21 fighter jet components. Similarly, Hyundai Rotem which produces rolling stock and defense products, signed an agreement with Peruvian Army Weapons and Ammunitions Factory to develop Army ground equipment.

Peru and South Korea have accorded their bilateral meeting a crucial move forward in their "comprehensive strategic partnership". [Yonhap News Agency 1]

*South Korea and Japan raise concerns over Russia-North Korea cooperation in Ukraine war*

In a bilateral meeting between Yoon and Japanese PM Shigeru Ishiba, both state leaders expressed grave concern over North Korean troop deployment and support rendered to Russia in its war against Ukraine.

They affirmed their mutual cooperation to each other in this context, assuring that shuttle diplomacy will continue taking place to effectively rally communication and coordination between each other.

As 2025 marks the 60$^{th}$ year since Japan-ROK relations were normalized, both states have agreed to take their strategic partnership to the next level in the coming months. [Yonhap News Agency 2]

*South Korea and Vietnam agree to cooperate on mineral sector development*

Yoon met with Vietnam's newly elected President Luong Cuong to discuss their mutually beneficial cooperation in development and trade in the mineral sector. Both nations affirmed the need for communication and close coordination and promised to work on bettering their "special and important" relationship.

As they have previously committed to increasing bilateral trade to USD 150 billion in 2030, the mineral sector will form another prong in their economic partnership in the years to come. Vietnam remains South Korea's third biggest trading partner, after the United States and China. [Yonhap News Agency 3] [Vietnam Investment Review]

*Yoon, Brunei sultan meet to extend bilateral ties*

Yoon Suk and Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah of Brunei met on November 15 and discussed strengthening bilateral relations, notably cooperation in defense, infrastructure and digital technologies.

Yoon stressed the importance of strengthening cooperation, particularly in the crude oil and construction sectors, and called for the bilateral partnership to make progress on issues such as the construction of smart cities, the defense industry and the promotion of digital developments.

On the other hand, Bolkiah emphasized the importance of South Korea's contributions to Brunei's infrastructure. He reaffirmed the need for joint action in climate change and cyber security. [Yonhap News Agency]

*Yoon urges Xi Jinping to address North Korea's "provocations" and Russia ties*

In his meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping, Yoon urged China to take a constructive role in addressing North Korea's military provocations, particularly its deployment of troops to Russia.

Yoon expressed hope for collaboration between South Korea and China to promote stability in response to North Korea's "provocations", the war in Ukraine, and Russia-North Korea military cooperation. He also emphasized the importance of enhancing economic cooperation, which he called the "central axis" of their 30-year bilateral relations. He stressed the importance of maintaining a favorable environment under the bilateral free trade agreement between South Korea and China, which has been in place for ten years, to enhance cooperation in the service and investment sectors. [Yonhap News Agency 4]

In response, Xi Jinping noted that rising tensions on the Korean Peninsula do not align with China's interests and called for renewed efforts to support dialogue and negotiation. He also noted that despite significant changes in international and regional situations over the past two years, both countries' economies remain highly integrated, share cultural similarities, and are geographically close – advantages that should be leveraged to deepen cooperation. [China Daily] [Reuters]

## Poland deploys South Korean tanks at Russian border

(bw) Poland has deployed South Korean-made K2 tanks, produced by Hyundai Rotem, near Russia's Kaliningrad Oblast as part of its "East Shield" program. This initiative is aimed at bolstering defenses along Poland's borders with Russia and Belarus. [The EurAsian Times 1]

According to Poland's 16th Pomeranian Mechanized Division, seven K2 tanks were delivered to the 9th Brigade in Braniewo, approximately 150 kilometers from the Russian border, with additional units expected by the end of the year. These tanks will be equipped with Polish military systems, including advanced communications technology.

The East Shield program, launched in May 2024, represents Poland's most significant border fortification effort since 1945. With a budget of PLN 10 billion (USD 2.5 billion), it aims to strengthen NATO's

eastern flank and deter potential aggression from Russia and Belarus.

Kaliningrad Oblast, located between Poland and Lithuania, is a critical strategic region for Russia. It provides access to the Baltic Sea and serves as the primary base for the Russian Baltic Fleet, hosting significant land and air forces. [Kyiv Independent]

Poland's acquisition of K2 tanks stems from a USD 3.4 billion deal signed with South Korea in August 2022. The first shipment arrived in December 2022, marking the beginning of Poland's replacement of its aging Soviet-era tank fleet with the K2 as its primary main battle tank. [Eurasian Times 2]

Discussions are underway between South Korea and Poland to establish local production of the K2 tanks in Poland, with an agreement expected in the coming weeks. [Reuters]

## South Korea, U.S., and Japan form trilateral secretariat amid N. Korea-Russia tensions

(mc) The leaders of South Korea, the United States and Japan held a trilateral summit on November 15 in Peru on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit. They announced the establishment of a tripartite secretariat to enhance cooperation and co-ordination on common regional issues.

President Yoon Suk Yeol, US President Joe Biden and Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba underlined that the secretariat would oversee and implement cooperation initiatives to promote regional stability and security and expressed their desire to promote cooperation, including economic, technological and social dimensions.

Furthermore, the three heads of state condemned North Korea's deployment of troops to Russia. They underlined the threat to regional and global security posed by the deepening military ties between the two countries, including the transfer of munitions and missiles. [Yonhap News Agency]

## Taiwan's President Lai to visit pacific allies

(hs) Taiwan President Lai Ching-te is expected to make stopovers in Hawaii, and possibly Guam, on an

upcoming diplomatic tour to Taiwan's Pacific allies.

This marks Lai's first overseas engagement since taking office in May after his January election win. While the exact timing and destinations remain undisclosed, the trip could include visits to the Marshall Islands, Tuvalu, and Palau which are three of the 12 nations that maintain formal relations with Taiwan. The trip kept discreet due to its potential to provoke strong reactions from China.

China, which views Taiwan as part of its territory and labels Lai a separatist, has responded to past Taiwan-U.S. interactions with military drills. Chinese officials have urged the U.S. to prevent Lai's transit, highlighting rising tensions as U.S.-Taiwan ties grow. The visit also occurs as U.S. President-elect Donald Trump, who has a strong pro-Taiwan stance, prepares to take office, with Senator Marco Rubio nominated as his secretary of state. This shift follows President Biden's support for Taiwan's self-defence.

The Pacific leg of Lai's trip is significant as Beijing continues to sway Taiwan's allies in the region. This year for example, Nauru resumed diplomatic relations with China, underscoring Taiwan's ongoing struggle to preserve its limited international partnerships amidst increasing Chinese influence. Lai's visit is significant in trying to keep allies in the region. [Reuters]

## Taiwan affirms own positions of economic powerhouse thanks to AI and semiconductor

(sk) Lin Hsin-i, Taiwan's envoy at the 2024 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Economic Leaders' Meeting (AELM), reaffirmed Taiwan's position as an "enduring economic powerhouse."

In his address on November 13, Lin emphasized that despite a year marked by global supply chain restructuring and significant geopolitical shifts in the Asia-Pacific, Taiwan has effectively leveraged its economic strengths and value-driven diplomacy to garner international support and elevate its global standing. By focusing on the twin pillars of semiconductors and artificial intelligence, Taiwan aims to reinforce its critical role in the global supply chain, enhance national security, and build resilience, thereby solidifying its status as a lasting economic powerhouse. [CAN 1, in Chinese].

The 2024 APEC summit was held in Lima, Peru, from November 10 to 16, with the AELM taking place on

November 15 and 16 as part of the broader forum. Due to pressure from China, Taiwan's presidents have never attended APEC leaders' summits, despite Taiwan's full membership in APEC. [CNA 2, in Chinese] [Focus Taiwan].

## Taiwanese President Lai attends 2024 EU Investment Forum

(hs/am) President Lai Ching-te spoke at the 2024 European Union Investment Forum on November 18,, marking five years of collaboration between Taiwan and the EU. The forum has played a key role in boosting Taiwanese investment in Europe and positioning the EU as Taiwan's largest foreign investor.

Lai stressed the importance of Taiwan and the EU aligning against the growing threat of authoritarianism and building resilient, secure supply chains for global democracies. He called for an Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) between Taiwan and the EU to further strengthen their economies and deepen cooperation in high-tech, green energy, and other sectors. Lai highlighted the success of Taiwan's investments in the EU, with 22 new projects valued at NT 158.703 billion (USD 4.9 billion) in 2023, reflecting a 750 percent increase from the previous year.

Looking ahead, Lai urged innovative approaches to the EPA, which could expand collaboration in areas like semiconductors, AI, and digital tech, benefiting both regions' economies and ensuring stable global supply chains. He also acknowledged the EU's role in safeguarding peace in the Taiwan Strait, as demonstrated by its support amid China's military exercises.

Lai concluded by reaffirming Taiwan's commitment to democracy and international cooperation, particularly in supporting Ukraine, and thanked the European Economic and Trade Office (EETO) and other partners for their role in strengthening Taiwan-EU relations.

The EU, which enacted the European Chips Act in 2023 to strengthen its semiconductor ecosystem and reduce supply chain vulnerabilities, views Taiwan as a strategic partner. [Office of the President Republic of China (Taiwan)] [Taiwan News]

## Bangladesh Chief Advisor Yunus urges wealthy nations to take responsibility at

## COP29

(asa) During COP29 held in Azerbaijan on November 14, the interim leader of Bangladesh, Muhammed Yunus, expressed profound dissatisfaction with the ongoing climate finance discussions, describing them as "humiliating" for nations that bear minimal responsibility for the climate crisis but experience most severe consequences. During his speech on the sidelines of the conference, Yunus strongly condemned the demands made on developing nations to solicit financial aid from wealthier, high-emission nations. [DAWN]

Yunus's remarks reflect growing tensions between developed and developing nations at the summit. Developing countries are demanding at least USD 1.3 trillion annually in climate funding, far exceeding the current contributions from the United States, European Union, and Japan. Meanwhile, wealthy countries are pushing for private-sector funding to meet climate goals, a solution criticized by NGOs as unrealistic. [The Daily Star]

A recent report highlights record-high global carbon emissions, emphasizing the urgent need for climate action. Scientists from the Global Carbon Project warn that achieving the Paris Agreement's 1.5°C target now requires net-zero CO2 emissions by the late 2030s—a much shorter timeline than previously expected. [Dhaka Tribune]

In addition to his climate advocacy, Yunus, together with Pope Francis, launched the "Pope Francis Yunus 3Zero Club," an initiative aimed at promoting sustainability and social justice. The club focuses on empowering youth from marginalized communities to develop innovative and sustainable solutions. Yunus highlighted its goal of achieving zero poverty, zero unemployment, and zero carbon emissions. [Dhaka Tribune]

## UN supports Bangladesh interim government's reform commissions and initiatives

(lm) The United Nations has begun providing support to reform commissions established by Bangladesh's interim government to develop proposals for governance reforms. This was revealed by UN Resident Coordinator (UNRC) Gwyn Lewis during a meeting with Foreign Secretary Md Jashim Uddin last week.

Lewis emphasized the UN's willingness to share global expertise and best practices to assist the commissions and suggested conducting nationwide stakeholder consultations to finalize reform proposals. She also advocated for convening a Bangladesh Development Forum meeting involving development partners and government agencies to align priorities with the interim government's goals.

Discussions at the meeting included UN agency cooperation in Bangladesh, support for electoral process reforms, and technical assistance from the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights for capacity building within relevant authorities.

The foreign secretary expressed gratitude for the UN's assistance and reiterated Bangladesh's request to the UN secretary-general for an all-stakeholder conference on the Rohingya crisis, aimed at finding innovative and sustainable solutions. [The Daily Star]

## Indian Prime Minister Modi on three-nation tour covering Nigeria, Brazil, Guyana

(lm/ad) Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is currently on a five-day, three-nation tour aimed at strengthening strategic partnerships and fostering ties with the Global South. The trip includes visits to Nigeria, Brazil, and Guyana, marking significant milestones in India's foreign relations.

Modi arrived in Abuja, Nigeria, on November 17, marking the first visit by an Indian premier to the West African nation in 17 years. As part of his three-nation tour, the visit aimed to deepen India's global partnerships and strategic ties with Nigeria. Upon his arrival, Modi was ceremonially welcomed and presented the symbolic "Key to the City" of Abuja by Nigeria's Minister for Federal Capital Territory, Nyesom Ezenwo Wike.

During his visit, Modi engaged in high-level discussions with Nigerian President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, focusing on defense, trade, energy, and development. Both leaders pledged to address the developmental priorities of the Global South. Modi emphasized India's support for Nigeria's leadership role in the African Union and BRICS and acknowledged the significant contributions of the Indian diaspora in Nigeria.

The two nations signed three agreements covering customs cooperation, cultural exchange, and surveys. Modi announced India's delivery of 20 tons of

humanitarian aid for Nigerian flood victims and highlighted the USD 27 billion investments made by Indian companies in Nigeria, creating significant employment opportunities.

The Nigerian government honored Modi with the Grand Commander of the Order of Niger (GCON), its highest award, recognizing his contributions to bilateral ties. Modi dedicated the honor to the people of India and the longstanding friendship between the two countries.

Following his Nigeria visit, Modi travelled to Brazil for the G20 Summit in Rio de Janeiro, representing India as part of the Troika, alongside Brazil and South Africa. Modi emphasized the importance of continuing India's efforts during its presidency last year to prioritize the Global South in G20 discussions. [Hindustan Times] [The Times of India]

The final leg of the tour takes Modi to Guyana, marking the first visit by an Indian prime minister to the Caribbean nation in over 50 years. He will participate in the 2nd India-CARICOM Summit, aimed at renewing historical ties and exploring cooperation opportunities with Caribbean nations. During his visit, Modi will also address Guyana's Parliament and receive the Dominica Award of Honour for his efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic and contributions to strengthening ties with Dominica. [The Economic Times]

## India strengthens West Asian diplomacy amidst regional conflict

(lm) India has intensified its diplomatic engagement with Arab nations amidst the ongoing conflict in Gaza, the West Bank, and Lebanon. The arrival of new ambassadors from Jordan and Egypt to New Delhi signals the growing importance of maintaining ties with key players in the region.

External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar hosted Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud on November 13 for the second ministerial meeting of the Political, Security, Social, and Cultural Committee of the India-Saudi Strategic Partnership Council. Discussions included the welfare of the 2.65 million Indians in Saudi Arabia. A day later, Jaishankar met United Arab Emirates (UAE) Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan in Abu Dhabi, highlighting India's close ties with Gulf nations.

These meetings followed Saudi Arabia's recent summit with Arab and Islamic leaders, where Crown Prince

Mohammed bin Salman reiterated Saudi Arabia's commitment to a Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders and demanded an immediate cessation of Israel's military campaigns in Gaza and Lebanon.

The conflict has cast uncertainty over the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), launched at the G20 Summit in New Delhi in 2023. With Israel's Haifa port as a pivotal link, the prolonged unrest in Gaza and Lebanon poses challenges to the initiative. Officials remain cautious about its future, with Saudi Arabia's position on Israel presenting another potential obstacle. [The Hindu]

## India free trade negotiations progressing as scheduled, government clarifies

(lm) India's ongoing negotiations for Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with key partners, including the United Kingdom and the European Union (EU), are proceeding on schedule, contrary to speculation about delays. A senior government official reaffirmed the country's commitment to advancing these agreements, emphasizing that all discussions are continuing as planned.

In the coming weeks, India's commerce secretary will meet with the EU's Director-General to assess progress on the proposed India-EU trade agreement. This meeting will also include discussions under the framework of the Trade and Technology Council (TTC). Alongside the EU and UK negotiations, India is actively pursuing FTAs with Australia, Peru, Sri Lanka, and Oman.

India has already implemented FTAs with nations such as Japan, South Korea, Singapore, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). These agreements focus on reducing or eliminating customs duties on traded goods, easing norms for trade in services, and encouraging investment.

In its negotiations with Peru, the next round of discussions will commence after finalizing India's FTA strategy, a standardized document expected to be completed by the end of the year. The government also confirmed that talks on a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with Oman, completed in March, remain ongoing for further refinements. [The Economic Times]

## European Union grants Indian plantation sectors more time for EUDR compliance

(lm) The European Union has postponed the implementation of its Deforestation Regulation (EUDR), granting Indian plantation sectors such as coffee and rubber additional time to comply. Large operators and exporters now have until December 30, 2025, while micro and small growers have until June 30, 2026, to meet the stringent requirements. Previously, the deadline was set for December 2024.

EUDR mandates that forest-based produce must not originate from deforested land or involve unethical practices. Over 70 percent of Indian coffee is exported to the EU, making compliance critical for the sector. Despite India's coffee being predominantly shade-grown and biodiversity-friendly, compliance with EUDR poses significant financial and technological challenges for growers, particularly smallholders.

The Coffee Board of India is developing a platform to assist producers in meeting the regulations. However, planters express concerns about the costs and ambiguities involved. K.G. Rajeev, chairman of the Karnataka Planters' Association, highlighted the burden of compliance and called for government and industry support to facilitate adherence.

For the rubber sector, the postponement has provided a short-term boost to the international market. The Rubber Board, in partnership with TRST01, plans to issue due diligence certificates to rubber exporters, beginning with phased registration in Kerala. Although India exports only 4,000 tons of natural rubber annually, EUDR compliance will also impact rubber product exporters, who must source from compliant growers. [The Hindu]

## Nepal's President Paudel urges developed nations to fulfill climate commitments

(dg) During his visit to Azerbaijan, President Ramchandra Paudel called on developed countries to honor their climate commitments. Meeting with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, Paudel emphasized Nepal's minimal carbon footprint and the disproportionate impact of climate change on the country.

He highlighted issues such as the melting of Himalayan snow, reduced clean water sources, and recurring natural disasters. Paudel urged developed nations to

uphold their pledges under the Paris Agreement, noting Nepal's target of achieving net-zero carbon emissions by 2045. He also praised Azerbaijan's development and expressed hope for investment in Nepal's agriculture, tourism, and hydropower sectors. [The Kathmandu Post]

## Nepal begins historic power export to Bangladesh via India

(rs) Nepal has commenced exporting electricity to Bangladesh through Indian transmission lines, marking a significant milestone in regional energy trade. On Friday, Nepal began supplying 40MW of hydroelectric power to Bangladesh, a first for the two countries. This historic export follows a tripartite agreement among Nepal, India, and Bangladesh.

The power will be transmitted via the 400KV Dhalkebar-Muzaffarpur transmission line in India, with Nepal earning an estimated NPR 330 million (USD 2.44 million) annually from the sales. This arrangement will continue annually from mid-June to mid-November for five years. Each year, Nepal is expected to export 144,000 MWh of electricity to Bangladesh at 6.4 US cents per unit.

Officials from all three nations virtually inaugurated the power flow. Nepal’s Energy Minister Dipak Khadka, India’s Union Minister Manohar Lal, and Bangladesh’s Fouzul Kabir Khan celebrated the collaboration as a landmark achievement in South Asian energy cooperation. Khadka praised the initiative as a major step in Nepal's efforts to expand electricity production and regional trade.

The export reflects India’s facilitation of the first trilateral power transaction, announced during former Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal's visit to India in May 2023. This collaboration underscores the growing sub-regional energy integration, strengthening economic ties between Nepal, India, and Bangladesh.

Bangladesh’s energy scenario highlights the need for renewable energy, with hydroelectricity making up just 1 percent of its 24,911 MW capacity. Experts view Nepal’s hydroelectric potential, estimated at 40,000 MW, as critical for reducing reliance on fossil fuels in the region.

Nepal plans to generate 28,500 MW of hydroelectric power by 2035 to boost foreign currency earnings and offset its trade deficit of NPR 1.44 trillion (USD 10.65 billion).

Bangladesh's Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus has called for a South Asian electricity grid connecting Nepal, Bhutan, India, and Bangladesh to maximize untapped hydroelectric potential in the Himalayas. He emphasized that Nepal's proximity and low-cost electricity offer significant benefits for regional energy security and environmental sustainability. [The Rising Nepal] [The Kathmandu Post]

## Pakistan, Russia urge regional collaboration on Afghanistan amid shared security concerns

(lm) Pakistan and Russia have called for enhanced regional cooperation to address security and stability issues in Afghanistan. This came during a visit by Moscow's special representative for Afghanistan, Ambassador Zamir Kabulov, who met with Pakistan's foreign secretary Amna Baloch and additional secretary Ahmad Naseem Warraich in Islamabad on November 14. Both sides emphasized the need for coordinated efforts to ensure a peaceful and prosperous Afghanistan.

The talks focused on shared security threats linked to Afghanistan. Russia has expressed concerns over Daesh activities, including attacks linked to militants with Afghan ties, while Pakistan accuses Kabul of harboring the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), responsible for cross-border violence—a claim the Afghan government denies.

Russia has recently taken steps toward normalizing ties with the Taliban by announcing plans to delist the group as a terrorist organization. Pakistan, however, has maintained a confrontational stance, pressuring Afghanistan to curb TTP activities.

Both nations view Afghanistan's stability as critical to regional connectivity and economic initiatives such as the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) Gas Pipeline and the Trans-Afghan Railway. Persistent security challenges have delayed these projects, but Pakistan continues to offer access to its ports for Central Asian nations, aiming to facilitate trade and strengthen regional ties.

While security concerns persist, Afghanistan's stability remains key to unlocking the economic potential of the region. [Arab News]

## Pakistan pushes for climate finance and resilience initiatives at COP29

(ja/lm) At the COP29 summit in Baku, Azerbaijan, Pakistan has intensified its call for global climate finance commitments while unveiling major initiatives aimed at bolstering its climate resilience. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif emphasized the urgent need for developed nations to honor financial pledges made in previous COP summits, advocating for grant-based funding to ease the burden on vulnerable nations like Pakistan. He highlighted the devastating impacts of climate change on the country, including the catastrophic 2022 floods that caused over 1,700 deaths and USD 30 billion in economic losses. [DAWN] [www.thenews.com.pk]

*National Climate Finance Strategy unveiled*

As a centerpiece of its COP29 agenda, Pakistan unveiled its first-ever National Climate Finance Strategy (NCFS). Introduced by Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb and Climate Change Coordinator Romina Khurshid Alam, the NCFS aims to mobilize resources for climate mitigation and adaptation. The strategy prioritizes resilience in key sectors such as agriculture, infrastructure, and urban planning, while addressing an estimated USD 348 billion climate finance gap by 2030.

A National Climate Finance Portal will track funding inflows and outflows to ensure transparency and accountability. Prime Minister Shehbaz highlighted the importance of international support, warning that without firm commitments, developing nations like Pakistan will struggle to meet their climate targets, which are critical for global progress. [Arab News 1]

*Climaventures Initiative for climate-tech startups*

In a bid to attract private sector investment, Pakistan launched the Climaventures initiative, providing USD 50 million to support climate-tech startups. This program, led by the National Rural Support Programme (NRSP) with backing from the Green Climate Fund (GCF), offers technical guidance, grants, and equity to develop sustainable solutions for local climate challenges.

NRSP aims to bridge Pakistan's funding gaps while fostering innovation through partnerships with stakeholders, including international organizations like the World Bank and Asian Development Bank. Georges Sander, a climate investment specialist, noted that Climaventures empowers local entrepreneurs to address pressing climate issues. [Arab News 2]

*Collaboration with Global Green Growth Initiative*

Pakistan also signed a four-year agreement with the Global Green Growth Initiative (GGGI) to advance green growth and address challenges such as water scarcity, deforestation, and energy inefficiencies. The agreement, formalized by Climate Change Ministry Secretary Aisha Humera Moriani and GGGI Deputy Director-General Helena McLeod, focuses on mobilizing green finance and strengthening Pakistan's transition to a green economy. [Arab News 3]

*The case for global climate finance*

Throughout COP29, Pakistan has underscored the disproportionate allocation of global climate finance, with wealthier nations and major economies like China and the U.S. receiving the bulk of investments. PM Shehbaz argued that developing countries require USD 6.8 trillion by 2030 to achieve even half of their nationally determined contributions under the Paris Agreement. He urged greater equity in financing to support nations most vulnerable to climate impacts.

Pakistan's appeals come as the summit focuses on setting a new global climate finance target, blending public and private resources to raise trillions for adaptation projects. With little of the USD 9 billion pledged for Pakistan's 2022 flood recovery delivered so far, Prime Minister Shehbaz called for restored confidence in the pledging process. [DAWN] [www.thenews.com.pk]

*Context of urgency*

Pakistan, ranked as the fifth most climate-vulnerable country globally, continues to face mounting climate challenges. In addition to floods, the country battles severe air pollution, particularly in Punjab, where Lahore recently recorded the worst air quality globally. Toxic smog, caused by vehicle emissions, industrial smoke, and agricultural burning, has forced school closures and hospitalizations, further underscoring the need for immediate action.

## Pakistan's army chief identifies non-state actors, disinformation as threats to peace

(lm) Pakistan's Army Chief General Asim Munir has flagged violent non-state actors and the spread of disinformation as major global challenges during the Margalla Dialogue 2024 in Islamabad. Organized by the Islamabad Policy Research Institute, the conference convened policymakers and experts to address critical

issues, with General Munir emphasizing Pakistan's role in fostering global stability.

Munir highlighted the threat posed by cross-border militancy, urging Afghanistan's interim government to prevent its territory from being used for terrorism against Pakistan, particularly by groups like the banned Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan. Islamabad has repeatedly accused Kabul of facilitating cross-border attacks, allegations Afghan authorities deny.

The army chief also addressed the dual role of technology in information dissemination and disinformation, warning that unregulated freedom of expression fosters hate speech and destabilizes societal structures. He called for comprehensive laws to curb disinformation while maintaining moral values.

General Munir expressed optimism about Pakistan's future, highlighting the country's young population, rich natural resources, and potential as a global trade hub. He noted Pakistan's significant contributions to global agriculture and the freelancing industry, underscoring its strategic geographical position for international trade.

He reaffirmed Pakistan's stance to avoid involvement in global conflicts while continuing to promote peace and stability worldwide. [Arab News]

## IMF team arrives in Sri Lanka for EFF third tranche review

(lm) An International Monetary Fund (IMF) delegation, led by Senior Mission Chief Peter Breuer, has begun its visit to Sri Lanka to conduct the third review of the country's Extended Fund Facility (EFF) program. The team will remain until November 23, holding discussions with President Anura Kumara Dissanayake and other officials.

The EFF program, which provides policy guidance and financial support, is key to Sri Lanka's economic recovery efforts following its 2022 bankruptcy. The country has already received two tranches of the USD 2.9 billion credit facility, with the current review focusing on the next steps in the agreed reform agenda. [Daily News]

## Director of COSATT meets with Defence Secretary of Sri Lanka

(sl) On November 13, Dr. Nishchal N. Pandey, Director of the Consortium of South Asian Think Tanks (COSATT), met with Sri Lanka's Defence Secretary, Air Vice Marshal Sampath Thuyakonta (retired), at the Defense Headquarters complex in Sri Jayawardenepura. During the meeting, Dr. Pandey reaffirmed COSATT's cooperation with the Institute of National Security Studies (INSS), which operates under the Ministry of Defense of Sri Lanka. [Ministry of Defence – Sri Lanka]

## UNFPA distributes dignity kits to Cambodian women and girls impacted by floods

(mfr) The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) has launched a proactive initiative to protect vulnerable women and girls in Cambodia as the country braces for increased flood risks and other natural disasters. As part of the preparedness effort, UNFPA has acquired 1,000 dignity kits to be distributed to flood-affected communities, survivors of gender-based violence (GBV), and those impacted by other disasters such as typhoons and droughts.

The kits, which contain hygiene supplies, clothing, and information on sexual and reproductive health and GBV support services, will be distributed through various channels. The Cambodian Red Cross will deliver 600 kits to remote areas, while 300 kits will go to Provincial Departments of Women's Affairs in Kampong Cham, Tboung Khmum, Preah Vihear, and Stung Treng provinces, supporting GBV survivors. An additional 100 kits will be given to the Cambodian Women for Peace and Development to assist vulnerable female entertainment workers.

This initiative follows a joint assessment by the Humanitarian Response Forum, the Ministry of Water Resources and Meteorology, and the National Disaster Management Committee, which predicts above-average rainfall and heightened flooding risks from September to November 2024. UNFPA's continued focus is on addressing GBV and advancing sexual and reproductive health rights, ensuring support for vulnerable women and girls during emergencies.

UNFPA Cambodia Representative Sandra Bernklau emphasized the importance of dignity kits, noting that they help women and girls maintain their safety and well-being during crises when they are most at risk of violence and abuse. [Khmer Times]

## Cambodian Supreme Court joins ASEAN judiciary meeting

(mfr) The Cambodian Supreme Court led by Supreme Court President Chiv Keng, is participating in this week's 11th Meeting of the Council of ASEAN Chief Justices (CACJ) and related ASEAN+ events in Cebu, Philippines. The meetings, hosted by Alexander G. Gesmundo, President of the Supreme Court of the Philippines, focus on enhancing judicial cooperation within ASEAN and with key partners, including China, Japan, and South Korea.

Key topics discussed include the progress of ASEAN-plus cooperation, the future of CACJ, and various judiciary-related matters such as the ASEAN Court website, civil case coordination, information technology in case management, and training on cross-border child disputes. The agenda also includes the first-ever meeting of bankruptcy judges and a video conference on ASEAN Cooperation Plus.

The discussions will culminate in the adoption of the "Cebu Declaration," summarizing the outcomes and setting priorities for future collaboration. The meetings aim to facilitate judicial cooperation and provide frameworks for addressing regional and international civil disputes. [Khmer Times]

## Cambodian defense minister leads delegation to 18th ADMM

(mfr) Cambodian Minister of National Defence General Tea Seiha is leading a high-ranking delegation of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF) to participate in the 18th ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM), the 11th ADMM-Plus, and associated events in Vientiane, Laos, this week.

The meetings, held under the theme "ASEAN: Working Together for Peace, Security, and Resilience," aim to strengthen trust, military capacity, and cooperation among ASEAN and Plus countries. Discussions will focus on enhancing regional peace, security, and resilience.

General Seiha will also participate in several key events, including the ASEAN-China and ASEAN-US Defence Ministers' Informal Meetings, the 50th anniversary of ASEAN-Australia Dialogue Relations, and the 35th anniversary of ASEAN-ROK Dialogue Relations.

Additionally, the ADMM Chairmanship will be handed over to Malaysia. Bilateral meetings between General Seiha and defense leaders from ASEAN and Plus countries are expected to further reinforce Cambodia's defense relationships. [Khmer Times]

## Indonesia urges action to overcome digital divide in Asia-pacific region at APEC ministerial meeting

(gk) At the Ministerial Meeting of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) held last week in Lima, Peru, Indonesian Foreign Minister Sugiono highlighted the necessity of innovation and digitalization as the driving force of the economy of Asia-Pacific region. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Indonesia]

Emphasizing especially the urgency of bridging the significant digital divide still present in the Asia-Pacific region, Sugiono pointed out that despite the region being a major global digital economy hub, more than 1.7 billion people do not have internet access, while nearly 70 per cent of workers in the middle- and low-income countries lack basic digital skills. He also explained that Indonesia considers equitable development of digital infrastructure a fundamental step, and programs like the Digital Village Initiative have demonstrated the importance of access to technology for rural and vulnerable communities. He further added that such infrastructure should be complemented with adequate skill training that helps every individual to take up opportunities in the digital economy.

While speaking about the economic transformation, light was thrown on how Indonesia is continuing to promote initiatives that support the transition from the informal sector to the formal sector. This includes expanding access to financing for micro and small enterprises, entrepreneurship training, and social security for workers in the formal sectors. Empowerment of women was also discussed; according to the minister, gender gap must be addressed immediately to ensure full participation of women in the digital economy, and that gender-responsive policies implemented by Indonesia have included access to affordable digital devices, skills training and other inclusive strategies. [Jakarta Globe] [Antara]

## Indonesian parliament asks UN to revoke Israel's membership

(mu) The Indonesian Parliament has officially called on the United Nations (UN) to revoke Israel's membership citing violations of international law, particularly its treatment of Palestinians.

This request was made during a parliamentary session on November 14, that emphasized Indonesia's strong opposition to Israel's policies in the occupied Palestinian territories. [Antara]

## Indonesia to promote emission reduction in all provincial and regional governments to tackle climate crisis

(gk) At a discussion held on the sidelines of the 29th United Nations Climate Change Conference (UN COP 29) in Azerbaijan on November 15, Indonesia announced plans to adopt a sub-national approach in its fight against climate change. Starting next year, it will implement measures to achieve greenhouse gas emission reduction targets at the provincial level.

Priyanto Rohmatullah, Environment Director at the National Development Planning Ministry, stated that from 2025, Indonesia will promote a more integrated approach to climate action across all provinces and regional governments.

The discussion also highlighted Indonesia's commitment to balancing climate change mitigation with economic development. Indonesia has set more ambitious climate targets in its second Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) document. This updated document, to be submitted to the UN Climate Change Conference next year, includes new initiatives targeting the fisheries sector and the upstream oil and gas sub-sectors for emission reductions. [Antara]

## ASEAN Policy Forum discusses regional education reform

(cc) The recent ASEAN Policy Forum on Higher Education, held in Vientiane, convened policymakers, academics, and industry leaders to explore strategies for fostering resilience and inclusivity in ASEAN's educational systems.

Key topics included enhancing resilience and adaptability, promoting connectivity and inclusion, and standardizing qualifications across the region. The forum also addressed challenges such as technological advancements and environmental issues. [ASEAN Main Portal] [The Laotian Times]

## International Labor Organization (ILO) to take action against Myanmar's military administration

(tl) The International Labor Organization (ILO) has decided to take action against Myanmar's military junta for human rights violations, citing the country's failure to comply with the ILO's recommendations. The ILO Commission of Inquiry has called for an end to the violence, the release of detained unionists, the restoration of civil rights, and the cessation of forced labor practices, after finding that the junta had severely restricted civil liberties and trade union rights since its 2021 coup.

The ILO Governing Body is set to review a draft resolution on Myanmar in March 2025, with a final decision expected at the ILO Conference in June. Since the military ousted the elected government in February 2021, labor advocates have been calling for international action. Potential measures under Article 33 of the ILO's constitution include halting support from U.N. agencies, suspending humanitarian aid, withdrawing diplomatic recognition, designating the military as a terrorist group, and subjecting military leaders involved in labor rights violations to international prosecution and possible economic sanctions. [Radio Free Asia][The Irrawaddy]

## Philippines, United States sign military intelligence-sharing agreement to counter China

(lm/rv) The Philippines and the United States have signed the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), marking a significant deepening of their security alliance. The pact, finalized on November 18 by Philippine Defense Secretary Gilberto Teodoro and US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin in Manila, enables the secure sharing of classified military information and facilitates access to advanced US defense capabilities.

The agreement aims to bolster defense collaboration in response to growing tensions with China, particularly in the contested South China Sea, a vital trade route valued at over USD 3 trillion annually. Both nations reaffirmed their commitment to regional security under their 1951 mutual defense treaty, which provides for joint responses to potential attacks, including those in the South China Sea.

The signing ceremony included the groundbreaking for a combined coordination center designed to enhance real-time information sharing and interoperability between the two countries' armed forces. Austin emphasized the US's "ironclad commitment" to its alliance with the Philippines, highlighting the agreement's role in addressing regional challenges.

This development follows a series of measures aimed at strengthening US-Philippine security ties. These include USD 500 million in US military aid, expanded access for US troops to Philippine bases, and ongoing discussions about the potential acquisition of the US Typhon midrange missile system, demonstrated earlier this year during joint exercises.

The heightened security cooperation comes amid China's increasing maritime assertiveness, including its harassment of Philippine vessels and rejection of a 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling that invalidated its sweeping territorial claims. As maritime confrontations escalate, the Philippines views the US presence as critical to maintaining peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region.

Austin's visit also includes a planned trip to Palawan, near the South China Sea, where he will meet with Philippine forces stationed in the area. [Al Jazeera] [Voice of America]

The enhanced military cooperation follows a series of steps to strengthen US-Philippine ties, including USD 500 million in US military aid, expanded access for US troops to Philippine bases, and discussions about the potential acquisition of the US Typhon midrange missile system. These efforts come as the Philippines increasingly looks to bolster its defenses in response to China's assertive actions in the region.

Meanwhile, as part of these enhanced security measures, the Philippines also carried out a resupply mission to its outpost at the Second Thomas Shoal in the South China Sea on November 15. The mission successfully delivered supplies and personnel to the BRP Sierra Madre, a World War II-era vessel intentionally grounded at the shoal in 1999 to assert Philippine sovereignty over the area. The mission

marked the third successful trip since a temporary agreement with China was signed in July. [Rappler] [Yahoo!]

## PM Lawrence Wong make working visit to Peru and Brazil

(fi) Singapore Prime Minister and Minister of Finance Lawrence Wong concluded his visit to Peru on November 14 to 16 to attend the 31st Asia-Pacific Cooperation (APEC) Economic Leaders Meeting at the invitation of Her Excellency Dina Ercilia Boluarte Zegarra, President of the Republic of Peru. In line with the theme "Empower, Include, grow", APEC leaders discussed ways to promote trade and investment for inclusive interconnected growth, transition toward the formal and global economy and achieve sustainable growth for resilient development.

Singapore is a member of the 21-economy APEC group which includes major powers such as the US, China, and Russia -accounting for nearly half of global trade. During the summit Prime Minister Wong highlighted concerns regarding weakening global support for free trade and emphasized the need to bolster trade and investment ties amid declining global support for free trade and geopolitical tension. APEC leaders are collectively committed to advancing multilateral trade, inclusive economic growth, and tackling climate change actions. Singapore also views APEC as a platform for collaboration on supply chains, the digital economy, and sustainability benefitting small, open economies.

Demonstrating its commitment, Singapore has offered to host the APEC summit in 2030, further solidifying its role as a key player in the region's economic agenda.

PM Wong also attended the G20 Summit in Rio de Janeiro from November 17 to 20 at the invitation of President of Federative Republic of Brazil, Luiz Inácio Lula de Silva. With "Building a Just Word and a Sustainable Planet" as the theme, G20 leaders discussed ways to address global challenges of equality, hunger and poverty, promote sustainable and inclusive growth, and rally support for global governance reform. PM Wong also discussed the importance of multilateral cooperation in bolstering growth, the reform of global governance institutions for greater development impact, energy transitions to job creation to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs Singapore]

## Singapore pledges up to USD 500 million to finance climate action in Asia

(fi) In a significant move towards advancing green development, Singapore recently announced an ambitious funding initiative of USD 500 million (SGD 670 million) as part of the Financing Asia's Transition Partnership (FAST-P). This initiative aims to accelerate decarbonization efforts across Asia, focusing on the region's most challenging decarbonizing sectors and providing critical funding for sustainable development.

This funding is part of a broader USD 5 billion (SGD 6.7 billion) green finance to meet Asia's urgent green and transition financing needs—an essential step in enabling the region to meet its climate goals. The new fund, alongside concessional capital from other global partners, will act as a catalyst to attract commercial capital and additional sources of financing.

The FAST-P initiative will focus on decarbonizing challenging sectors like heavy industry and transportation and supporting advanced low-carbon technologies and sustainable industrial solutions. By prioritizing these areas, the partnership aims to accelerate Asia's shift toward a low-carbon economy and provide essential funding for this transition.

The Monetary Authority of Singapore's (MAS) Financing Asia's Transition Partnership (FAST-P), launched at COP28 in 2023, received an update announced by Singapore's Minister for Sustainability and the Environment, Grace Fu, at COP29. The refreshed initiative emphasizes accelerating capital flows for Asia's green transition, aiming to attract private investments through a new concessional capital pool.

FAST-P prioritizes hard-to-decarbonize sectors such as heavy industry and transportation, investing in low-carbon technologies and sustainable solutions. This targeted support is essential for addressing Asia's green funding gap, highlighted by Ambassador for Climate Action Ravi Menon. Menon identified challenges like high upfront costs, lengthy payback periods, and regulatory uncertainties that hinder private capital in decarbonization projects.

FAST-P will leverage up to USD 4 billion in commercial capital to support projects including coal power phase-outs, grid modernization, and industrial decarbonization, crucial for Asia's low-carbon shift. By bridging financing gaps, FAST-P aims to play a pivotal role in securing Asia's sustainable future. [The Independent Singapore News]

## Thailand advocates for FTAAP at APEC Summit to enhance trade and regional connectivity

(bk) On November 16, Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra joined the APEC Economic Leaders' Retreat, chaired by Peru's President Dina Ercilia Boluarte Zegarra, prior to the closing of the 31st APEC Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Lima.

In her address, the prime minister emphasized the need for regional economic integration, advocating for the Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific (FTAAP) as a key mechanism to enhance trade sustainability and encourage broad stakeholder participation. She also called for increased physical and digital connectivity across the region, highlighting the need to expand digital infrastructure and the APEC Business Travel Card (ABTC) to facilitate mobility, especially for digital nomads. On sustainability, Paetongtarn urged APEC members to continue their efforts on the Bangkok Goals for a Bio-Circular-Green (BCG) economy, set ambitious targets for the green transition, and explore carbon credit markets and advanced agricultural technologies to improve food security. During the summit, three major documents were endorsed: the APEC Economic Leaders' Declaration, the Ichma Statement on FTAAP, and the Lima Roadmap. [Bangkok Post]

The Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific (FTAAP) is a proposed trade agreement aimed at creating a comprehensive, open, and inclusive free trade area across the 21 member economies of APEC. These members include Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Peru, the Philippines, Russia, Singapore, Thailand, the United States, Vietnam, and Chinese Taipei (Taiwan). FTAAP seeks to promote regional economic integration by reducing trade barriers, enhancing investment flows, and fostering economic cooperation among these diverse economies. While it remains a long-term goal, efforts continue within APEC to lay the groundwork for its eventual realization.

## India imposes anti-dumping duty on chemical imports from China, South Korea, Thailand

(hrs) India has imposed an anti-dumping duty of up to USD 557 per ton on Epichlorohydrin, a chemical primarily used in the adhesive industry, imported from

China, Korea, and Thailand. The measure, effective for five years, aims to protect domestic manufacturers from the adverse impact of imports priced below normal market levels. [Business Standard]

## India, Vietnam highlighted as possible venues for Russia-United States summit between Putin, Trump

(lm) Vietnam and India have been highlighted as potential venues in Asia for a high-profile summit between Russian President Vladimir Putin and U.S. President-elect Donald Trump, according to Konstantin Sukhoverkhov of the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), a prominent Russian think tank specializing in foreign policy and international relations. The official also mentioned countries outside Asia, including Egypt, South Africa, and Brazil, as possible alternatives.

The comment comes after Putin, in a recent speech in Sochi, expressed readiness to resume dialogue with the U.S., while stressing that the initiative must come from Washington. Sukhoverkhov emphasized that choosing a venue will require careful consideration of logistical and security factors.

Vietnam has significant experience hosting diplomatic events, including the 2017 APEC Summit in Da Nang, where Trump and Putin met, and the 2019 U.S.-North Korea Summit in Hanoi. Similarly, India, with its robust infrastructure and diplomatic ties, is seen as a strong contender. [Tuoi Tre News]

## Vietnam strengthens global presence with strategic initiatives at APEC, G20 Summits

(hn) At the APEC CEO Summit 2024 in Lima, Vietnam's President Luong Cuong emphasized the critical role of APEC as a platform for fostering global trade, promoting peace, and ensuring inclusive development. He outlined four priorities for APEC member economies: supporting peace and stability, ensuring equal access to opportunities, addressing climate change with clean energy solutions, and responsibly developing disruptive technologies like AI. President Cuong also highlighted the business community's role in driving innovation in green, digital, and circular economies, reinforcing Vietnam's commitment to multilateralism, free trade, and global cooperation.

[VietnamNews] [Thanh nien, in Vietnamese] [Thong tan xa Vietnam, in Vietnamese]

Vietnam's Vice Prime Minister Bui Thanh Son also contributed to APEC's regional cooperation at the 35th APEC Ministerial Meeting (AMM 35) in Lima. His recommendations included enhancing digital governance, supporting MSMEs through better access to capital and markets, and expanding digital skills training. These proposals align with Vietnam's ongoing digital transformation efforts, aimed at creating job opportunities and integrating informal workers into the formal economy. The AMM 35 laid the groundwork for APEC's future focus on innovation, clean energy, and fair trade, as well as progress toward the Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific (FTAAP). [Vietnam News]

Meanwhile, Vietnam's Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh attended the G20 Summit in Brazil from November 16 to 19, marking the nation's fifth appearance at the forum. The summit focused on creating a sustainable world, and Prime Minister Chinh used the opportunity to present Vietnam as an innovative and proactive nation ready to tackle global challenges. [VietnamNews] [Bao dien tu chinh phu, in Vietnamese]

## Vietnam strengthens strategic partnerships with Brazil and Peru

(lm/hn) Vietnam has solidified its relationships with Brazil and Peru, marking a significant step in its diplomatic engagement with Latin America.

*Vietnam-Brazil Strategic Partnership*

Vietnam and Brazil have elevated their bilateral relationship to a strategic partnership, as announced during Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh's meeting with Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva on November 17 in Rio de Janeiro. The talks coincided with Prime Minister Chinh's participation in the G20 Summit.

The strategic partnership framework aims to bolster cooperation on bilateral, regional, and global issues, focusing on high technology, digital transformation, energy transition, biofuels, and climate change. Both nations also committed to advancing peace and stability in line with international law, including the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

Economic collaboration takes center stage, with Vietnam and Brazil setting ambitious trade targets of

USD 10 billion by 2025 and USD 15 billion by 2030. Brazil, Vietnam's leading trade partner in Latin America, saw bilateral trade grow to over USD 7.1 billion in 2023, up from USD 1.53 billion in 2011. Prime Minister Chinh urged Brazil to recognize Vietnam's market economy status and explore a free trade agreement with MERCOSUR, South America's prominent trading bloc.

Defense cooperation, including officer training and peacekeeping operations, will expand under a 2023 memorandum. Brazil will also participate in Vietnam's International Defense Exhibition in December 2024. Both leaders exchanged invitations for state visits in 2025, symbolizing the strengthening ties. [Tuoi Tre News] [The Investor]

*Vietnam-Peru deepens bilateral ties*

Vietnam State President Luong Cuong's historic visit to Peru from November 12–14 marked the 30th anniversary of diplomatic relations. During talks with Peruvian President Dina Boluarte, the leaders issued a joint declaration to deepen collaboration under shared commitments to multilateralism, international law, and free trade.

Economic relations are set to grow through the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), which both countries are part of. The CPTPP eliminates tariffs, promotes trade, and enforces labor and environmental standards among its 11 member nations across the Asia-Pacific and Americas. Vietnam, Peru's largest trading partner in Southeast Asia, will expand cooperation in agriculture, infrastructure, and investment, particularly through Peru's Chancay Port project.

The two nations will also strengthen ties in technology, education, and renewable energy, emphasizing digital transformation and sustainability. Cultural exchanges and people-to-people ties will be expanded under existing agreements.

During the visit, President Cuong received the Order "The Sun of Peru," Peru's highest honor, in recognition of his efforts to advance bilateral relations. In return, Cuong invited Boluarte to visit Vietnam, reinforcing the commitment to a shared vision for economic and diplomatic growth. [Viet Nam News]

## Bangladesh interim leader Yunus's pursuit of Sheikh Hasina sparks diplomatic tensions with India

(lm) Bangladesh's interim Chief Adviser, Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus, has announced sweeping measures to address political instability and human rights concerns, including the extradition of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina from India. These developments are intensifying diplomatic tensions between Dhaka and New Delhi, further complicated by international scrutiny and a push for action by Indian Americans in the United States.

Yunus declared on November 17, 2024, that his administration would seek Hasina's extradition from India, where she fled in August following a student-led uprising that toppled her 15-year rule. Bangladesh has approached Interpol to issue a red notice for Hasina's arrest and is in discussions with the International Criminal Court (ICC) to prosecute her for alleged human rights violations, including enforced disappearances and hundreds of deaths during her tenure.

"We will seek the return of the fallen autocrat Sheikh Hasina from India," Yunus stated in a televised address marking his first 100 days in office. He emphasized the importance of holding Hasina and her associates accountable, a move that could strain Bangladesh-India relations, given Hasina's historical ties with New Delhi, where she is viewed as a trusted ally. [The Hindu]

Furthermore, the Yunus administration dismissed reports of widespread violence against minorities as "exaggerated" and politically motivated. In his address, Yunus assured that his government is committed to safeguarding all communities, highlighting measures such as the peaceful celebration of Durga Puja under enhanced security. [The Daily Star 1]

Information Adviser Nahid Islam reinforced this stance, emphasizing that protecting minorities is a domestic responsibility. He criticized India for its silence on alleged atrocities committed by the Awami League before Hasina's ouster and urged New Delhi to support Bangladesh constructively rather than interfere. Additionally, the Bangladeshi government expressed dissatisfaction with Hasina's frequent political statements from Indian exile and formally requested New Delhi to curb her public remarks. [The Daily Star 2] [The Daily Star 3]

Meanwhile, Indian Americans are mobilizing to urge the incoming Trump administration to impose

economic sanctions on Bangladesh over alleged persecution of Hindus and other minorities. Influential community leader Dr. Bharat Barai accused the Yunus government of being a "military-controlled puppet regime" and called for sanctions targeting Bangladesh's garment industry, which constitutes 80 percent of its exports.

Barai also urged India to take a stronger stance, advocating sanctions against Bangladesh if minority persecution continues. His appeal reflects growing concerns over South Asia's instability and its implications for religious minorities.

President-elect Donald Trump's recent statements have further fueled these tensions. Trump condemned the "barbaric violence" against minorities in Bangladesh, blaming the Biden administration for inaction and pledging stronger protections for Hindu Americans. "This would have never happened on my watch," he asserted, framing minority rights as a priority under his administration. [NDTV]

## Delegation of Bangladesh's BNP meets US chargé d'affaires in Dhaka

(lm) A three-member delegation from the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), led by Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, recently met with Megan Bouldin, the US Embassy chargé d'affaires, in Dhaka. While the BNP did not disclose specific details, the discussions reportedly centered on issues of mutual interest between Bangladesh and Washington. [The Daily Star]

## United Kingdom Minister for Indo-Pacific visits Bangladesh, discusses support for national reconciliation

(asa) The British Minister for the Indo-Pacific, Catherine West, has expressed the United Kingdom's support for Bangladesh's interim government, emphasizing the importance of national reconciliation and accountability. During her meeting with Foreign Affairs Adviser Md Touhid Hossain, West urged Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus to outline his vision for the country's political future.

London is committed to assisting Bangladesh in stabilizing its economy and advancing toward a democratic future. West also reaffirmed the UK's

support for Bangladesh's ongoing political reforms, climate action, trade, and security cooperation. Additionally, the UK has pledged GBP 10 million to support Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, providing shelter, food, medical supplies, and education.

This marks the first official UK ministerial visit since the formation of the interim government in August 2024, aiming to strengthen the partnership between the two nations. [Dhaka Tribune]

## Bangladesh seeks to increase Brazilian investment

(vk) Bangladesh's Fisheries and Livestock Adviser Farida Akhter has called for Brazilian investment to strengthen economic relations between the two nations. Speaking at a reception hosted by the Brazilian Embassy in Dhaka on November 15 to mark Brazil's 202nd Independence Day, Akhter encouraged Brazilian Ambassador Paulo Fernando Dias Feres to secure investment during his tenure.

Despite Brazil recognizing Bangladesh's independence in 1972, economic engagement remains limited. However, recent developments, including the first visit by a Brazilian foreign minister in April 2024 and three Brazilian trade missions to Bangladesh this year, signal growing interest.

Akhter also sought Brazil's support for Bangladesh's BRICS membership bid and the initiation of a preferential trade agreement with MERCOSUR, a South American trade bloc comprising Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay, aimed at promoting free trade and economic integration. She emphasized the importance of South-South cooperation in fostering stronger ties. [Bss News]

## Brunei and China strengthen logistics partnership with MoC at ASEAN-China conference

(ga) The Brunei Freight Forwarders Association (BRUFA) attended the 2024 China (Chongqing)-ASEAN Logistics Industry Cooperation Conference, which focused on strengthening logistics ties between ASEAN nations and China. The conference brought together logistics, trade, and investment stakeholders under the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

A key development during the event was the signing of a memorandum of collaboration (MoC) between BRUFA and the Chongqing Highway Logistics Base Administrative Committee. The agreement aims to enhance trade exchanges, improve logistics partnerships, and promote sustainable investments. The MoC includes initiatives for sharing trade, logistics, and policy information, as well as supporting joint participation in trade exhibitions and forums.

The MoC will leverage the New Western Land-Sea Corridor to improve cargo flow between Chongqing and Brunei and extend the link to the Brunei-Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA). The collaboration also benefits from enhanced sea connectivity between Guangxi Port and Brunei's Muara Port through the Beibu Gulf. [Borneo Bulletin]

## Brunei and Singapore discuss education collaboration

(ga) The 14th Joint Working Group (JWG) meeting between Brunei's Ministry of Education (MoE) and Singapore's Ministry of Education was held on November 14. The meeting focused on reviewing current educational collaborations and exploring new partnership opportunities. Updates were shared on Early Childhood Care and Education, as well as internship initiatives within Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET).

Both countries also discussed future areas for collaboration, including expanding teacher and student exchanges and integrating Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics (STEAM) into the curriculum. [Borneo Bulletin]

## Brunei calls for increased South Korean investment and cooperation

(ga) Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah of Brunei met with South Korean President Yoon Suk-Yeol on November 14 in Peru during the APEC summit. The meeting marked the 40th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two nations.

The Sultan expressed satisfaction with the strong ties between Brunei and South Korea, particularly in information technology and agriculture. His Majesty welcomed increased Korean investment, noting the

benefits of existing collaboration in trade and economic projects.

Brunei also affirmed the importance of enhancing food security and strengthening agricultural links through the BIMP-EAGA R.O.K. Cooperation Fund. Both sides agreed to continue fostering cooperation in various sectors, including education, ICT, and infrastructure. [Borneo Bulletin]

## Brunei and Malaysia strengthen customs cooperation at 11th bilateral meeting

(ga) Brunei and Malaysia have affirmed enhancing customs cooperation at the 11th bilateral meeting held in Malaysia. The discussions focused on improving customs administration, facilitating cross-border trade, securing control posts, and tackling smuggling activities at borders and territorial waters. [Borneo Bulletin]

## Brunei and Peru strengthen bilateral ties during state visit, expand cooperation

(ga) Brunei and Peru have reinforced their diplomatic relations during Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah's official State Visit to Peru on November 12. During a bilateral meeting, they discussed enhancing cooperation in trade, education, defense, and climate change, emphasizing the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and visa waiver arrangements. [Borneo Bulletin 1]

Both nations emphasized leveraging their shared membership in the CPTPP to boost trade and investment. Peru encouraged Brunei to invest in its Multimodal Logistics Industrial and Technological Hub, while Brunei invited Peru to use its strategic position to expand into Southeast Asia.

Discussions also focused on energy cooperation, climate change mitigation, and agricultural trade, including facilitating market access for agri-food products. In addition, both countries pledged to strengthen people-to-people ties through higher education linkages and cultural exchanges, supported by a cultural cooperation program.

The visit included the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding on Bilateral Consultations and Judiciary Cooperation to promote knowledge sharing and facilitate exchanges. Both leaders also reaffirmed their

commitment to multilateralism, adherence to international law, and mutual support in international forums. [Borneo Bulletin 2] [Borneo Bulletin 3]

## Cambodia, Malaysia hold talks on combating transnational crime

(mfr) Cambodia and Malaysia are advancing discussions on strengthening cooperation to combat transnational organized crime. November 12, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Interior Sar Sokha met with Malaysian Ambassador to Cambodia, Shaharuddin Onn, at the ministry to discuss potential collaborative measures. Sokha proposed the establishment of a Memorandum of Understanding to bolster security efforts and advocated for more frequent exchanges between law enforcement agencies to enhance their capabilities in addressing global crime challenges.

Both Sokha and Shaharuddin expressed satisfaction with the strong relations between the two countries, encompassing government, business, and community connections. The ambassador noted the positive environment provided for Malaysians in Cambodia and welcomed future cooperation to further strengthen ties. He also voiced confidence in Cambodia's support for Malaysia's upcoming ASEAN chairmanship. [Khmer Times]

## Cambodia and Türkiye commit to strengthening bilateral relations

(mfr) Cambodia and Türkiye have pledged to strengthen their military cooperation through enhanced exchanges, intelligence sharing, and human resource training. This commitment was made during a meeting between Cambodian and Turkish officials, including Lieutenant General Rath Dararoth of Cambodia's Ministry of National Defence and Turkish Ambassador Ülkü Kocaefe. The two sides discussed plans to deepen bilateral military ties and resume efforts that had been delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The partnership dates back to 2019, when former Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen visited Türkiye, and further strengthened in 2020 during an official visit by Deputy Prime Minister General Tea Banh. Both countries have since committed to fostering closer military collaboration, with an emphasis on training,

disaster relief, and expanding technological cooperation.

In addition to the military exchanges, the two nations are set to implement a bilateral Memorandum of Understanding, which includes joint training programs, disaster response, and peacekeeping efforts. Both sides also expressed interest in expanding their military industry and continuing reciprocal visits for military events. [Khmer Times]

## Cambodia and Indonesia reaffirm complementary potential

(mfr) Cambodian Prime Minister Dr. Hun Manet met with Muhaimin Iskandar, Vice President of the Centrist Democrat International (IDC-CDI) and Coordinating Minister for Community Empowerment of Indonesia, on November 18 in Siem Reap. The meeting took place on the sidelines of the IDC-CDI Executive Committee Meeting.

Muhaimin Iskandar praised the longstanding cooperation between Cambodia and Indonesia, highlighting their potential to complement each other in various fields. He also commended Cambodia for its religious harmony and the successful hosting of the IDC-CDI meeting, emphasizing its role in enhancing regional and global influence.

Hun Manet congratulated Iskandar on his ministerial appointment and expressed satisfaction with the progress in bilateral relations, particularly in agriculture, trade, security, and cultural exchanges. He encouraged both nations to explore further opportunities for collaboration.

The Cambodian Premier noted the significance of hosting the IDC-CDI Executive Committee Meeting, alongside two other major events: the 12th General Assembly of the International Conference of Asian Political Parties and the 11th Plenary Session of the International Parliament for Tolerance and Peace, which are also being held in Cambodia this week. [Khmer Times]

## Vietnamese national assembly president to begin four-day Cambodia visit

(mfr) Vietnam's National Assembly President, Chin Thanh Minh, will lead a high-level delegation to

Cambodia from November 21 to 24, 2024, for an official and friendly visit.

The visit, initiated at the invitation of Cambodia's National Assembly President, Khuon Sudary, aims to strengthen cooperation between the legislative bodies of the two neighboring countries.

During the visit, the Vietnamese delegation will meet with Cambodian leaders to discuss bilateral collaboration, regional issues, and strategies to enhance mutual development. The agenda includes official meetings and events highlighting the deepening partnership and commitment to continued friendship between Cambodia and Vietnam. [Khmer Times]

## CHRC and US envoy hold talks to enhance human rights cooperation

(mfr) Keo Remy, president of the Cambodian Human Rights Committee (CHRC), met with Bridgette L Walker, Chargé d'affaires a.i. of the United States Embassy, in Phnom Penh to discuss CHRC's progress and enhance human rights cooperation. Remy outlined CHRC's work in investigating and resolving complaints, conducting human rights education, performing prison inspections, and providing free legal services to vulnerable groups, including the poor, women, children, and prisoners without representation.

Walker reaffirmed the U.S. commitment to democracy and human rights and commended CHRC's human rights efforts. She also expressed gratitude for the Cambodian government's assistance with U.S. Embassy visits to American detainees, including Seng Theary. Additionally, she proposed potential cooperation on LGBT rights and highlighted the promotion of the rights of persons with disabilities in preparation for the 75th anniversary of U.S.-Cambodia relations next year.

Walker inquired about the status of the draft law on establishing National Human Rights Institutions. Remy responded that the draft has been submitted to the Council of Ministers and is awaiting further review. [Khmer Times]

## Cambodia and Croatia hold successful first bilateral political consultation

(mfr) The first bilateral political consultation between Cambodia and Croatia, held on November 4–5 in Zagreb, resulted in significant agreements aimed at

strengthening cooperation in various sectors. Co-chaired by Cambodia's Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Khuon Phon Rattanak, and Croatia's State Secretary for Foreign and European Affairs, Frano Matusic, the discussions focused on enhancing economic, cultural, and tourism ties.

One major outcome was an agreement to establish a Memorandum of Understanding between their chambers of commerce, laying the groundwork for increased economic collaboration in agriculture, food processing, manufacturing, and infrastructure. Cambodia highlighted its rapid socioeconomic development and aspirations to achieve upper-middle-income status by 2030 and high-income status by 2050, opening further opportunities for trade and investment with Croatia.

The consultation emphasized cooperation in demining, with Croatia offering expertise through its specialized demining companies, demonstrating a shared commitment to addressing post-conflict issues. Cultural and tourism cooperation was also a key topic, with both countries considering a sister-city partnership between Siem Reap and Dubrovnik to promote sustainable tourism and cultural connections. [Khmer Times]

## Cambodian foreign minister and Dutch ambassador meeting boosts bilateral relations

(mfr) Cambodia's Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Sok Chenda Sophea, met with Remco Johannes van Wiljngaarden, the Dutch Ambassador to Cambodia, to discuss the country's development progress and bilateral ties. Chenda Sophea outlined Cambodia's anticipated graduation from Least Developed Country (LDC) status by 2029 and emphasized the government's dedication to socio-economic growth, human capital development, and technology under the Pentagonal Strategy.

Both officials expressed satisfaction with the successful First Bilateral Consultation held in The Hague last year and confirmed plans for the next consultation in Cambodia next year. Chenda Sophea encouraged Dutch investment in various sectors, assuring the Netherlands of Cambodia's commitment to a favorable investment environment.

Ambassador van Wiljngaarden reiterated the Netherlands' support for sustainable development in Cambodia, focusing on investment that aligns with

capacity building and the nation's development priorities. They also discussed shared views on regional and international issues. [Khmer Times]

## Cambodia, Australia commit to enhancing security information exchange

(mfr) Cambodia and Australia have reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening bilateral cooperation across various sectors, including investment, education, and security. On November 13, Deputy Prime Minister and Chairman of the National Authority for Combating Drugs (NACD), Neth Savoeun, met with Australian Ambassador to Cambodia, Derek Yip, at the Office of the Council of Ministers.

During the meeting, Savoeun highlighted the long-standing partnership between the two countries, dating back 72 years, with Australia playing a significant role in Cambodia's development, particularly since the UNTAC mission in 1993. Savoeun expressed hope for continued Australian support, especially in encouraging investment, expanding tourism, and providing scholarships for Cambodian students.

Yip responded positively, emphasizing Australia's willingness to enhance scholarships, promote investment, and raise awareness of Cambodia's favorable business environment. Yip also pledged to support Cambodia's fight against drugs, with a focus on increasing collaboration between the Australian Federal Police and NACD. This includes improving information exchange and providing necessary resources for drug prevention efforts.

Furthermore, the two sides agreed to enhance security cooperation, particularly in information sharing related to transnational crime and cybersecurity. Australia offered to assist Cambodia in strengthening its digital security infrastructure, an emerging priority for the country. [Khmer Times]

## Chinese military patrols around Scarborough Shoal during tensions

(to) The Chinese military conducted a joint sea and air patrol around the disputed Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea on November 13, heightening ongoing tensions with the Philippines. The Southern Theatre Command of China's People's Liberation Army (PLA)

stated that the patrols were “carried out in accordance with the law.”

Scarborough Shoal, is claimed by both nations, though China has controlled it since a standoff in 2012. The shoal is located about 220 kilometers west of Luzon, the main island of the Philippines. This recent patrol marks the second air-to-sea joint operation by the PLA around the shoal in four months, indicating the area’s growing significance in China-Philippines relations. [South China Morning Post]

The patrols come in the midst of increasing confrontations over disputed territories in the South China Sea, as China has set official boundaries around Scarborough Shoal, causing a dispute with the Philippines, which responded with new maritime laws that China views as violations of its territory (see AiR No. 46, November/2024, 2).

## China, Japan agree to forge mutually beneficial ties

(alk/hs) Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba and Chinese President Xi Jinping met on November 15 for their first in-person talks at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Lima, Peru. This meeting marked the first face-to-face interaction between Xi and a Japanese prime minister in a year and followed Ishiba’s recent re-election as prime minister after a challenging general election which saw his Liberal Democratic Party and its junior coalition partner Komeito losing its majority in the House of Representatives (see AiR No. 46, November/2024, 2).

Both leaders agreed to foster "mutually beneficial" and "stable" relations despite ongoing tensions. Ishiba expressed Japan's "extreme concern" over China's increased military activities near Japanese-controlled islands, Taiwan, and the South China Sea. He emphasized the importance of continued dialogue and requested Xi's assurance for the safety of Japanese citizens in China, following recent violent incidents, including the fatal stabbing of a Japanese schoolboy in Shenzhen (see AiR No.39, September/2024, 4).

Ishiba also pressed for China’s commitment to resume imports of Japanese seafood, which had been banned after the release of treated water from the Fukushima nuclear plant. Xi acknowledged China’s gradual plan to lift the ban but did not provide a timeline. Discussions on resuming Japanese beef and rice exports were also mentioned, with Xi noting that these matters should be handled by relevant authorities.

The Japanese Foreign Ministry reported that both sides agreed to increase bilateral talks, including reciprocal visits by foreign ministers and high-level economic dialogues. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan] [NHK]

Xi reiterated China's stance that Japan should address historical and sensitive issues, such as Taiwan, properly. He also highlighted the need for both nations to safeguard global free trade and maintain stable supply chains. [China Daily]

The meeting comes amid concerns about the incoming US administration under President-elect Donald Trump, who is expected to adopt a tougher stance on China. Ishiba, whose domestic political standing is still fragile after leading a minority government due to losses in the October 27 lower house election (see AiR No. 44, October/2024, 5, and article in this edition), aims to bolster Japan's strategic interests through stable ties with China.

Recent months have seen efforts to revive consultative talks between the two nations after years of strained relations due to territorial disputes, trade issues, and the Fukushima water release. Anti-Japanese sentiment in China has been exacerbated by recent attacks, including the stabbing of a Japanese schoolboy in September and a June incident involving a Chinese woman who was killed while protecting a Japanese mother and child from an assailant. [Kyodo News] [Reuters]

## China frees Taiwanese finishing boat and skipper

(alk) Mainland Chinese authorities have returned a Taiwanese fishing boat and released its captain after more than four months of detention near the Quemoy islands.

The Da Jin Man 88 and its captain, surnamed Hong, were repatriated on November 15. The vessel was seized by the China Coast Guard in early July, and while Hong remained in custody for investigations, the four other crew members – one Taiwanese and three Indonesians – were released in mid-August.

The Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO) announced that Hong had been released after relevant departments imposed penalties, without providing further details.

The Taiwanese coastguard escorted the boat to a port in Penghu, according to the report. [Taiwan Affairs Office] [South China Morning Post]

## Chinese defense firms to attend Vietnam arms fair

(alk) Chinese defense firms will participate in Vietnam's upcoming international arms fair, signaling potential deepening military ties between the neighboring countries. The event, set for December 19-22 in Hanoi, will feature around 140 companies showcasing military equipment. The specific Chinese companies attending have not been disclosed, and no Chinese equipment was displayed at Vietnam's inaugural fair in 2022.

Recently, both countries have expressed interest in strengthening defense industry collaboration, signing preliminary agreements, and conducting high-level military exchanges and joint coast guard patrols in the Gulf of Tonkin.

Despite close economic ties, Vietnam and China have a contentious history, including maritime disputes in the South China Sea and a border conflict in 1979. Analysts suggest military expos could facilitate defense deals, though likely limited to non-combat areas such as logistics, aviation transport, and military medicine. "Vietnam won't rely on China for major military systems due to the risk of suspension during tensions," said Carl Thayer, a Vietnam expert at the Australian Defence Force Academy.

The fair will include exhibitors from 27 countries, including the U.S., Russia, and France, with potential participation from Iranian firms. [Reuters]

## China urges resumption of direct flights in meeting with India

(alk) On November 18, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi met his Indian counterpart Subrahmanyam Jaishankar in Rio de Janeiro, urging the resumption of direct flights and improved bilateral relations.

Wang emphasized building "more mutual trust and less suspicion" between the two nations, which recently began resolving a military standoff along their disputed Himalayan border. He also called for enhanced cooperation on journalist exchanges and visa facilitation. [Reuters]

China and India, two of Asia's largest powers, have long-standing tensions over their disputed Himalayan border, which escalated into a deadly military clash in

2020. Despite agreements to reduce hostilities, mistrust persists, affecting broader bilateral ties.

Diplomatic efforts, like the recent meeting between their foreign ministers, aim to rebuild trust, restore connectivity, and encourage cooperation on trade and people-to-people exchanges. However, progress remains slow due to deep-seated geopolitical and strategic differences.

## Trump assembles China hawks for important roles in new cabinet

(to) President-elect Donald Trump announced new cabinet picks that indicate a strong stance against China. His choices include figures known for their strong views on Chinese policies, showcasing a likely shift toward tougher actions on trade, security, and US-China relations.

Among these picks is former Director of National Intelligence John Ratcliffe from 2020-2021 during Trump's first presidency, who has consistently warned that China poses the greatest threat to U.S. interests and the rest of the free world. He is set to lead the CIA. [CNN] [Mint]

Pete Hegseth, a FOX News host and army veteran, who accuses China of planning to "supplant" the US culturally, financially and technologically "through leveraging their growing network of partners", has been chosen as Secretary of Defense while Michael Waltz, Republican congressman from Florida, has been named as next National Security Adviser. Waltz has been a member of the House China Task Force, which focuses on strategies for U.S.-China competition. Waltz has called for increased support for Taiwan, criticized China for human rights abuses in Xinjiang and advocated for a U.S. boycott of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics. [South China Morning Post] [Radio Free Asia]

Florida Senator Marco Rubio, another prominent China critic, is expected to become Secretary of State. He is known for his staunch anti-communist stance. In 2020 he was sanctioned by China for supporting Hong Kong democracy protesters, which gained him active travel restrictions. [Reuters]

These appointments highlight Trump's plan to counter China's global influence and support allies like Taiwan. Analysts suggest that this approach may lead to growing tensions, as many of Trump's picks advocate for the reduction of economic relations with China. This move aligns with Trump's campaign promises to

impose higher tariffs on Chinese goods and increase US self-reliance in manufacturing. [Aljazeera]

## Biden and Xi agree on human control over nuclear arms

(to/bw) U.S. President Joe Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping met on November 16 during the APEC Summit in Lima, Peru. President Xi emphasized the importance of mutual respect, avoiding conflict, and expanding cooperation in areas like climate change, artificial intelligence, and trade.

The meeting marked progress in rebuilding communication channels, with both sides reaffirming the need for peaceful coexistence and collaboration on shared challenges. They also stressed maintaining open dialogue and responsibly managing their competitive relationship. Moreover, Biden and Xi's shared emphasis on candid communication, mutual respect, and the global importance of stable US-China relations to manage competition and prevent conflict. [US Embassy and Consulates in China] [AP News]

Both Presidents expressed willingness to continue engagement to stabilize relations and address global challenges together. They furthermore agreed that humans, not artificial intelligence, should control decisions about nuclear weapons and highlighted the need for careful and responsible development of AI technologies in military contexts. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China]

This marks a significant first step in discussions between the two nations on nuclear weapons and AI, topics where progress has been slow. While it is unclear if further talks will follow, the agreement addresses growing concerns about the integration of AI into military systems.

The meeting comes amid U.S. concerns about China's rapidly expanding nuclear arsenal and efforts to restart arms control talks, which have seen little movement so far. [Reuters]

Following the meeting, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan reported that Biden called on China use its influence to try to prevent a further escalation or further expansion of the war through the introduction of even more North Korean forces. [Yonhap News Agency]

## US accuses China of big cyberespionage campaign

(to) The US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) announced on November 14 a cyberespionage campaign linked to China. The hackers reportedly infiltrated multiple telecommunications networks, stealing call records and targeting individuals involved in government and politics.

The agencies revealed that the attackers also accessed data from programs under US surveillance laws, aiming to compromise critical information. This latest campaign follows earlier allegations of Chinese cyberattacks on political figures, including Donald Trump and Kamala Harris, showing growing tensions over Beijing's alleged cyber activities. [Aljazeera]

The situation escalated further a day after the announcement when it was reported that hackers linked to a Chinese intelligence agency had breached T-Mobile's network. This breach was part of the broader cyberespionage campaign targeting telecommunications companies in the U.S. and abroad. The months-long hack focused on intercepting sensitive communications of high-value intelligence targets.

While T-Mobile claimed no significant impact on its systems or customer data, U.S. officials revealed that the hackers accessed surveillance data from federal wiretapping systems. [Reuters 1]

In a latest related development, the U.S. Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Technology is set to hold a hearing on November 19 to address Chinese hacking threats. Senator Richard Blumenthal will chair the session, focusing on the risks Chinese cyber activities pose to democracy, national security, and the economy. Concerns about Elon Musk's potential conflicts of interest with China will also be raised, given his increasing involvement in U.S. government affairs and business operations in China.

The hearing will feature testimony from industry and cybersecurity experts, including representatives from CrowdStrike, the Telecommunications Industry Association, and Georgetown University's Center for Security and Emerging Technology.

China has consistently denied allegations of state-sponsored hacking. [Reuters 2]

## China warns US against allowing Taiwan's William Lai transit through country

(alk) Beijing has urged Washington to block Taiwanese leader William Lai Ching-te from transiting through the United States ahead of his planned visit to the Pacific islands. This request follows Beijing's call for Canada to honor its "one China" commitment amid reports of former Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen's upcoming visit to Canada. [Taipei Times]

Lai plans to visit Taiwan's diplomatic allies in the Pacific in the coming weeks, with potential stopovers in Hawaii and Guam, both key US military locations. [South China Morning Post]

China's foreign ministry criticized Taiwan for using diplomatic engagements to further its political agenda, asserting that such efforts are ineffective in changing global recognition of the "one China" policy. The ministry reiterated its opposition to US arrangements allowing Taiwanese officials to transit through the US, urging Washington to adhere to the one-China principle and the three joint communiques, which recognize the People's Republic of China as the sole legitimate government and acknowledge Beijing's claim over Taiwan. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China]

## Merck licenses Chinese cancer drug in USD 3.3 billion deal

(to) American multinational pharmaceutical company Merck & Co. has announced a licensing agreement with Chinese company LaNova Medicines Ltd. for a new experimental cancer drug, LM-299. The deal includes a USD 588 million upfront payment and up to USD 2.7 billion in milestone payments. Merck gains exclusive global rights to LM-299, a bispecific antibody that fights cancer by targeting two mechanisms: activating the immune system and blocking tumor blood vessel growth.

This move strengthens Merck's portfolio in the promising field of dual-targeted cancer treatments as it seeks to reduce reliance on its best-selling drug, Keytruda. LM-299 is currently in early clinical trials in China, and Merck plans to advance its development rapidly to address critical patient needs. [BNN Bloomberg]

## Denmark-based weight-loss drug goes on sale in China

(alk) Novo Nordisk, a Denmark-based healthcare company, has launched its weight-loss drug Wegovy in China following approval in June, entering the world's second-largest pharmaceutical market and intensifying competition with Eli Lilly, whose weight-loss drug is approved but not yet available there.

China, home to over 180 million obese individuals, offers significant market potential. Wegovy, priced at USD 194 for four injections, is cheaper than in the US but not covered by national healthcare insurance, requiring patients to pay out-of-pocket.

Wegovy's active ingredient, semaglutide, helps control blood sugar, suppress appetite, and promote a feeling of fullness. It can help patients lose over 10 percent of their body weight but may cause side effects like nausea and weight regain after discontinuation.

Since its 2021 US launch, Wegovy has gained global popularity, partly due to celebrity endorsements, despite concerns about misuse by non-obese individuals. Its success has made Novo Nordisk Europe's most valuable company, with a market value exceeding $440 billion. [BBC]

## German Chancellor Scholz to raise concerns about delivery of Chinese drones to Russia in talks with Xi

(to) German Chancellor Olaf Scholz has announced to address the issue of delivery of dual-use goods in a meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping during the G20 summit in Rio de Janeiro. Scholz expressed concerns about reports of a Chinese factory producing military drones for Russia, which could be used in the ongoing war in Ukraine.

Scholz emphasized Germany's opposition to the delivery of lethal weapons to Russia and discussed the importance of addressing dual-use items that can be used for both civilian and military purposes.

He also raised issues about the deployment of North Korean soldiers in Ukraine, calling it a "terrible change" in the conflict. [Reuters]

**Embraer looks to China for support in supply chain**

(to) Brazilian aircraft manufacturer Embraer has announced its interest in strengthening its supply chain through partnerships with Chinese companies. Speaking at China's largest airshow in Zhuhai last week, Embraer's Chief Commercial Officer, Martyn Holmes, emphasized that the company sees opportunities to collaborate with Chinese suppliers to increase its production and distribution networks.

Embraer produces regional jets that rival the Airbus A220 and Boeing 737. It noted that these discussions come at an important time, with China's President Xi Jinping visiting Brazil soon for the G20 summit and the company seeking to expand in Asia with its efficient E2 jet models

After gaining Chinese certification for these jets in 2022 and 2023, Embraer is now focused on integrating more local support to meet growing demand in the region. [Reuters]

## Chinese President Xi Jinping inaugurates major Chinese-funded port in Peru

(to/alk) Chinese President Xi Jinping opened the Chancay Port in Peru on November 13 marking the start of his week-long tour of South America.

The USD 1.3 billion deep-water port, located 80 kilometers north of Lima, is part of China's Belt and Road Initiative and aims to strengthen trade routes between Asia and South America. Xi called it the beginning of a "21st-century maritime Silk Road."

The port, which is expected to generate USD 4.5 billion in annual revenues and create over 8,000 jobs, will serve as a key hub for shipping goods like Peruvian fruit and Brazilian iron ore to China. It also reduces logistics costs on the Peru-China route by 20 percent. The Chancay port will facilitate faster, larger-scale trade, cutting shipping times to Asia from 35 to 23 days. This will benefit exports like Brazilian soybeans and Chilean copper while also supporting an influx of Chinese imports. [Reuters] [BBC]

The China-funded Chancay port in Peru is creating growing political tensions in South America. US officials are worried about how this project could increase Chinas influence in the region, especially since there are plans to connect the port to Brazil. This connection could change trade routes and give China more control over South American infrastructure, raising concerns in the US about both security and economic impacts, challenging US dominance in the region and reshaping

trade and security dynamics. [South China Morning Post] [CSIS]

General Laura Richardson, recently retired chief of US Southern Command, pointed out China's "long game" in establishing facilities with potential military uses. This adds to fears that the U.S. is losing its traditional influence in Latin America. Critics argue that Washington's neglect of the region has left a vacuum that China has rapidly filled.

As President-elect Donald Trump prepares to take office with promises to confront China, Latin American nations may find themselves under pressure. Countries like Peru, Chile, and Colombia, tied by trade agreements with the US, could face renegotiations or policy shifts as Trump's administration seeks to counter China's influence. [BBC]

## China, New Zealand pledge cooperation at APEC summit

(alk) New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon and Chinese President Xi Jinping met for the first time at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Lima, Peru, and pledged to strengthen cooperation.

"I look forward to continuing to build on our partnership and friendship," Luxon said during their discussion, as reported by Radio New Zealand. In response, Xi reaffirmed China's readiness to work with the new government in New Zealand."

Luxon, who previously worked as an airline executive and has visited China multiple times, assumed office last October after his center-right National Party formed a government. This meeting marked the first interaction between Xi and Luxon.

In June, New Zealand and China signed agreements on trade and climate change during Chinese Premier Li Qiang's visit – the highest-level Chinese delegation to New Zealand in seven years (see AiR No. 25, June/2024, 3). China is New Zealand's largest trading partner, with bilateral trade amounting to nearly NZD 38 billion (USD 23.27 billion).

New Zealand's foreign minister has described the bilateral relationship as "complex," noting differences on issues such as Taiwan and human rights concerns related to the treatment of Muslim minorities in Xinjiang. [Reuters]

## China, Suriname sign debt rescheduling

(alk) Suriname has signed a debt rescheduling agreement with China, Finance Minister Stanley Raghoebarsing announced on November 18.

The deal involves restructuring $476 million owed to China's Exim Bank, including $140 million in arrears as of mid-2024. Debt repayments will occur in two phases, while a separate $68 million owed to the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC) will be settled in a single tranche, according to debt office head Malty Dwarkasing. The first payment under the new terms is expected after the rescheduling contract is finalized by November 22. [Reuters]

Suriname, facing significant financial challenges, is restructuring its debts as part of broader efforts to stabilize its economy. It has relied on Chinese loans for infrastructure and development, leading to substantial debt. This rescheduling deal with China, including arrears to major lenders like Exim Bank and ICBC, is a critical step in easing financial pressures and meeting obligations to creditors.

## United States returns 1,400 looted artifacts worth

## USD 10 million to India

(rsv) The United States has returned over 1,400 looted Indian antiquities valued at USD 10 million, including significant pieces such as a sandstone sculpture of a celestial dancer from Madhya Pradesh and a Tanesar Mother Goddess from Rajasthan. These artifacts, looted in the 1980s and 1960s, were recovered through ongoing investigations into international trafficking networks, including those linked to convicted traffickers Subhash Kapoor and Nancy Wiener.

The U.S. District Attorney's Antiquities Trafficking Unit has so far recovered over 2,100 antiquities, valued at nearly USD 230 million, from over 30 countries. [The Hindu]

## Indian students protest outside Oxford Union over debate on Kashmir and speakers' alleged terror links

(ad) On November 15, INSIGHT UK, a social movement of British Hindus and Indians, protested outside the Oxford Union over a debate titled "This House Believes in the Independent State of Kashmir." The protestors raised slogans condemning the debate for featuring speakers with alleged ties to terrorism.

INSIGHT UK accused Muzzammil Ayyub Thakur and Zafar Khan, the two speakers supporting the motion, of having links to groups associated with violent extremism. Thakur, president of the World Kashmir Freedom Movement, and Khan, chairman of the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), have faced accusations of hate speech and involvement in terrorist activities. Thakur and his organizations have allegedly been investigated by authorities, including Scotland Yard, the Charity Commission, and the FBI. Khan's JKLF has also been linked to violent acts targeting the Kashmiri Hindu community, including the 1984 kidnapping and killing of an Indian diplomat. [The Times of India] [Hindustan Times]

## Indonesia and Japan meet for discussions on bilateral economic relations

(gk) On the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit that was held last week in Peruvian capital Lima, Indonesian Trade Minister Budi Santoso and Japanese Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry Yoji Muto held a bilateral meeting.

Both countries agreed to expedite the ratification of the Protocol to Amend the Indonesia–Japan Economic Partnership Agreement (IJEPA), aiming for its implementation by 2025. This Protocol is an amendment and enhancement of the original IJEPA agreement, which has been in effect since 2008. The updated Protocol includes new chapters on Trade in Goods, Trade in Services, E-Commerce, Movement of Natural Persons (MNP), Cooperation, Intellectual Property, and Government Procurement of Goods and Services.

Discussions on the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) were also held. Santoso expressed optimism for strong cooperation with Japan during their co-chairmanship of RCEP in 2025. He announced that the RCEP Support Unit at the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta will be inaugurated on December 9, aiming to streamline the implementation of RCEP and enhance economic integration in the region. [Antara]

## Indonesia and Japan reach deal carbon credit trading at COP29

(ft) Indonesia and Japan have signed an agreement to implement a Mutual Recognition Arrangement (MRA) for bilateral carbon credit trading, marking the first such cooperation under the Paris Agreement.

Announced at COP29 in Baku, this MRA enables both countries to collaborate on emission reduction projects in Indonesia, with the goal of contributing to global climate goals and achieving net-zero emissions. The agreement ensures that Indonesia's carbon credit system, including its emission reduction certification (SPEI), is recognized internationally, allowing for the exchange of carbon credits under transparent and standardized systems.

This initiative builds on prior cooperation between Indonesia and Japan through the Joint Crediting Mechanism (JCM) and aims to strengthen Indonesia's position in global carbon markets while advancing its climate change mitigation efforts. The MRA took effect on October 28, following extensive dialogue between both governments since August 2024. [Tempo]

## Indonesia and India conclude Garuda Shakti Exercise

(gk) Indonesia and India concluded their joint military exercise Garuda Shakti on November 12. This 9$^{th}$ edition of the exercise was held from November 1 to November 12, in Indonesia. This exercise was held to enable both contingents to enhance their capabilities to conduct joint military operations in counter terrorism environment in sub conventional domain. A statement from the Ministry of Defense said that the exercise was designed to develop bilateral military cooperation and strengthen the bond between two armies via discussions and rehearsal of tactical military drills. Underwater training, close-ranging shooting and exercises in urban and jungle terrain were a few of the many areas of collaboration.

Indian contingent was represented by The Parachute Regiment (Special Forces) while the Indonesian contingent was represented by Indonesian Special Forces Kopassus. [Business Standard] [DD News]

## Strategic partnerships discussed at the bilateral meeting between Indonesia and

## Vietnam

(gk) President of Indonesia Prabowo Subianto met Viet Nam's President Luong Cuong in a bilateral meeting held on the sidelines of the 2024 APEC summit in Lima, Peru.

Prabowo highlighted the need for close ties between the two countries in Southeast Asia. He reaffirmed Indonesia's commitment to accelerating the ratification of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) agreement and finalizing its implementation arrangements.

Cuong proposed elevating the bilateral relationship to a comprehensive strategic partnership between the two nations in the next year. He also addressed legal resolutions on regional issues such as South China Sea, which was recently ratified by Vietnam's National Assembly. He also sought Indonesia's support in international forums, including the United Nations.

The two leaders also discussed potential cooperation to achieve a bilateral trade target of USD 18 billion. President Cuong expressed hope that the two countries could expand market access and coordinate efforts across ministries to enhance trade. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia]

## Cooperation with China not to affect Indonesia's sovereignty in North Natuna

(mu) Maritime cooperation with China will not compromise Indonesia's sovereign position in the North Natuna Sea, Coordinating Minister for Political and Security Affairs, Budi Gunawan, stated on November 14. He clarified that the cooperation, agreed upon during President Prabowo's recent visit to Beijing to meet with Chinese President Xi Jinping, is aimed at maintaining regional stability. During their meeting earlier this month, Prabowo and Xi pledged to create "more bright spots in maritime cooperation" (see AiR No. 46, November/2024, 2). [Antara] [Jakarta Globe]

In an official statement released on November 11, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs emphasized that nothing in the maritime cooperation agreement should be interpreted as recognition of China's "nine-dash line" claim. The statement reaffirmed Indonesia's stance that this claim lacks an international legal basis and is inconsistent with the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The ministry expressed optimism that the cooperation could facilitate progress towards establishing a Code of Conduct in the South China Sea.

The statement came in response to criticism suggesting that Indonesia may have implicitly recognized China's claims in the South China Sea when it signed a maritime development agreement with Beijing during President Prabowo's recent visit (see AiR No. 46, November/2024, 2). [CNN Indonesia, in Indonesian] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Indonesia]

## Bilateral meeting held between Indonesia and U.S.

(gk) President of Indonesia Prabowo Subianto met his U.S counterpart Joe Biden at the White House in Washington D.C., US, on November 12. During their talks Subianto reaffirmed to work hard to strengthen the Indonesia-U.S. relationship. President Biden, for his part, highlighted several areas of cooperation, including strengthening a free and open Indo-Pacific region, supporting the clean energy transition, and building a secure and resilient supply chain. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia]

Global challenges such as the situation in Gaza and the South China Sea were also discussed by the two heads of state. They agreed on Palestinian independence as part of a two-state solution to end the humanitarian conflict in Gaza. They called for an immediate ceasefire, followed by the immediate release of hostages, prisoner exchanges, smooth delivery of humanitarian aid, and an end to the conflict. The two parties also recognized the need to prevent the conflict from escalating and spreading further, including to Lebanon.

Turning to Southeast Asia, the two presidents strongly condemned the ongoing violence against civilians in Myanmar, calling for immediate cessation of the violence and asking the Myanmar regime to create conditions conducive to national dialogue that re-establishes Myanmar as an inclusive democracy. They also reiterated full support for ASEAN's central role and the implementation of the ASEAN Five-Point consensus to help resolve the crisis. [Antara 1] [Antara 2]

Advancing a free and open Indo-Pacific region with ASEAN as its center was also spoken about. Both leaders committed to working together to support an open, inclusive, rules-based, and ASEAN-centered regional architecture that upholds international law, and emphasized their commitment to upholding freedom of navigation and overflight as well as respect for sovereign rights and jurisdiction of coastal states over their exclusive economic zones. Both also expressed support for ASEAN efforts to develop an

effective and substantive code of conduct in the South China Sea that is in accordance with the international law, especially United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). [Antara 3] [Reuters 1]

On the topic of climate crisis, both reaffirmed their commitment to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and to more ambitious, economy-wide emission reduction targets, encompassing all greenhouse gases, sectors and categories, and aligning with their respective net-zero goals. They are determined to expand collaboration on clean and renewable energy generation and accelerate their clean energy transitions. [Antara 4]

With regards to technology and its role in sustainable development, Prabowo and Biden agreed on the importance of optimizing the use of artificial intelligence (AI) to pave the way for sustainable development and bridge the digital divide. They underlined the urgent need for capacity-building measures to ensure equitable access to safe and resilient AI and other related digital innovations. They also expressed interest in seizing the opportunity to expand radio access network (Open RAN) projects in Indonesia that could help the country improve its cellular network performance. They also emphasized the necessity of a shared aspiration to promote a peaceful, secure and resilient cyberspace as the root to improve their nations' digital capacity. The partnership established between the Indonesian government and the US Department of State through the International technology Security and Innovation (ITSI) Fund under the Creating Helpful Incentives to Produce Semiconductors and Science (CHIPS) Act of 2022 was celebrated. The CHIPS Act is designed to revitalize the U.S. semiconductor industry, secure critical technology supply chains, and foster technological advancement. Through the ITSI Fund, it also enables international collaborations, such as with Indonesia, to build resilient and secure global technology networks. [Antara 5] [The White House]

This bilateral meeting comes right after President Prabowo's recent visit to Beijing, where the two nations signed agreements worth approximately USD 10 billion. These deals focus on infrastructure, green energy, digital technology, and agriculture, including a joint development agreement for fisheries and oil and gas exploration in waters near Indonesia's Natuna Islands (see AiR No. 46, November/2024, 2). Notably, this area lies within Indonesia's Exclusive Economic Zone but overlaps with China's controversial "nine-dash line" claims in the South China Sea. [Reuters 2]

Given Indonesia's increasing influence in the Indo-Pacific region and President Prabowo's aspiration to elevate the country's standing in the international landscape, it's commitment to maintain neutrality amid US-China tensions is widely seen to be critical for the nation's future.

Washington sees Indonesia, the most populous country in Southeast Asia, as an important partner in a region where its rival Beijing has deep trade and investment ties. While China is a key economic partner for Indonesia, Jakarta has also become a big buyer of U.S. arms, and it wants to sell the West more metals from its mines.

Amid rising regional tensions, Indonesia would have to seek the US support for its defensive efforts, against China's assertiveness in the South China Sea. The latest US elections may also pose new challenges to Indonesia; the new government under Donald Trump may adopt a more confrontational approach towards China, thus forcing Indonesia to align more with the US.

For Prabowo himself the visit to the White House is also significant, marking a milestone after a longstanding U.S. entry ban against him due to his alleged involvement in human rights violations. The ban was lifted by the Trump administration in 2020 when he was Indonesia's defense minister. [VoA]

## Indonesia and Canada discuss trade agreements

(gk) Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto met with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Lima, Peru, on November 15. The two leaders announced the conclusion of negotiations on a trade agreement, with Canada expressing interest in collaborating with Indonesia on nuclear energy, as well as other initiatives involving Southeast Asian nations.

Prabowo expressed hope that the finalized trade deal would enhance digital trade and renewable energy cooperation. The meeting also celebrated significant progress on the Indonesia-Canada Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (ICA-CEPA), which marks Indonesia's first CEPA with a North American country. This agreement is expected to unlock opportunities in sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing, and supply chain optimization. A joint ministerial statement marking the conclusion of

negotiations is scheduled to be signed on December 2, during Canadian Trade Minister Mary Ng's visit to Indonesia.

During the bilateral discussions, Indonesia urged Canada to strengthen partnerships in four priority sectors: critical minerals, food security and nutrition, energy resilience, and defense cooperation. Regarding critical minerals, Indonesia proposed collaboration to optimize its nickel downstream industries for electric vehicle production and to support zero-emission targets. Indonesia also hopes for cooperation with Canada in agriculture and aquaculture, focusing on technology integration to reduce stunting and ensure the availability of nutritious food. Jakarta is looking to partner with Ottawa on joint research and innovation for cleaner energy solutions, aiming to support Indonesia's net-zero target by 2060 and attract projected investments of up to USD 1 trillion.

Amid rising regional tensions, Indonesia seeks enhanced defense and security collaboration with Canada, particularly in counterterrorism, logistics support, and defense industry development. On global issues, President Prabowo urged Canada to continue financial support for Palestine and to formally recognize Palestinian statehood to advance the Two-State Solution and promote peace efforts. [CBC] [Jakarta Globe] [ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The Republic of Indonesia ]

## Indonesia and Russia to strengthen cooperation in countering drug trafficking

(mu) On November 11, Commissioner General Marthinus Hukom, Head of the Indonesian National Narcotics Agency (BNN), met with Russian Ambassador to Indonesia Sergei Tolchenov to discuss enhancing cooperation in combating illicit narcotics trafficking. The collaboration aims to involve Russian networks through information exchange to support ongoing investigations. [Tempo.co]

Commissioner General Hukom highlighted that several narcotics cases have been linked to Russian networks, particularly in Bali, which attracts around 40,000 Russian tourists annually. However, some of these visitors have been involved in drug abuse and illegal trafficking.

Ambassador Tolchenov expressed Russia's readiness to collaborate with Indonesia, emphasizing that bilateral efforts would strengthen both preventive and repressive measures to combat drug abuse and

disrupt international drug trafficking networks. [Antara]

## Indonesia and Serbia organize bilateral interfaith dialogue

(mu) Indonesian and Serbian representatives gathered in Belgrade for an interfaith dialogue from November 11-14 to foster mutual understanding, harmony, and tolerance. According to the Foreign Ministry's Director General of Information and Public Diplomacy, Siti Nugraha Mauludiah, the fifth edition of this bilateral dialogue will help both nations seek collaborative solutions to current challenges.

The Indonesian delegation included Muhammad Adib Abdushomad from the Ministry of Religious Affairs, Safira Machrusah from Nahdlatul Ulama, one of Indonesia's largest Muslim organizations, and representatives from Indonesian religious universities. From Serbia, the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Porfirije, along with representatives of Serbian religious organizations and universities, participated in the dialogue.

The next Indonesian-Serbian interfaith dialogue will be held in Jakarta in 2026. [Antara] [SEA News]

## Indonesian Vice Foreign Minister Anis Matta pays courtesy visit to prime minister of Qatar

(gk) Indonesia’s Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Muhammad Anis Matta, paid a courtesy visit to the Prime Minister (PM) of Qatar, Sheikh Mohammed Bin Abdulrahman Bin Jassim Al Thani, at Doha, Qatar on November 13.

Both parties discussed efforts to improve bilateral relations into a mutually beneficial strategic partnership for both countries. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia]

## Indonesia discusses bilateral relations with Australia and New Zealand

(gk) On the sidelines Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit in Lima, Peru, Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto held a bilateral meeting with

Australian Prime Minister (PM) Anthony Albanese and New Zealand's Prime Minister Christopher Luxon. Indonesia reaffirmed its strategic and diplomatic commitment with both countries.

In the meeting with Australia, Prabowo highlighted the strong friendship existing between the two nations. Both countries hoped for increased partnership across all fields, especially in the sectors of agriculture, health and education. [Cabinet Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia][Minstry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia] [Antara]

Prime Minister Luzon praised Indonesia's constructive role in the ASEAN region and globally, highlighting the tripling of bilateral trade since 2018. Indonesia was also praised for sensitively addressing the issue of release of New Zealand pilot Philip Mertens (who was held hostage by armed separatist groups in Indonesia). Prabowo reaffirmed Indonesia's readiness to deepen the bilateral trade relations, open markets and support Indonesia's participation in the Pacific country forums. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The Republic of Indonesia] [Antara].

## Indonesia and Peru commit to deepening cooperation

(gk) President Prabowo Subianto was warmly welcomed by President of Peru, Dina Boluarte, during his official visit to the South American country on November 14. The meeting was the first official visit to Peru by Prabowo.

During the bilateral meeting, both leaders agreed to expand cooperation in fields of economy and culture. Prabowo also stated that products from Peru would gain open market access in Indonesia. "We hope to build strong bilateral relations and, within the context of multilateral relations, Indonesia, as part of ASEAN, will continue to support Peru's partnership with ASEAN," Prabowo.

Both heads of state also committed to completing the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) within the next six months. The leaders also discussed cooperation in combating narcotics. [Cabinet Secretariat of The Republic of Indonesia 1] [Antara]

Following the meeting, both presidents witnessed the signing of a Visa-Free Agreement for Holders of Diplomatic and Service or Special Passports, symbolizing enhanced diplomatic relations. [Cabinet Secretariat of The Republic of Indonesia 2]

## Japan, South Korea strengthen cooperation

(hs) Japan's Minister for Foreign Affairs Takeshi Iwaya met with his South Korean counterpart Cho Tae-yul, in Lima, Peru. The meeting took place on November 14 on the sidelines of the APEC Ministerial Meetings. The discussion aimed to enhance bilateral relations and address regional security concerns.

During their talks both ministers underscored the importance of cooperation as the two nations prepare to mark the 60th anniversary of normalized diplomatic relations in 2025. They agreed to strengthen ties and collaborate on shared regional and global challenges.

A significant focus of the discussion was the regional security situation, particularly North Korea's continued nuclear and missile development and its deepening military ties with Russia, including reports of North Korean troops being deployed to Russia. The ministers expressed serious concern over these developments and reaffirmed their commitment to trilateral cooperation with the United States to address these threats.

Minister Cho reiterated South Korea's support for Japan on the issue of North Korean abductions, a longstanding concern for Japan involving its citizens.

This dialogue reflects a willingness to mend past rifts for the sake of both countries' futures and highlights the growing alignment between Tokyo and Seoul. [Minister of Foreign Affairs, Japan] [Nippon.com]

## Japan and Vietnam strengthen regional security cooperation

(sw) Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba and Vietnamese President Luong Cuong agreed on November 16 to enhance regional security cooperation and promote people-to-people exchanges. The leaders, meeting on the sidelines of the APEC summit in Lima, pledged collaboration in infrastructure development, digital technologies, and regional peace efforts, including issues related to the South China Sea.

Ishiba also held discussions with Indonesia's new President, Prabowo Subianto, during which they agreed to strengthen security cooperation through concrete measures to support a rules-based Indo-Pacific. [Ministry of Foreign Ministry, Japan] [Mainichi]

## Japan and Singapore collaborate on air travel

(hs) The Civil Aviation Authority of Singapore (CAAS) and the Japan Civil Aviation Bureau (JCAB) have reaffirmed their partnership to address growing global air travel demand at the 3rd Singapore-Japan Dialogue on Aviation Collaboration. Held in Kansai, Japan, on November 14-15, the meeting focused on strengthening cooperation in air connectivity, sustainable aviation, safety, air traffic management, aviation innovation, and unmanned aircraft systems (UAS) and advanced air mobility (AAM). This dialogue builds on a past Memorandum of Cooperation signed in 2022.

Air connectivity between both countries has recovered significantly in the past year. With 165 weekly flights operated by seven carriers, capacity now stands at 89 percent of pre-COVID levels, compared to 70 percent in 2023. A full recovery is expected by 2025 as both authorities agreed to work on further improving connectivity and enhancing flight efficiency and punctuality to meet passenger needs. [The Strait Times] [Travel Daily News]

## Japan and Ukraine sign security information sharing pact

(sw) Japan and Ukraine have signed an agreement to facilitate the exchange of classified security information, strengthening their cooperation amid Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine. Japanese Foreign Minister Takeshi Iwaya and Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal attended the signing ceremony in Kyiv on November 17.

The pact lays the foundation for intelligence sharing between the two governments. Additionally, Iwaya and Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha agreed to initiate a high-level security policy dialogue involving foreign and defense officials to enhance defense coordination.

Iwaya reaffirmed Japan’s commitment to supporting Ukraine’s efforts for a “just and lasting peace” and condemned North Korea’s reported troop deployment to Russia, calling it “extremely concerning.” Iwaya also paid a courtesy call to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

The agreement follows the “in principle” understanding reached by former Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and Zelenskyy in September. Japan, along with the US and other G7 nations has supported Ukraine since Russia’s 2022 invasion through economic sanctions on Moscow and humanitarian aid to Kyiv.

Iwaya and Sybiha also affirmed their joint efforts in the Ukraine Mine Action Conference, an international forum focused on landmine countermeasures, which Japan is set to host next fall. [Kyodo News]

## Japan’s defense minister to visit South Korea in December

(hs) Japanese Defense Minister Gen Nakatani is scheduled to visit South Korea in late December for discussions with, Kim Yong Hyun, this marks the first visit by a Japanese defense chief to South Korea in 9 years. This reflects the need for both countries to collaborate on multiple levels to address common threats.

The talks are expected to focus on strengthening bilateral defense cooperation, building on recent improvements in relations after tensions arose from a 2018 incident where a South Korean warship allegedly locked its fire-control radar on a Japanese patrol plane. While South Korea denies the allegation, the defense ministers agreed in June 2024 to measures to prevent similar incidents and resume high-level exchanges between their militaries.

Nakatani and Kim will also discuss trilateral defense cooperation with the United States, particularly in the context of the upcoming return of President-elect Donald Trump in January 2025, whose "America First" approach raises concerns about alliances. Additionally, the agenda is likely to cover North Korea’s missile tests and its growing defense collaboration with Russia, including troop deployments supporting Russia’s actions in Ukraine.

In July 2024, Japan, South Korea, and the United States signed a memorandum to enhance trilateral defense ties, focusing on policy consultations, information-sharing on ballistic missiles, and joint exercises. [The Manichi]

## Japan and UK strengthen ties with new economic and security agreements at G20

(hs) Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba and UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer held a bilateral meeting on the sidelines of the G20 Summit in Rio de Janeiro on November 18.

The two leaders highlighted the indivisibility of Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific security, pledging to deepen their collaboration. They welcomed significant progress on several initiatives: the trilateral Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP) with Italy, which will develop a next-generation fighter jet; and the deployment of the UK's Carrier Strike Group to the Indo-Pacific, planned for 2025; as well as Japan extending asset protection measures for UK forces. These measures are aimed at advancing their shared vision of a "free and open Indo-Pacific."

A key outcome of the meeting was the launch of the Japan-UK Economic "2+2" Ministers' Meeting. This new framework will involve foreign, economy, and trade ministers to promote bilateral cooperation in economic security, trade, and investment. The first meeting is planned for as early as January 2025. [NHK World News]

Both leaders agreed that strong economic growth is a shared priority and emphasized the importance of deeper collaboration in trade, investment, and climate action to achieve mutual prosperity. International cooperation was another key focus. They reaffirmed their commitment to supporting Ukraine in the face of Russia's continued aggression, including condemning the reported deployment of North Korean troops by Moscow. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs- Japan] [United Kingdom Government]

## Japan to enhance water and health services in Sudan

(sw) On November 18, the Japanese government and the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS) formalized a USD 4.75 million partnership to address critical water and healthcare needs in Port Sudan and Kassala, Sudan. This initiative aims to improve living conditions for over 2.2 million people, including host communities, refugees, and internally displaced persons affected by the ongoing conflict.

The project aims to expand water access by constructing sustainable water systems, including a pumping station, transmission lines, and distribution networks, which will triple daily water availability for approximately 114,000 people. It will also strengthen healthcare by rehabilitating hospitals in Kassala and

the Red Sea, providing modern medical equipment that will benefit over 550,000 people. Additionally, the project will focus on community involvement and capacity building by engaging local communities in planning and implementation, ensuring long-term impact. [ReliefWeb]

## Japan and Laos to cooperate in advancing digital identity systems

(dql) The Lao and Japanese governments, in partnership with Japanese companies, have agreed to work together to develop a digital identity system in Laos. Organized by the Digital Government Center under Laos' Ministry of Technology and Communications, with support from Japan's Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, the initiative seeks to enhance public services through secure digital identity verification.

A recent workshop in Vientiane highlighted lessons from other countries, Japan's digital identity system, and potential applications in Laos. It featured discussions on public service improvements, sector-specific applications, and a live demonstration of digital identity registration using Japanese simulation technology.

This initiative is part of the second phase of cooperation between the Lao and Japanese governments, involving companies like Ryobi Systems, NEC, and Ryobi Lao. Trial registrations are underway in Vientiane and will continue until December 2024. [The Laotian Times]

## Lao national arrested in Cambodia with over one million meth pills

(dql) Cambodian authorities arrested a Lao national at the Trapeang Kriel International Border Checkpoint for transporting over 1 million methamphetamine pills. The 31-year-old was apprehended while driving a white Fortuner with a Lao license plate.

This incident follows several similar drug-related arrests in Cambodia. In 2023, two Lao nationals were detained for smuggling meth pills into Stung Treng province, facing potential life sentences. In another case in March 2023, a Lao and a Vietnamese national were arrested for possessing 40 kilograms of

methamphetamine after a police tip-off. Both remain in pre-trial detention as investigations continue.

Meanwhile, Laos has seen significant drug enforcement activity in 2024. Over the first nine months, authorities in Vientiane Capital seized 15.5 million narcotic pills and arrested 1,273 individuals, including 82 foreigners, in connection with 739 drug-related cases. [The Laotian Times]

## Malaysia issues protest note against new Philippine maritime laws

(oc) Malaysia has protested new Philippine maritime laws, claiming they encroach on its territory. Deputy Foreign Minister Mohamad Alamin announced that Malaysia sent a protest note on November 14 regarding the Philippine Maritime Zones Act and the Archipelagic Sea Lanes Act, signed by President Ferdinand Marcos Jr (see AiR No. 46, November/2024, 2). The laws reaffirm the Philippines' maritime claims, including over the oil-rich state of Sabah in northern Borneo, which Malaysia considers part of its territory.

The protest centers on the fact that the laws restate Manila's long-standing claim over Sabah, contradicting Malaysia's internationally recognized boundaries established in its 1979 map. Alamin emphasized that the protest underscores Malaysia's commitment to defending its sovereignty.

These laws, which also address the South China Sea, have drawn ire from China and other claimants, including Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Brunei, Indonesia, and Taiwan. [AP News]

## Maldives, Azerbaijan sign key agreements to enhance cooperation

(sl) On November 15, the foreign ministers of the Maldives and Azerbaijan, Dr. Abdulla Khalil and Jeyhun Bayramov, signed two key bilateral agreements. The first, an agreement on mutual visa exemption for diplomatic, service, and official passport holders, will allow Maldivian nationals to enter Azerbaijan for up to 90 days. The second, a Memorandum of Understanding on Tourism Cooperation, aims to foster joint development in tourism, recognizing its importance to both countries' economies and cultures. Dr. Khalil emphasized the strong ties between the nations and their commitment to deepening

cooperation. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Maldives]

## Mongolia and South Korea strengthen ties during Joint Committee meeting

(fs) Mongolia and South Korea held the eighth Joint Committee meeting in Seoul, held on November 11 and chaired by Mongolian Cabinet Secretariat Head Nyam-Osor Uchral and South Korean Deputy Foreign Minister Kang In-Sung.

Both nations expressed their willingness to finalize as soon as possible negotiations to sign the Mongolia-Korea Economic Partnership Agreement, which will facilitate increased trade, investment, and business opportunities.

Discussions addressed attracting South Korean investment in Mongolia's major projects, aligned with Mongolia's Vision 2050 development agenda. Both parties reviewed the progress of South Korea-funded projects, including the Solongo initiatives and Bayangol Valley housing. They also explored establishing a joint research center on rare earth metals.

Mongolia aims to study South Korea's strategies in urban and regional planning to support the development of New Kharkhorum city and the Ulaanbaatar-Kharkhorum railway, with South Korea providing technical support. Infrastructure initiatives, like the Ulaanbaatar metro project, are also set to benefit from South Korean collaboration.

In environmental and health sectors, the nations agreed to jointly support Mongolia’s Billion Trees and Healthy Mongolian campaigns, while visa conditions for Mongolian citizens visiting South Korea may be eased for medical and business purposes. [GoGo]

## NEMA and U.S. Forest Service enhance Mongolia’s emergency preparedness

(fs) The National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) of Mongolia, in partnership with the U.S. Forest Service and supported by the US Agency for International Development (USAID), held a joint meeting as part of their Strategic Document Development and Training Technical Working Group.

The meeting focused on planning for 2025-2026, sharing expertise, and advancing professional skills in

emergency management. Participants engaged in practical exercises tackling Mongolia's common disasters, such as wildfires and floods. The sessions allowed for knowledge exchange and improved inter-agency coordination.

This collaboration has led to multiple training programs, including Emergency Incident Management (2019), virtual training on Emergency Operations Centers (2022), and Incident Command System (ICS) instructor certifications (2023-2024). [GoGo]

## Mongolia and Poland to strengthen ties through parliamentary and cultural cooperation

(fs) Mongolian Member of Parliament and Chairman of the Mongolian-Polish Parliamentary Group J. Zoljargal met with Poland's Ambassador to Mongolia Krzysztof Boyko to discuss advancing bilateral cooperation.

Zoljargal acknowledged the recent establishment of Poland's embassy in Ulaanbaatar in 2023 as a positive development that enhances diplomatic and cultural exchanges. He also expressed interest in collaborating with Poland on cybersecurity and transparency in judicial processes.

Boyko noted the expanding trade, now reaching USD 100 million, and the growth of cultural exchanges, such as the upcoming Polish Film Days and an international piano competition in Ulaanbaatar. He pointed to the formation of parliamentary friendship groups, including one in the Polish Sejm (lower house of the bicameral parliament of Poland), as key mechanisms for advancing cooperation. [GoGo]

## Myanmar's military government to blacklist passport renewed by exiled National University Government

(tl) Myanmar's military regime has announced that passports renewed unlawfully in South Korea will be revoked as part of its efforts to crack down on its opponents abroad and force citizens to return home.

An increasing number of Myanmar citizens are renewing their passports at the NUG's representative office in Seoul. However, the junta-appointed Myanmar embassy in Seoul has warned that passports reissued through this office will be revoked and their holders

blacklisted. The embassy is in discussions with relevant South Korean authorities to take appropriate action.

Many Myanmar nationals who fled the country now have expired passports, which junta-controlled embassies often refuse to renew or only do so after extensive background checks and requiring applicants to sign pledges not to engage in political activities.

Over 500 people have renewed their passports through the NUG office in Seoul, and this number is expected to rise into the thousands. The NUG office in Seoul stated that it is doing its best to protect Myanmar citizens who oppose the junta, as well as working to secure the release of Myanmar nationals arrested in South Korea for visa violations. [Radio Free Asia] [Mizzima][Eleven Media Gorup]

## Myanmar and China push for joint security venture amid sovereignty concerns

(sc) Myanmar's junta has formed a working committee to establish a joint security company with China, tasked with protecting Chinese projects and personnel in the country according to a report in the Myanmar Gazette published on November 8.

The move follows discussions between Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and junta leader Min Aung Hlaing in August, emphasizing the Belt and Road Initiative's expansion and safeguarding oil and gas pipelines. The committee will oversee weapons imports, ensuring they don't harm Myanmar's sovereignty, sparking public fears of increasing Chinese control and possible direct security operations by Beijing. [Mizzima] [The Irrawaddy]

China’s investments, including the Muse-Kyaukphyu train line, face threats from escalating resistance by anti-regime groups in conflict zones like Shan and Rakhine States. This proposal signals China's mistrust in the junta’s protective capacity while seeking autonomy over strategic projects.

Critics argue the plan risks undermining Myanmar’s sovereignty, echoing earlier controversies over Chinese-backed security arrangements. Experts highlight potential parallels with past efforts to establish Chinese-controlled security zones for hydropower projects in Myanmar. [The Irrawaddy]

## Shan State residents in Myanmar face supply shortages amid Chinese border trade restrictions

(tl) Residents in northern Shan State, Myanmar, are facing severe food and supply shortages due to China's restrictions on small-scale, informal cross-border trade. The closure of two out of three border gates in Muse, a key trade hub connecting Myanmar to Ruili in China, has caused major disruptions, leading to sharp price increases for essential goods. For instance, fuel prices have surged to over MMK 10,000 kyats (USD 4.76) per liter, and rice prices have nearly doubled.

The trade restrictions follow a visit by Myanmar junta chief Min Aung Hlaing to China, during which he discussed border stability and trade control with Chinese Premier Li Qiang. However, it remains unclear whether the restrictions are a direct outcome of this visit.

The border closures have left over 300 vehicles stranded, including trucks carrying perishable goods such as fish and potatoes, many of which have spoiled due to delays. Although some Chinese officials have allowed limited crossings, Myanmar's government has halted operations. Attempts to secure official statements from Myanmar's Ministry of Commerce and the Chinese Embassy in Myanmar have been unsuccessful. [Radio Free Asia][Mizzima]

## Myanmar's military leader Min Aung Hlaing heads to Russia

(tl) Myanmar's military leader, General Min Aung Hlaing, was reported on November 16 to be en route to Russia following a recent visit to China. This marks his fourth visit to Russia since the 2021 coup and his 10th since assuming the role of commander-in-chief. Sources close to the military office in Nay Pyi Taw confirmed that the trip will include stops in Russia and neighboring Belarus, the latter invited to participate in the visit.

It remains unclear whether Min Aung Hlaing will meet Russian President Vladimir Putin during this trip. On his previous visit to Russia, he met Putin and attended the Far East Forum in Vladivostok, though his first post-coup visit in June 2021 did not include a meeting with the Russian leader.

Min Aung Hlaing has previously sought to strengthen ties with Russia, including cultural diplomacy efforts

such as donating a replica of Myanmar's iconic Shwedagon Pagoda to Russia's ETHNOMIR World Cultural Capital in Kaluga Province in 2022.

This visit follows his participation in the Greater Mekong Subregion Summit in China, where he met Chinese Premier Li Qiang. Both China and Russia are regarded as key allies of Myanmar's military regime amid its ongoing domestic and international isolation. [The Irrawaddy][BBC]

## Preparations for Nepalese Prime Minister Oli's China visit amid BRI implementation debate

(dg) Nepal is gearing up for Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli's visit to China from December 2-6, a trip aimed at strengthening bilateral ties and advancing economic and infrastructure collaboration under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The visit, preceded by Foreign Minister Arzu Rana Deuba's trip to Beijing in late November, is expected to finalize the agenda and agreements, including the long-debated BRI implementation plan.

Oli's visit will focus on implementing past agreements, securing economic and technical support, and proposing major infrastructure projects under the BRI framework. Nepal plans to negotiate a waiver for the NPR 25.88 billion (USD 193 million) loan taken for the Pokhara International Airport, which has struggled to generate revenue since its inauguration. Since 2008, China has pledged NPR 80 billion (USD 596 million) in grants to Nepal, but concerns over debt sustainability have prompted Nepal to seek concessional loans or grants similar to those provided by multilateral lenders. [Khabarhub] [The Kathmandu Post 1]

The BRI implementation plan remains a contentious issue. While the Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist Leninist (CPN-UML) supports signing the plan, the Nepali Congress (NC) has raised concerns about its broader geopolitical implications. The NC prefers a project-by-project negotiation strategy to ensure that Nepal's priorities and mutual benefits are emphasized rather than aligning solely with Chinese interests.

Chinese Ambassador Chen Song has intensified lobbying efforts, meeting with leaders from both parties, including Congress Vice President Purna Bahadur Khadka and UML leader KP Oli, to build consensus for the plan. The draft emphasizes major infrastructure initiatives, including the Trans-Himalayan Multi-Dimensional Connectivity Network,

cross-border railways, enhanced air routes, and electricity transmission lines. However, Nepali officials have expressed reservations, particularly regarding provisions on joint law enforcement, international alignment, and financial commitments.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Finance are preparing a counterproposal addressing these concerns, which will be discussed during Deuba's Beijing visit. These discussions are expected to finalize the agenda for Oli's trip and ensure the agreements reflect Nepal's strategic interests. [The Kathmandu Post 2]

Meanwhile, speaking at the Kantipur Conclave, Oli assured that his visit to China would not harm Nepal's ties with India, emphasizing Nepal's sovereignty in managing diplomatic engagements. He described the visit as a matter of convenience and reaffirmed Nepal's commitment to balanced relations with its neighbors. [The Kathmandu Post 3]

## India-Nepal border security and bilateral ties strengthened by Indian security chiefs' visits to Kathmandu

(rs/dg) In a bid to strengthen bilateral ties and enhance regional security, two high-ranking Indian security officials are visiting Nepal this month. Indian Army Chief Upendra Dwivedi is scheduled to arrive on November 20, following the visit of Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB) Director General Amrit Mohan Prasad, who participated in the eighth annual Nepal-India border security coordination meeting in Kathmandu on November 15. [Online Khabar]

The recent coordination meeting, led by Nepal's Armed Police Force Inspector General Raju Aryal and SSB Director General Prasad, focused on addressing pressing concerns, including the movement of third-country nationals through the open border. The talks highlighted the influx of Chinese, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Rohingya nationals and the need for enhanced monitoring to prevent human trafficking and drug smuggling.

Both sides agreed to strengthen coordination, improve information sharing, and conduct joint patrolling to combat cross-border crimes effectively. Discussions also included maintaining and repairing over 8,553 boundary pillars—of which 2,700 are missing—and establishing help desks and tourist posts to improve record-keeping at transit points. Nepal raised concerns over unauthorized incursions by Indian personnel,

while India emphasized the need to address drug trafficking and smuggling. [The Kathmandu Post 1]

Nepal's Home Minister Ramesh Lekhak met with SSB Director General Prasad during the visit, focusing on improving border management and ensuring respectful treatment for individuals crossing the Nepal-India border. Lekhak reiterated Nepal's commitment to strengthening bilateral relations while addressing issues such as illegal trafficking and the need for peaceful border management.

These high-level interactions, including Army Chief Upendra Dwivedi's upcoming visit, reflect a broader commitment to enhancing security cooperation. The meetings are part of a long-standing coordination mechanism established in 2012, facilitating collaborative responses to shared challenges, including trans-border crimes, natural disasters, and capacity-building initiatives. [The Kathmandu Post 2]

## North Korea troops on Ukraine ground, US confirms

(jb) The US Department of State confirmed in a press briefing on November 12 that the US has acknowledged the official presence of 10,000 North Korean soldiers on Russian soil, deployed to aid Russia in their war in Ukraine.

Stating that most of the troops have moved to the Kursk region in Russia, the US has officially confirmed Ukrainian soldiers' statement that they are currently combating North Korean soldiers in the war as well.

While South Korea's confirmation is yet to be received, reports mention that Russia has trained North Korean soldiers in all front-line combat skills necessary for the artillery and drone warfare waged by Russia. Despite this, the alliance's compatibility in war as a decisive factor for victory remains to be seen. [South China Morning Post]

This comes as photographs posted to the Russian side of the social media giant Telegram revealed the presence of a North Korean M-1978/1989 Koksan 170mm self-propelled howitzer (SPG), a heavy artillery system with an inbuilt propulsion mechanism, in Krasnoyarsk, central Russia.

The pictures noted two such SPGs, the longest-range artillery in North Korean service which was also imported by Iran during the Iran-Iraq war. The machines are suspected to either be in Russia for the

purpose of testing or to be deployed for the war in Kursk, Russia where North Korean troops are currently posted to support Russia for its war in Ukraine.

Russia, which currently holds little ammunition inventory that fits the M-1978 and M-1989 artillery, would also likely be importing the ammunition from North Korea in the event of regular deployment. [The Warzone]

## China-Pakistan relations strained over security concerns amid escalating attacks on Chinese nationals

(sn/lm) Rising militant attacks on Chinese nationals working on China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects have strained bilateral ties, prompting Beijing to call for enhanced security measures. Simultaneously, Pakistan has extended invitations to Chinese companies to invest in renewable energy, signaling a desire to balance security challenges with economic collaboration.

*Beijing's concerns and security proposals*

The escalating violence, including a deadly car bombing in Karachi that killed two Chinese engineers, has amplified Beijing's dissatisfaction with Pakistan's security efforts. China has proposed a joint security management framework, including deploying Chinese security personnel in Pakistan for counter-terrorism operations—a suggestion Islamabad has resisted, citing sovereignty concerns.

Instead, Pakistan has sought Chinese assistance in improving surveillance and intelligence capabilities. Despite deploying over 15,000 personnel, including specialized units, to safeguard CPEC projects, security gaps persist. Chinese workers remain vulnerable, with some expressing intentions to leave Pakistan. Compounding the issue, Chinese private security contractors, barred from carrying arms under domestic regulations, rely on local guards, further exposing projects to risks. [Reuters]

*Impact on CPEC and bilateral relations*

The deteriorating security situation has disrupted CPEC projects, with delays and cancellations becoming increasingly common. Frontier Services Group, a security contractor associated with Blackwater founder Erik Prince, reported a 74 percent decline in Chinese investments in Pakistan under the Belt and Road Initiative last year. Chinese officials have warned that

the inability to protect its nationals and projects could undermine bilateral cooperation and trust. [Financial Times]

Amid these challenges, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif assured Chinese Vice Premier Ding Xuexiang at the COP29 Summit of Pakistan's commitment to combating terrorism and protecting Chinese nationals. Sharif emphasized China's role as a "longstanding friend" and reiterated Pakistan's resolve to strengthen ties despite setbacks. [Arab News 1]

In parallel, Pakistan has invited Chinese companies to invest in its renewable energy and offshore wind sectors to reduce reliance on costly fuel imports. At a seminar in Fuzhou, Ambassador Khalil Hashmi highlighted Pakistan's 1,000-kilometer coastline as a strategic advantage for offshore wind development.

This outreach builds on existing energy collaboration. Last month, Pakistan's power minister met Chinese officials at the Belt & Road Ministerial Conference to discuss modernizing power systems and reducing transmission losses. [Arab News 2]

## Potential softening in ties between Bangladesh, Pakistan

(lm) Pakistan has extended a hand of solidarity to Bangladesh amidst its worst dengue outbreak in years, while a direct shipping route between the two countries marks a notable shift toward a potential softening of relations between the two nations, historically marked by tensions since their split in 1971.

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif offered assistance to Bangladesh on November 18, as the country battles a deadly outbreak of dengue fever that has claimed over 400 lives and hospitalized more than 78,000. The crisis, exacerbated by rising temperatures and prolonged monsoons linked to climate change, has overwhelmed Bangladesh's healthcare system. Hospitals are grappling with a surge of patients experiencing severe flu-like symptoms, while health officials urge preventive measures like mosquito repellents and bed nets.

Dengue is endemic to Pakistan, which also experiences year-round transmission and seasonal peaks. Pakistan's expertise in managing similar outbreaks positions it as a valuable partner in addressing the ongoing crisis. [Arab News 1]

Adding to this positive trajectory, the first direct cargo ship in decades between Pakistan and Bangladesh docked successfully at Chittagong Port on November 11. Previously, Pakistani goods required transshipment through intermediary ports, increasing costs and delays.

This logistical breakthrough follows Bangladesh's decision to ease import restrictions on Pakistani goods, removing mandatory physical inspections that had hindered trade. Pakistan's envoy to Dhaka, Syed Ahmed Maroof, praised the development as a "major step" in fostering regional trade and business opportunities. [Arab News 2]

## Japan approves USD 18.5 million grant for flood management in Pakistan

(mra) Japan has approved a grant of JPY 2.831 billion (USD 18.5 million) to enhance flood management in Pakistan. The initiative includes constructing three embankments on the Indus River in Haripur district and installing rain meters at 45 sites in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab. These measures aim to improve flood forecasting, reduce disaster risks, and protect local communities from potential human and economic losses.

The project comes after Pakistan's devastating 2022 floods, which claimed 1,700 lives, displaced millions, and caused USD 30 billion in damages. Data from the rain meters, managed by the Federal Flood Commission and Water and Power Development Authority, will be shared with relevant agencies to improve disaster preparedness.

This grant is part of a broader PKR 200 billion (USD 705 million) flood protection program, co-funded by federal and provincial governments and international lenders. The program also includes the installation of 45 telemetry stations and five automatic weather stations for enhanced weather monitoring and flood forecasting. [DAWN] [The Express Tribune]

## Indonesia, Pakistan explore Halal meat trade and agricultural partnerships

(ja) Indonesia's Chargé d'Affaires in Pakistan, Rahmat Hindiarta Kusuma, recently visited Muhammad Nawaz Sharif University of Agriculture (MNSUA) in Multan to discuss expanding trade in halal meat and exploring

agricultural collaborations. Kusuma emphasized Indonesia's demand for halal products and expressed interest in Pakistan's halal meat sector.

MNSUA Vice-Chancellor Dr. Ishtiaq A. Rajwana presented the university's innovations in climate-smart agriculture and sustainable farming. The visit ended with both parties agreeing to explore further cooperation, particularly in halal meat and modern agriculture, to boost economic growth and food security. [The Nation]

## Pakistan Cricket Board urges India to address Champions Trophy concerns

The Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) has called on India to discuss its concerns over the 2025 Champions Trophy, scheduled to be hosted in Pakistan from February 9 to March 19. India has refused to send its team to Pakistan due to political tensions. PCB Chairman Mohsin Naqvi emphasized that Pakistan will not accept a "hybrid" model for the tournament, as done for the 2023 Asia Cup, and urged India to engage in direct dialogue to resolve any issues. [Arab News 1]

Meanwhile, ongoing violence in Indian-administered Kashmir, including recent attacks linked to Pakistan, continues to undermine India's claim of normalcy in the region. Despite accusations from Indian officials that Pakistan supports insurgents, Islamabad maintains it only offers moral and diplomatic support. The situation remains tense, with over 120 deaths this year alone, as both countries maintain entrenched positions on the disputed territory. [Arab News 2]

## Pakistan ex-Premier Khan's imprisonment casts shadow over efforts to revitalize ties with US under Trump

Planning Minister Ahsan Iqbal emphasized the potential for revitalized collaboration with Washington during a USAID event in Islamabad on November 16. He highlighted shared opportunities in the economy, climate change, education, and health, describing the current moment as a "unique opportunity" to adapt the bilateral partnership to global challenges.

Iqbal noted that the US remains Pakistan's largest trading partner, with bilateral trade surpassing USD 6.5 billion in 2023. Pakistan's exports to the US, including textiles, surgical instruments, and IT services,

contribute significantly to its economy, but Iqbal underscored untapped growth potential in these sectors.

Relations between the two nations have been strained in recent years, especially under former Prime Minister Imran Khan, who accused Washington of orchestrating his ouster and supported the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in 2021. Current Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's administration has worked to repair ties, but analysts believe US engagement will remain focused on security and counterterrorism, particularly in Afghanistan.

Defense Minister Khawaja Asif voiced Pakistan's readiness to collaborate with the Trump administration where interests align but cautioned that differences could emerge if Washington continues supporting conflicts in the Middle East. Asif welcomed Trump's campaign pledge to end global wars, viewing it as a positive step for regional stability. [Arab News 1]

Efforts to strengthen US-Pakistan ties also include economic outreach. Pakistan is courting New York-based businesses with incentives to invest in its economy, positioning itself as a trade and transit hub for South and Central Asia. During a meeting with Mark Jaffe, President of the Greater New York Chamber of Commerce, Pakistan's Ambassador Rizwan Saeed Sheikh promoted the country's liberal investment policies, geographical advantages, and strategic trade agreements, including its GSP+ status with the European Union and a Free Trade Agreement with China. [Arab News 2]

However, Islamabad's ambitions for improved ties with Washington face challenges due to Khan's imprisonment. A group of 46 US lawmakers recently urged President Joe Biden to advocate for Khan's release and to address human rights concerns in Pakistan. In a letter dated November 16, the lawmakers cited mass arrests, restrictions on freedom of expression, and alleged electoral manipulation during Pakistan's February 2024 elections, which they described as flawed and suppressive of Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party. [Geo News]

The lawmakers' appeal has provoked sharp criticism from Pakistan's ruling coalition. PPP Senator Sherry Rehman accused PTI of hypocrisy, pointing out that the party previously blamed the US for interfering in Khan's ouster in 2022 but now seeks its intervention. Sindh Information Minister Sharjeel Inam Memon echoed these sentiments, accusing PTI of undermining Pakistan's sovereignty by lobbying for foreign pressure.

Khan, ousted via a no-confidence vote in April 2022, has been imprisoned since August 2023 on charges of corruption and terrorism. While concerns about a possible military trial surfaced after riots by PTI supporters in May 2023, UK Foreign Secretary David Lammy recently stated there are no indications that Pakistan plans to try Khan in a military court. Lammy emphasized the importance of fair trials and due process, urging Pakistan to uphold international obligations and democratic principles. [DAWN] [Arab News 3]

## The Netherlands offers support for Pakistan to improve human rights conditions

(sn) Henny de Vries, the Netherlands ambassador to Pakistan, has offered to cooperate with Pakistan to improve their conditions relating to human rights, discrimination and violence against religious minorities, and interfaith dialogue. A meeting was held between de Vries and Sardar Ramesh Singh Arora, the Provincial Minorities Affairs Minister for Pakistan, where the need for action was discussed, and the formulation of a five-year plan was discussed, which would be the first by a Punjab government.

Improvements have been introduced, including scholarships for children from selected minority communities, a 200 per cent increase in Diwali quotas for minority celebrations, and plans to issue 'minority cards' to be supplied to over 50,000 families. Arora emphasized the need for international support in establishing a solid commitment to human rights and underlined Pakistan's commitment to improving its practices. Henny de Vries praised Pakistan for its commitment to supporting religious and minority tolerance and expressed the Netherlands' commitment to the cause. [The Express Tribune] [Daily Parliament Times]

## Poland seeks partnership with Pakistan

(sn) Poland's Ambassador to Pakistan, Maciej Pisarski, expressed his country's desire to collaborate with Pakistan to strengthen the international order based on principles outlined in the UN Charter. He emphasized the need to reaffirm universal norms like respect for sovereignty, human rights, and territorial integrity.

During Poland's Independence Day and Armed Forces Day celebration in Islamabad, Pisarski reflected on Poland's historical resilience in defending its sovereignty and highlighted Poland's support for Ukraine amid Russia's aggression. He also called for the protection of civilians in Gaza and Lebanon and advocated for a just and lasting peace in the Middle East.

Focusing on bilateral relations, Pisarski noted the growing partnership between Poland and Pakistan, with trade nearing USD 1 billion and Polish investments in Pakistan's gas sector as evidence of the strengthening economic ties. He praised the GSP+ scheme, which provides Pakistan with preferential access to European markets. [The News International]

## Pakistan's Defense minister reports knife threat to UK police after subway incident

(lm) Pakistan's Defense Minister Khawaja Asif has reported a death threat to British police following a harassment incident during a subway ride in London. A viral video captured an unidentified man using abusive language in Punjabi and warning, "Take him away before someone stabs him with a knife."

Asif ignored the incident at the time but later lodged a formal complaint at the Pakistan High Commission in London. The minister called for an investigation, urging London Transport Police to review CCTV footage to identify the suspects, who reportedly included a family of three to four individuals.

This incident follows similar episodes of harassment faced by Pakistani ministers, allegedly at the hands of supporters of jailed former Prime Minister Imran Khan. [Arab News]

## UK to improve education access for over 250,000 Pakistani children with USD 25.2 million initiative

(lm) The United Kingdom has announced a USD 25.2 million program to enhance education access for more than 250,000 children in Pakistan over three years. The initiative, part of the "Khilo aur Barho" service delivery component of the Girls and Out of School Children's Action for Learning (GOAL) program, will focus on improving literacy and numeracy skills in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) provinces.

Funded by the British High Commission and delivered by the British Council, the program aims to address Pakistan's education crisis, with an estimated 22.8 million out-of-school children, the second highest in the world according to UNICEF. Among them, 12.2 million are girls, often excluded due to cultural and social barriers, especially in rural areas.

The British High Commission highlighted that 10 percent of participants will be children with disabilities, while 20 percent will come from marginalized groups. The program emphasizes ability-based learning to help children quickly catch up in Urdu, Math, and English.

British High Commissioner Jane Marriott described Pakistan's situation as an "education emergency," noting that over 26.2 million children are out of school. She emphasized the UK's commitment to education, having supported 4.5 million children in Pakistan over the past decade.

The program underscores the need for greater investment in education. Despite a literacy rate of 59 percent, Pakistan spends only 2.8 percent of its GDP on education, leading to poor infrastructure, limited teacher training, and low access to quality education, particularly in rural areas.

In 2022, the UK had contributed USD 160 million (PKR 45.76 billion) toward women's education in Pakistan, further underscoring its long-standing support for the country's educational development. [Arab News]

## Qatar to defer 5 LNG cargoes to 2026 as Pakistani consumption declines

(sn) Five Liquified natural gas (LNG) cargoes have been deferred from 2025 to 2026, as Pakistan faces a noticeable decline in national GDP growth and industrial activities. Qatar is expected to supply Pakistan with 18 LNG cargos in 2026. Shehbaz Sharif, the Prime Minister of Pakistan, reported that RLNG consumption had declined by 150 million cubic feet in the previous month. Under a flexible clause in the agreement, Pakistan can defer up to five LNG cargoes to 2025 but cannot request Qatar to adjust for the additional 13 cargo. This leaves Pakistani authorities with the task of dealing with 13 cargoes that have remained unused due to the decline. [The News International]

## Pakistan's Deputy Prime Minister discusses trade and investment with Egyptian foreign minister

(lm) Pakistan's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Mohammad Ishaq Dar met Egyptian Foreign Minister Badr Abdelatty last week during the 15th Sir Bani Yas Forum in the United Arab Emirates. The forum, running from November 15 to 17, focused on Middle Eastern peace, security, and economic transformation, bringing together global policymakers and experts.

Dar and Abdelatty discussed enhancing Pakistan-Egypt cooperation in trade, investment, and tourism. This dialogue reflects ongoing efforts to strengthen bilateral ties, which were commemorated last year with a joint postage stamp marking 75 years of diplomatic relations.

While Pakistan has primarily concentrated on fostering economic partnerships with Gulf states, the meeting signifies a growing commitment to broader regional collaboration. Dar attended the forum at the invitation of UAE Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan. [Arab News]

## UAE eyes investment in Pakistan Sindh's desalination, transport, and construction sectors

(lm) The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has expressed interest in investing in Karachi's desalination plant and transport, road, and bridge construction projects, according to a spokesman for Sindh Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah. The announcement followed a meeting between Shah and UAE Consul General Bakhit Atiq Al Rimithiki on the UAE's National Day.

The UAE is one of Pakistan's largest trading partners and a significant investor, with trade volume reaching USD 7.9 billion in 2023, marking a 12 percent increase from 2022. Over the past two decades, UAE investments in Pakistan have exceeded USD 10 billion.

The Sindh government is facilitating discussions between the provincial investment department and UAE representatives to advance these projects. Earlier this month, Pakistan signed agreements with the UAE's AD Ports Group to explore investments in maritime, air, rail, logistics, and digital services sectors. At Karachi Port, AD Ports Group and its partner Kaheel Terminals

have pledged nearly USD 400 million in investment over 15 years to enhance operations and efficiency.

Pakistan is actively seeking foreign investment to stabilize its USD 350 billion economy while implementing reforms mandated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The UAE's interest aligns with Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's earlier statement about the UAE committing USD 10 billion to Pakistan's economic sectors. [Arab News]

## Pakistan, Morocco discuss aerospace collaboration to strengthen defense ties

(lm) Pakistan and Morocco are exploring enhanced collaboration in the aerospace sector as Moroccan Air Force Inspector Major General Mohammed Gadih visited Islamabad for discussions with Pakistan's Chief of Air Staff, Air Marshal Zaheer Ahmed Baber Sidhu. The meeting emphasized military cooperation and joint training initiatives to bolster defense relations.

During his visit, Maj. Gen. Gadih praised the technological advancements of the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) and expressed Morocco's interest in learning from Pakistan's expertise in aerospace technology. The Moroccan official highlighted his admiration for the National Aerospace Science and Technology Park, expressing keen interest in industrial collaboration to improve Morocco's operational capabilities.

Air Marshal Sidhu reaffirmed Pakistan's commitment to strengthening bilateral defense ties through joint training exercises, including basic and tactical-level programs for Moroccan Air Force personnel. Maj. Gen. Gadih also toured key PAF installations, including the National ISR and Integrated Air Operations Center, to witness Pakistan's technological infrastructure firsthand.

The meeting underscores the growing defense relationship between Pakistan and Morocco, which share strong ties with Arab nations through joint exercises, defense production, and counter-terrorism intelligence cooperation. Both sides aim to enhance their strategic partnership in the aerospace and military domains. [Arab News]

## Malaysia, Singapore sign MoU to combat cross border crime

(fi) On November 14, Singapore and Malaysia signed a new Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) aimed at strengthening cooperation in the prevention and combat of transnational crimes. The MoU reflects the two countries' long-standing relationship, with both sides engaging in information sharing, training, capacity building, and mutual support on a variety of security challenges. Under the Mou, Singapore and Malaysia will enhance collaboration in combating transnational crimes including as drug trafficking, terrorism, cybercrime, and scams, especially cyber-enabled scams. A joint committee will be formed by Singapore's Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) and Malaysia's Ministry of Home Affairs to identify and propose actions, policies, or programs to be implemented under the MoU. [Ministry of Home Affairs Singapore][The Edge Malaysia]

## SAF, Royal Thai Army conclude successful Exercise Kocha Singa 2024

(lm) The Singapore Army and Royal Thai Army (RTA) concluded the 24th edition of Exercise Kocha Singa in Kanchanaburi, Thailand, held from November 7 to 15. The closing ceremony, co-officiated by Singapore's Chief of Army Major-General David Neo and RTA Commander-in-Chief General Pana Klaewblaudtuk, marked the culmination of joint military training.

The exercise involved 325 personnel from Singapore's 40th Battalion Singapore Armoured Regiment and the RTA's 3rd Infantry Battalion. Activities included jungle survival, live-firing, urban operations, drone deployments, professional exchanges, and a joint battalion-level assault exercise. [MINDEF Singapore]

## New Camp Tilpal boosts Singapore Armed Forces training in Australia

(lm) Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) soldiers training in Australia now have access to Camp Tilpal, a modern facility in Shoalwater Bay, Queensland, accommodating up to 2,000 troops. Completed in 2024, the camp features improved accommodations, operational facilities, and a medical center, enhancing training safety and efficiency. [The Straits Times]

## South Korea eyes loan recovery from North Korea

(dql) The South Korean unification ministry announced it is reviewing measures to recover loans provided to North Korea for constructing inter-Korean roads and railways. This follows North Korea's demolition of sections of the Gyeongui and Donghae Lines in October, a move reflecting escalating tensions.

From 2002 to 2008, South Korea extended in-kind loans worth USD 132.9 million to North Korea for these projects. The ministry is working with related agencies to finalize the loan amounts and explore immediate recovery options without a grace period, amid concerns over North Korea's likely refusal to repay.

Additionally, the ministry's policy plan includes efforts to enhance support for North Korean defectors. This involves promoting a pending bill in the National Assembly under which companies employing defectors who have resettled in South Korea would receive tax incentives. [Yonhap News Agency]

## US Air Force to phase out A-10 Fleet in South Korea by 2025

(mc) U.S. officials have announced plans to retire the U.S. Air Force's fleet of A-10 Thunderbolt II aircraft from key bases in the Indo-Pacific, including Osan Air Base in South Korea, as part of a broader modernization initiative.

The 24 retiring A-10 fighter jets will be replaced with advanced fourth- and fifth-generation aircraft to enhance the defense of strategic locations in the region. Lieutenant General David Iverson, Commander of the Seventh Air Force and Deputy Commander of U.S. Forces Korea, emphasized that upgrading air capabilities in the Korean theater will bolster deterrence against North Korea and contribute to regional stability.

This modernization strategy aligns with the recent approval of a USD 4.92 billion military aid package for South Korea, which includes E-7 Airborne Early Warning and Control aircraft. [The Defense Post]

## South Korea's KEPCO secures major renewable energy projects in Saudi Arabia and Guam

(mc) South Korea's Korea Electric Power Corp (KEPCO) has announced that it has secured contracts in Saudi

Arabia and Guam in the renewable energy sector, with projected revenues exceeding KRW 1 trillion (USD 717 million) over 25 years.

In Saudi Arabia, KEPCO, in partnership with the UAE-based company Masdar, signed an agreement under the national renewable energy initiative to build a 2-gigawatt solar power plant and manage electricity distribution in the region for 25 years.

In addition, KEPCO won a contract to construct a 132-megawatt solar farm, scheduled for completion by 2027. This project, in collaboration with partners like Samsung S&T Corp., will supply energy to the region for the same 25-year period. [Yonhap News Agency]

## Sri Lanka's Navy Commander hosts Director General of Indian Coast Guard

(axc) Indian Coast Guard (ICG) Director General S. Paramesh met with India's High Commissioner Santosh Jha and Sri Lanka Navy Commander Vice Admiral Priyantha Perera during a visit to Colombo, focusing on strengthening regional maritime security and bilateral cooperation.

The meetings followed the 7th Annual High-Level Meeting (HLM) between the Indian and Sri Lanka Coast Guards, held under a 2018 Memorandum of Understanding. Discussions addressed maritime challenges, including drug trafficking, marine pollution, and safety of mariners, with both sides committing to deeper collaboration.

Paramesh emphasized enhancing operational ties, while Sri Lankan officials highlighted the importance of joint efforts in ensuring regional security. The 8th HLM will be hosted by India in 2025. [Business Standard] [NewsLK]

## JICA to assess and improve Sri Lanka's estate sector conditions

(sl) The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) plans to enhance social and economic conditions for Sri Lanka's estate sector workers. Announcing a new initiative, JICA will conduct a survey starting in December 2024 to evaluate estate management practices and living conditions, aiming to guide future interventions.

The survey will examine business models employed by Regional Plantation Companies, the Janatha Estate Development Board, the Sri Lanka State Plantations Corporation, and smallholders. It will also recommend improvements to infrastructure, including road maintenance, water supply, and sanitation facilities. [Daily Mirror]

## United States lifts security alert on Sri Lanka's Arugam Bay after enhanced measures

(lm) The United States has lifted its security alert on Sri Lanka's popular tourist destination of Arugam Bay after extensive security measures were implemented by Sri Lankan authorities. The alert, issued on October 23, 2024, by the US Embassy in Colombo, was based on credible intelligence suggesting a potential attack targeting tourist areas. The alert prompted immediate action from Sri Lanka's Defence Ministry, Public Security Ministry, and law enforcement agencies. [Daily News]

## Dutch delegation meets with Presidential Secretary of Sri Lanka, focuses on providing technical and financial support

(sl) A meeting between the Dutch delegation, led by Deputy Ambassador Iwan Rutjens, and Presidential Secretary Dr. Nandika Sanath Kumanayake was held at the Presidential Secretariat on November 13. During the meeting, the Dutch delegation expressed its interest in working closely with Sri Lanka to provide the necessary technical assistance and financial resources for the development of agriculture, education, tourism, and the public sector, particularly in the context of programs that Wageningen University & Research is seeking to establish with key Sri Lankan stakeholders in agriculture and agro-ecotourism. [Presidential Secretariat]

## China frustrated over Taiwan leaders' planned visit to North America

(am) China's Foreign Ministry has expressed frustration over reports that Taiwan President Lai Ching-te and former president Tsai Ing-wen are preparing to visit countries in North America within the coming weeks. [Taiwan News 1]

While Tsai will to attend and to speak at the Halifax International Security Forum, which begins on November 22, Lai is scheduled to travel through Hawaii during a diplomatic tour to visit pacific allies (see article in this edition). [Focus Taiwan] [Taiwan News 2]

China's Foreign Ministry has stated China "firmly opposes" the visit by "separatist" leaders, urging Canada to honour its diplomatic relations with China with "concrete action" by refusing to allow Tsai's visit.

The ministry called Lai's planned visit a "separatist provocation," and warned that by allowing such a visit, Washington would send "wrong signals to" Taiwan "independence forces."

## Taiwan to spend USD 2.2 billion on US arms in 2025

(hs) The Taiwanese government has committed NTD 70.6 billion (USD 2.2 billion) for weapons purchases from the United States in 2025. This spending is part of broader defense contracts, valued at NTD 716.6 billion (USD 22.5 billion), covering 21 procurement projects. Payments for these projects are scheduled through to 2031, with NTD 373.1 billion (USD 11.9 billion) already paid and NTD 343.5 billion (USD 10.9 billion) still outstanding.

The weapons being acquired in the coming year include advanced systems like portable short-range air defence missiles and radar upgrades. Additionally, Taiwan has plans to purchase key military equipment, such as 108 M1A2T Abrams tanks, 66 F-16V fighter jets, 29 HIMARS rocket systems, and 100 Harpoon land-based missile systems. These acquisitions are part of Taiwan's broader strategy to bolster its defences against the growing threat from China, which views Taiwan as part of its territory.

Concerns over Taiwan's defense spending have emerged and more so after comments from US President-elect Donald Trump. Trump has criticized Taiwan for not investing enough in its own defense and urged an increase in military expenditure to 10 percent of GDP. Local experts warn that raising spending to this level could strain Taiwan's economy, limiting funding for other governmental priorities.

The US has committed to supplying Taiwan with arms under the Taiwan Relations Act, which mandates that the US provide the island with the means to defend itself. Reports have surfaced suggesting Taiwan may seek an additional NTD 471 billion (USD 15 billion)

weapons package, including F-35 fighter jets, Aegis-equipped warships, and Patriot missiles. However, Taiwan's Defence Minister, Wellington Koo, has denied knowledge of this plan, dismissing the report as unsubstantiated.

Delays in arms deliveries, such as the F-16Vs, have also drawn criticism from Taiwanese lawmakers. The government has explained that the Covid-19 pandemic caused disruptions to manufacturing, but that delivery schedules have improved in recent months. Taiwan is still awaiting a backlog of US arms valued at USD 20.5 billion, including critical systems like fighter jets, tanks, and missile defense technologies. These delayed deliveries have highlighted the challenges Taiwan faces in ensuring timely access to the military equipment needed to counter the threat from China. [South China Morning Post]

## Trump selects Taiwan-friendly Congressman Mike Waltz as National Security Advisor

(hs) US President-elect Donald Trump has reportedly chosen Representative Mike Waltz as his incoming national security advisor, signaling a strong focus on Taiwan and countering China. Waltz, a former Green Beret and Virginia Military Institute graduate, is a member of the Congressional Taiwan Caucus and the House China Task Force, known for advocating robust US-Taiwan ties and confronting Beijing's influence. His appointment, which does not require Senate confirmation, places him at the forefront of addressing global security challenges.

Waltz has proposed strategies to counter China, including expediting arms shipments to Taiwan, reinforcing Pacific alliances, and upgrading US military assets. In his book, *Hard Truths: Think and Lead Like a Green Beret*, he outlined a five-part plan and has consistently called for proactive measures to deter Beijing's aggression. His vocal support for Taiwan's defense, often citing lessons from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, reflects his prioritization of the Indo-Pacific.

According to his recent public speech in the Reagan Foundation, Waltz highlights the US military capacity should be ready for any upcoming challenges in the region, even though the Chinese has grown three times in their numbers of nuclear weapons, as well as the exceeded capacity in space force. Meanwhile, instead of tanks or warships in conventional warfare, the Chinese cyber espionage and attacks on American ports, pipelines and water resources should not be

underrated, such as the Volt Typhoon. [CNA, in Chinese]

This choice shows Taiwan's place in US foreign policy and suggests a recalibration of priorities towards countering Chinese influence. Waltz's evolving stance on global conflicts, such as shifting focus from Ukraine to Asia, may spark debates over resource allocation but underscores a clear strategy of strengthening alliances and deterring adversaries in a volatile global landscape. [Taiwan News]

## Taiwan's TSMC to receive US subsidy for its Arizona plant

(am) The U.S. Department of Commerce announced that it is moving forward with a deal to provide direct funding to the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) under the CHIPS and Science Act. This agreement will grant TSMC's new plant in Arizona a subsidy of USD 6.6 billion.

TSMC has already invested over USD 65 billion to construct three semiconductor fabrication plants near Phoenix, Arizona. The Biden administration's decision will significantly support TSMC in scaling up its development of advanced semiconductor manufacturing technology. The subsidy is based on a preliminary agreement reached in April.

President Biden and Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo have both hailed TSMC's Arizona plant as a critical step in bringing advanced chip production back to the United States. The first of the three fabs is expected to begin semiconductor production early next year, creating thousands of jobs in the coming years. [White House] [Taiwan News]

## Former Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen to visit Canada

(am) Taiwan's former President Tsai Ing-wen is set to visit Canada next week to attend the Halifax International Security Forum, which begins on November 22. [Taiwan News 1]

Sources indicate that Tsai is expected to deliver a speech at the forum, though her office has not confirmed these reports and declined to comment on the speculation. [Reuters]

Recently, Tsai concluded an 8-day tour of Europe. She first visited Prague, where she gave a speech at the Forum 2000 conference, followed by visits to the French Senate in Paris and the European Parliament in Brussels. [Taiwan News 2]

Canada has recently strengthened its security ties with Taiwan. Multiple sources report that Canada has appointed a cyber attaché to its diplomatic mission in Taipei. This attaché will collaborate with the Taiwanese government on cybersecurity initiatives, particularly in countering foreign information manipulation and interference. In January of this year, Canadian officials were sent to Taipei to learn about Chinese disinformation tactics used during Taiwan's presidential elections.

## Czech cross-party parliamentary delegation visits Taiwan

(sk) A cross-party Czechia parliamentary delegation visited from November 11 to 14 Taiwan to meet with Taiwanese President Lai Ching-te and other senior officials to discuss Taiwan-Czechia cooperation projects, as the first visit after the President Lai's inauguration in May. The delegation was led by Marek Benda, chair of the Czech Republic-Taiwan Parliamentary Platform and a senior member of the Chamber of Deputies of the Czech Parliament. [Focus Taiwan]

On November 12, the delegation met with President Lai, who emphasized the shared values on democracy and resistance to authoritarian suppression, as the 35th anniversary of Velvet Revolution in 1989. He expressed optimism for expanding collaboration in semiconductors, cybersecurity, and cultural exchange. Benda echoed this sentiment, commending Taiwan's democratic resilience and discussing the importance of bilateral economic and cultural ties. He also voiced concerns over expanding authoritarian influence and the need for peace in the Taiwan Strait, which he linked to wider regional stability. [CNA, in Chinese]

On the same day, the delegation also met with Lin Chia-lung, Minister of Foreign Affairs, highlighting ongoing Taiwan-Czechia collaboration in technology, industry, and culture. Lin mentioned the fruit of multidimensional cooperation, including new weekly direct flights and investment visits to Czechia for semiconductor suppliers, which can be developed as a "non-red supply chain" for democratic countries. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Taiwan, in Chinese].

On November 13, the delegation met with Han Kuo-yu, President of the Legislative Yuan, Taiwan's parliament, and representatives from all major political parties in the Legislative Yuan. Han underlined the importance of increased direct flights and rich cultures enhancing the Czechia impression in Taiwan's society, while Chairman Benda embraced the cross-parties cooperation across the spectrum as the key for domestic democratic operation to respond to the complex issues within international relations. [CNA, in Chinese]

## Taiwanese delegation visits Lithuania amid pro-Beijing shift in new government

(am) Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced on November 17 that a delegation of 20 UAV manufacturers and developers of related technologies will visit Lithuania as part of a broader trip to Europe, taking place from November 17 to 24. The delegation will be led by Taiwan Foreign Minister Lin Chia-lung. [Taiwan News]

The trip is intended to bolster the manufacturing supply chain for drones and allow Taiwanese businesses to network with European entities.

The delegation's first stop in Lithuania comes at a crucial time for Taiwan-Lithuania relations. Lithuania's Parliament swore in new legislators on November 14, with a new coalition government to be led by the Social Democratic Party of Lithuania.

The expected incoming prime minister, Gintautas Paluckas, has indicated he seeks to improve relations with Beijing at the expense of Taipei. He recently referred to warming relations between Lithuania and Taiwan as a "grave diplomatic mistake."

Lin's primary objective during the visit, according to MOFA, is to demonstrate "comprehensive diplomacy" to Lithuania's political leaders and business communities. MOFA hopes Lithuania will recognize Taiwan as a trustworthy diplomatic partner that can offer substantive benefits.

In addition to promoting partnerships with drone manufacturers, Taiwan previously discussed manufacturing semiconductors in Lithuania with the Teltonikas group. Lithuanian news site *LRT* reported that plans to build a 3.5 million Euro facility at Liepkalnis to produce semiconductors with assistance from Taiwanese tech firms are on the verge of being scrapped because of delays in securing necessary electrical power.

## Taiwan and Lithuania working to maintain progress on IC despite challenges

(hs) On November 19, the Lithuanian government pledged to resolve key challenges preventing the continuation of a high-tech industrial park project in Vilnius, crucial for a joint semiconductor initiative with Taiwan. The halt in construction, which was revealed on November 15, stems from two main issues: a shortage of electricity and an unresolved rezoning of the land for industrial use.

The industrial park, located in the Teltonika High-Tech Hill Park, is intended to house 10 facilities, including a semiconductor manufacturing plant in partnership with Taiwan. Teltonika, a major Internet of Things supplier in Lithuania, entered into an agreement with Taiwan's Industrial Technology Research Institute (ITRI) in January 2023. This partnership, worth EUR 14 million, aims to develop semiconductor production capacity in Lithuania, specifically to produce eight-inch wafers. The agreement represents a significant investment for Lithuania and is part of the country's strategy to strengthen its position in the global semiconductor market.

However, the construction delay has caused concerns. Arvydas Paukštys, the main shareholder of Teltonika, stated that the halt would push the project's completion from its original 2028 deadline to 2032, at the earliest. This delay is expected to have a broad economic impact, including the loss of 6,000 potential jobs and billions of euros in GDP.

In response, Lithuanian Prime Minister Ingrida Simonyte met with Paukštys and directed government agencies to work closely with Teltonika to resolve these issues. The government has already settled technical problems related to the project and is now focused on preparing the necessary paperwork and planning to move forward. Economy and Innovation Minister Aušrinė Armonaitė added that 18 government agencies, including the military, would need to collaborate to resolve the rezoning of the land for industrial use.

The halt in construction highlights the challenges faced by Lithuania in its bid to develop a competitive semiconductor industry, which has become a cornerstone of its economic strategy. Despite these setbacks, Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs reassured that the partnership between Taiwan and Lithuania would continue, indicating that cooperation in

semiconductor development would not be derailed by these delays.

This project is vital not only for Lithuania's economic growth but also for its strategic position within the semiconductor supply chain in Europe. Taiwan's involvement is crucial, given its technological expertise, and the completion of this industrial park would help Lithuania become a key player in the global semiconductor market. Resolving these construction and administrative issues quickly is essential to maintaining the momentum of this significant collaboration.

While the project faces challenges, the Lithuanian government's commitment to addressing these obstacles suggests that the semiconductor partnership between Lithuania and Taiwan will ultimately proceed, albeit with a delay. This development underscores the importance of continued international cooperation in building critical technological infrastructure, particularly in the high-stakes semiconductor industry. [Focus Taiwan 1] [Focus Taiwan 2]

## Thailand's King, Queen to visit China in 2025 to mark diplomatic milestone

(lm) Thailand's monarchs are set to visit China in late 2025 at the invitation of the Chinese government to commemorate the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two nations. The announcement was made during a meeting between Thai Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra and Chinese President Xi Jinping on the sidelines of the APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting in Lima, Peru. The Thai premier expressed hope that President Xi and his wife would also visit Thailand in 2025 to honor the "golden year" of Thai-Chinese friendship.

During their discussions, Prime Minister Paetongtarn praised China's innovation-driven economic growth and its achievements in poverty alleviation, disaster management, and advancements in aerospace, electric vehicles, and clean energy. She reiterated Thailand's readiness to strengthen bilateral and multilateral ties, including within the APEC framework, and voiced support for China hosting the APEC summit in 2026.

President Xi emphasized the special relationship between the two nations, underscoring deep collaboration in areas such as trade, culture, education, and digital technology. He expressed optimism about deepening ties over the next 50 years and highlighted plans for expanded trade, particularly

in agricultural imports from Thailand, as well as increased Chinese investment in education and joint efforts against online scams and transnational crime.

Additionally, President Xi voiced support for Thailand's bid to join the BRICS group of nations and endorsed Thailand's leadership roles in the Asia Cooperation Dialogue and Mekong-Lancang Cooperation frameworks. [Bangkok Post]

## Thailand's Prime Minister Paetongtarn to visit Malaysia to strengthen ties and boost trade

(msz) Thai Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra is scheduled to visit Malaysia in December to enhance bilateral relations, boost trade, and address critical border management issues.

Thailand has expressed support for Malaysia's plan to construct a 100-kilometer security and flood wall along the Golok River at Rantau Panjang. Narathiwat Governor Trakul Thotham emphasized the wall's potential to curb cross-border crimes such as smuggling and illegal crossings while mitigating the recurring flooding caused by the river's overflow. This initiative builds on existing infrastructure that has proven effective in improving border security. [The Nation]

The visit will also prioritize the advancement of the second friendship bridge over the Sungai Kolok River, which will connect Narathiwat province in Thailand with Rantau Panjang in Malaysia. The bridge is expected to enhance logistics and tourism between the two nations, facilitating closer economic integration.

Justice Minister Tawee Sodsong recently led a Thai delegation to the "Kuala Lumpur Forum on International Arbitration 2024," where Thailand and Malaysia discussed reforms and innovations in arbitration. Malaysia expressed its readiness to collaborate with Thailand in developing regional leadership in legal arbitration and advancing "digital justice" initiatives. During the forum, the Thai delegation engaged with key Malaysian officials, including Azalina Othman Said, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department on Legal Affairs, and Tan Sri Dato' Johari Abdul, Speaker of the Malaysian House of Representatives. Discussions included legislative exchanges, strengthening peace in Thailand's southern provinces, and improving conditions for Thai workers in Malaysia. [Bangkok Post]

## South Korea, Thailand to finalize Economic Partnership Agreement at 2025 APEC Summit

(bk) Thailand and South Korea are set to finalize an Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) next year to enhance their economic ties, according to Thailand's Commerce Minister Pichai Naripthaphan. The agreement is expected to be signed at the 36th APEC summit, which South Korea will host.

The EPA aims to expand upon existing trade agreements like the ASEAN-Korea Free Trade Agreement (AKFTA) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), with a focus on new collaborations in digital trade and supply chains. Thailand has requested South Korea to open its market to high-quality agricultural products, including mangos, pineapples, and shrimp, while also inviting South Korean investors to explore opportunities in electric vehicles, semiconductors, and the medical and digital sectors.

South Korea is Thailand's 12th largest trade partner, with total bilateral trade valued at USD 14.74 billion in 2023. Thailand's exports to South Korea totaled USD 6.07 billion, while imports were USD 8.67 billion. The two countries are also working to resume the Joint Trade Committee ministerial meeting to address trade and investment challenges, with Thailand planning to host the meeting early next year. [The Nation]

## Ukraine seeks stronger ties with Thailand amid war with Russia

(lm) As the war between Ukraine and Russia reaches its 1,000th day, Ukraine remains committed to strengthening its relationship with Thailand and other ASEAN nations. Viktor Semenov, the newly appointed Ukrainian chargé d'affaires in Bangkok, emphasized Ukraine's strategic focus on Southeast Asia, highlighting ongoing cooperation in food, agriculture, digital economy, trade, energy, disaster management, and demining operations.

In February, Ukraine's Foreign Affairs Ministry unveiled its policy paper, "Ukraine-ASEAN: Vision of Cooperation," detailing strategies for deeper partnerships. Thailand and Ukraine have already collaborated on cultural initiatives and other projects, with Ukrainian parliamentarians participating in the

ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly in October. Ukraine has expressed its intent to become a Sectoral Dialogue Partner of ASEAN, underscoring the region's importance in Kyiv's strategic calculations.

Semenov called for the establishment of a Joint Trade Commission to prioritize economic cooperation in areas such as sustainable energy, agriculture, and technology. He also proposed enhancing technical collaboration between the armed forces and expanding cooperation in science, space exploration, and cultural diplomacy, including a Ukrainian-Thai poetry collection.

Ukraine continues to seek global assistance, including from Thailand, to address humanitarian needs and bolster energy security amid Russian missile attacks targeting critical infrastructure. Semenov highlighted the importance of protecting Ukraine's power grid, especially during winter, and addressing the mental health crisis caused by the war. [Bangkok Post]

## Tourism Authority of Thailand looking to tap high-end European market for 2025 revenue goals

(hrs) With a new upgraded tourism revenue target of 2.4 trillion baht in 2025, the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) is looking to partner with luxury brands to produce city guidebooks, in an effort to appeal to the high-end European market.

The TAT's Paris office has plans to allocate 12 million baht in 2025 to support projects which include marketing programmes, press trips and luxury lifestyle events to target the luxury market in France and Benelux – referring to Belgium, Netherlands and Luxembourg.

The TAT is also undertaking partnerships with leading European media such as Marie Claire, Le Monde magazine and Le Figaro magazine to promote luxury travel in Thailand to aid in this goal, and to promote Thailand on the global level. [Bangkok Post]

## Thai police dismiss terrorist attack rumors targeting Israelis, heighten security for Koh Pha-ngan Full Moon Party

(bk) Thailand has heightened security after Israeli authorities warned of increased threats to Israelis and

Jews in the country, specifically citing fears of a terror plot targeting the Full Moon Party in Koh Phangan on November 15. The Israeli Prime Minister's Office, backed by Mossad and the National Security Council, stated that Iranian proxies have intensified efforts to target Israeli and Jewish interests worldwide since October.

Thai police have implemented roadblocks and increased security on Koh Phangan following intelligence suggesting a potential attack during the event, which attracts many Israeli tourists. While the alert has not changed Thailand's official threat level, Israeli citizens are advised to avoid large gatherings associated with Israelis, refrain from displaying Israeli or Jewish identity, and report suspicious activities to authorities.

This warning comes amid broader concerns about Iran-linked plots, including a thwarted mass shooting targeting Israeli tourists in Sri Lanka in October. US authorities recently revealed that Farhad Shakeri, an Afghan national allegedly hired by Iran's Revolutionary Guard, coordinated plans for attacks on Israeli and Jewish targets. [The Nation] [Thai PBS World] [The Times of Israel]

## Thailand, Peru discuss comprehensive cooperation

(acs) Thailand's Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra and the President of the Republic of Peru, Dina Ercilia Boluarte Zegarra, held a meeting ahead of the 31st APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting in Lima to discuss ways to enhance bilateral relations between their countries.

The leaders discussed developing a multidimensional framework for bilateral relations, with a focus on promoting democracy. The planned cooperation between the two countries will include trade relations, infrastructure, and business sectors.

Regarding trade, both sides agreed to finalize the Thailand-Peru Free Trade Area negotiations, aiming to strengthen trade and investment relations between the private sectors of the two countries. This cooperation will particularly focus on economic sectors such as textiles and fashion, fostering reciprocal benefits.

In terms of infrastructure, Shinawatra praised President Zegarra for the establishment of the Chancay Mega-port, which is expected to serve as a

commercial gate for Latin America. In response, the Thai Prime Minister presented Thailand's Landbridge Project, which aims to establish the country as a commercial hub in ASEAN. This project involves advanced transport infrastructure, offering Thailand the opportunity to serve as a link between Latin America, ASEAN, and other regions.

Finally, the two leaders discussed potential investment opportunities in Thailand, particularly in innovative sectors such as the S-Curve industries. The Thai side emphasized the strong alignment between the two countries in these areas, which could enhance cooperation in business development. [Royal Thai Government]

## Timor-Leste, Australia's Northern Territory strengthen bilateral relations

(lm) On November 7-8, Robyn Cahill, Minister for Trade, Business, and Asian Relations of Australia's Northern Territory, visited Timor-Leste to advance bilateral relations and the Strategic Partnership Agreement 2023-2027. Key discussions with Timor-Leste's Vice Prime Minister, Francisco Kalbuadi Lay, focused on enhancing cooperation in areas such as economy, education, tourism, and labour mobility. Other officials, including Timor-Leste's health, training, and tourism representatives, and the Australian Ambassador Caitlin Wilson, also participated.

Cahill expressed enthusiasm for deepening economic, cultural, and strategic ties between the two regions, emphasizing the priority sectors of trade, education, tourism, and business development. The Strategic Partnership Agreement has already yielded initiatives in labor mobility, skill-sharing, biosecurity, tourism marketing, and emergency services.

During the visit, Cahill toured the National Centre for Employment and Vocational Training (CNEFP), which trains locals in practical trades like carpentry and welding. She praised the successful trainer exchange program between CNEFP and Darwin's training centers.

The visit concluded with a reception celebrating collaboration, featuring Timorese alumni of Charles Darwin University and Northern Territory citizens active in Timor-Leste. [Government of Timor-Leste]

## Australian mining company expands in Timor-Leste with high-grade manganese discoveries, strategic investments

(lm) Estrella Resources Limited, an Australian-based mining and exploration company, has significantly expanded its presence in Timor-Leste, becoming the largest concession holder in the region. The company specializes in discovering and developing high-value mineral deposits, with a focus on critical minerals like manganese and nickel, essential for technologies such as electric vehicle (EV) batteries.

In Timor-Leste, Estrella's projects now cover over 700 square kilometers across multiple exploration and evaluation licenses. Recent discoveries at its Lautém project include high-grade manganese outcrops at the Ira Miri and Sica prospects, with rock samples yielding grades of 57.5 percent and 63.4 percent manganese. Additional promising mineralization has been identified at the Samalari prospect. These findings coincide with the country's efforts to diversify its economy through a new mining code and reduced reliance on petroleum revenues.

To accelerate its projects, Estrella has secured a strategic investment, enabling expanded geophysical surveys, including tailored Induced Polarisation (IP) studies, and preparing for drill testing in 2025 after the wet season. [The West Australian] [TIPRANKS]

## Vietnamese senior official calls for enhanced cooperation with China's Fujian to deepen bilateral ties

(hn) A delegation from the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), led by Politburo member and Chairman of the Commission for Internal Affairs Phan Dinh Trac, visited China from November 11-15, 2024, at the invitation of the Communist Party of China (CPC). During the visit, Trac held talks with senior Chinese officials, including Li Xi, a member of the CPC's Standing Committee, and Chen Wenqing, head of the CPC Central Political and Legal Affairs Commission.

The discussions emphasized strengthening the Vietnam-China comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership. Both sides highlighted mutual achievements and reaffirmed the importance of high-level exchanges, economic and trade cooperation, and cultural ties. They agreed on plans for the 75th anniversary of diplomatic relations and the 2025 Year of Vietnam-China Humanistic Exchange.

Other key topics included enhancing political trust, addressing regional and international issues, managing disputes at sea according to international law, and sharing experiences in governance, anti-corruption, and judicial reform.

As part of this visit, Chen Wenqing, a senior official of the Communist Party of China (CPC), met with Phan Dinh Trac, a senior Vietnamese Communist Party official, in Beijing to discuss strengthening China-Vietnam relations. Chen highlighted the strong progress in building a shared future for the two nations under the guidance of their top leaders. He emphasized the need to implement existing cooperation agreements, enhance collaboration in politics and law, improve regional and multilateral coordination, and elevate security cooperation. Trac expressed Vietnam's commitment to fostering deeper and more stable security ties with China, reinforcing their bilateral partnership and strategic goals.

Trac also visited the Museum of the Communist Party of China and the Xiong'an New Area and is scheduled to visit Fujian province. [VietnamPlus] [China.org.cn]

## Switzerland provides USD 3.3 million to promote Vietnam's circular economy

(lm) Vietnam's Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI) has received USD 3.3 million in funding from the Swiss State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (SECO) to support the nation's transition toward a circular economy and enhance resilience to climate change. The announcement was made during the signing ceremony for the project titled Scaling up eco-industrial park approaches to promote a circular economy in Vietnam, hosted by the MPI and the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO).

The project aligns with Vietnam's broader goals under the 2021–2030 Socio-Economic Development Strategy, which emphasizes institutional improvement, development of high-quality human resources, and synchronized infrastructure investments. Deputy Minister Do Thanh Trung highlighted Vietnam's interest in deepening collaboration with Switzerland in areas such as technology, finance, and sustainable urban development to boost competitiveness and pave the way for a green economy.

Over the past three decades, Switzerland has provided nearly USD 687 million through SECO to support economic development and competitiveness in Vietnam. Switzerland ranks among Vietnam's top 20

foreign investors, with investments exceeding USD 2.1 billion, primarily in medium and large-scale projects in the processing industry within industrial parks. [Viet Nam News]

### Member of Vietnamese presidential delegation arrested in Chile for sexual assault

(lm) A member of Vietnamese President Luong Cuong's delegation was arrested in Chile for alleged sexual assault. The incident occurred during President Cuong's official visit to Santiago ahead of the APEC summit in Peru.

Chilean authorities confirmed the arrest of a Vietnamese security officer following accusations by a hotel worker. The court ordered the man to leave Chile immediately, barred him from returning for two years, and restricted contact with the victim, citing his clean record as the reason for the lenient decision.

Vietnamese Foreign Minister Bui Thanh Son formally apologized to Chile. The accused, identified as part of the High Command of Guard Police and a medical officer for the delegation, declined to comment when approached by reporters.

President Cuong's visit marked efforts to strengthen economic and cultural ties, with bilateral trade between Vietnam and Chile valued at over USD 800 billion (VND 20,513,000 billion) in the first half of 2024. Vietnamese state media omitted mentions of the scandal. [Radio Free Asia]

## Announcements

## Upcoming online events

**20 November 2024 @ 9:00 - 10:00 a.m. (GMT -5), Atlantic Council, USA**

### Debriefing the US elections and their implications for Europe

This webinar will the implication of the return of Donald Trump to power for Europe. Among the questions to be addressed are: How should Europe prepare for the incoming administration? What will be the priorities of the incoming administration, particularly as it relates to Europe, the European Union, and the transatlantic relationship? What potential disputes and divergences as well as areas of opportunity between Europe and the United States can we expect? For more information, visit [Atlantic Council].

**20 November 2024 @ 9:30 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. (GMT +1), Chatham House, UK**

### Iraq Initiative Conference 2024

Chatham House's hybrid 6th Iraq Initiative conference will gather Iraqi and international policymakers, experts and civil society to discuss the critical questions for Iraq's future, and the country's trajectory in the year ahead. For more information, see [Chatham House].

**20 November 2024 @ 3:00 - 3:45 p.m. (GMT-5), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, USA**

### Where Does America Go From Here? A Conversation With SE Cupp and Norman Ornstein

Against the backdrop of Donald Trump's return to the White House, this online panel will feature SE Cupp and Norman Ornstein, two of the US' most thoughtful political analysts, to discuss the following questions and other issues. What explains Trumps election? Does it presage a genuine political realignment? What are the consequences of Republican control of the White House, Senate, and potentially the House? And what do they mean for a Democratic party now seemingly in

the political wilderness? For more information, see [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace].

**20 November 2024 @ 10:00 - 11:00 a.m. (GMT +8), ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore**

### Cambodia's Foreign Policy under Prime Minister Hun Manet and Implications for Vietnam

This webinar will discuss Cambodia's domestic political landscape and the influence of historical memories as key factors shaping the country's approach to Vietnam. It will also provide an assessment of the future of Cambodia-Vietnam relations over the next decade. For more information, visit [ISEAS].

**21 November 2024 @ 5:30 - 7:00 p.m. (GMT +1), German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA), Germany**

### The Future of Sanctions after the US Elections

Against the backdrop of Donald Trump's re-election, the hybrid panel discussion will delve into critical questions about the future of sanctions, including: What are the prospects for continued collaboration between the US, EU, and their partners? Will sanctions and export controls become even more prevalent as foreign policy tools, and how might their design evolve? What steps will the US and EU take to strengthen the international legitimacy of their measures? For more information, see [GIGA].

**22 November 2024 @ 9:00 a.m. (GMT -5), Atlantic Council, USA**

### COP29 takeaways for Africa: Lessons, challenges, and the path forward

This online event will present the most significant takeaways in climate finance, renewable energy, critical minerals, and more for Africa following COP29. For more information, visit [Atlantic Council].

**22 November 2024 @ 9:00 - 10:30 a.m. (GMT +8), ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore**

### Cambodia's Foreign Policy under Prime Minister Hun Manet and Implications for Vietnam

Against the backdrop of Donald Trump's re-election as US president, this hybrid event will examine potential shifts and disruptions in US-China relations under his second term, explore how China may recalibrate its approach to navigate the volatility ahead while seeking to maintain a stable yet competitive relationship with the US. The webinar will also address the question of how these US-China dynamics could reshape the geopolitical and geo-economic landscape in Asia and beyond. For more information, visit [ISEAS].

**22 November 2024 @ 9:00 - m11:30 a.m. (GMT -4), Brookings, USA**

### The future of alliances, partnerships, and the Indo-Pacific regional order

This hybrid event will examine the results of the U.S. presidential election and discuss their implications for U.S. allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific. For more information, see [Brookings].

**20 November 2024 @ 9:30 a.m. - 4:30 p.m. (GMT-5), Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), USA**

### Report Launch: Project Atom 2024

At this livestreamed event the Center for Strategic and International Studies will present its report, *Project Atom 2024*. Using a competitive strategies approach, the report explores challenges associated with intrawar deterrence and consists of five alternative strategies for responding to strategic deterrence failure. For more information, see [CSIS].

**22 November 2024 @ 3:00 - 4:00 p.m. (GMT-5), Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), USA**

### Harnessing Progress: Strengthening the Indo-Pacific through Alliances and Partnerships

At this live stream event Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell and NSC Senior Director for East Asia and Oceania Mira Rapp-Hooper will analyze the Biden-Harris Administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy. They will review key milestones in alliance-building and partnerships and discuss opportunities for fostering a free, open, and resilient Indo-Pacific. For more information, see [CSIS].

**25 November 2024 @ 11:00 a.m. - 12:15 p.m. (GMT -4), Brookings, USA**

### Bombing to provoke: Rockets, missiles, and drones as instruments of fear and coercion

This online discussion will provide insights into how aerospace weapons influence decisionmakers in target states – not just through their physical impact, but by the emotional and strategic responses they provoke, which are key to understanding their coercive effect. For more information, see [Brookings].

**25-26 November 2024 @ 8:00 a.m. - 6:30 p.m. (GMT +1), Chatham House, UK**

### Europe's strategic choices 2024

The 2024 hybrid annual Europe's Strategic Choices conference, jointly organized by Chatham House, the Institute for Security Policy at Kiel University (ISPK) and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, will explore the shifting dynamics of heightened geopolitical risk, along with the challenges in security and defense, competitiveness and trade, technology, and global influence. For more information, see [Chatham House].

**26 November 2024 @ 11:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m. (GMT -4), Brookings, USA**

### China's slowing economy: What China is doing about it, and what it means for the rest of the world

This webinar will examine the current state of the Chinese economy and discuss China's policy response and the implications for the rest of the world. For more information, see [Brookings].

**26 November 2024 @ 10:00 - 11:30 a.m. (GMT +8), ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore**

### The Localization of the United States-China Rivalry: Cases from the Philippines

This webinar will present latest research findings on the question of how US and China activities in two geostrategic provinces in the Philippines have affected local political dynamics and also the foreign policy of the country: Cagayan province located in northern Philippines near Taiwan, and Palawan that is proximate to the South China Sea. For more information, visit [ISEAS].

## Recent Book Releases

**Adrienne Buller, *The Value of a Whale: On the Illusions of Green Capitalism***, Manchester University Press, 368 pages, published July 26, 2022. For a review, see [LSE].

**Scott-Baumann, *Paul Ricoeur: Empowering Education, Politics and Society***, Springer, 133 pages, published 22 August 2023. For a review, see [LSE].

**Christopher Shaw, *Liberalism and the Challenge of Climate Change***, Routledge, 148 pages, published August 25, 2023. For a review, see [LSE].

**David Graeber, *The Ultimate Hidden Truth of the World***, Allen Lane, 384 pages, published 7 Nov. 2024. For a review, see [LSE].

**Noam Chomsky and Nathan J. Robinson, *The Myth of American Idealism: How U.S. Foreign Policy Endangers the World,*** Penguin, 416 pages, published October 15, 2024. For a review, see [LARB]

**David Graeber. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, *The Ultimate Hidden Truth of the World,*** Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 384 pages, published November 12, 2024. For a review, see [LARB]

**Stephen G. Bloom, *The Brazil Chronicles,*** University of Missouri, 496 pages, published November 18, 2024. For a review, see [LARB]

**Michael Kimmage, *Collisions: The Origins of the War in Ukraine and the New Global Instability,*** Oxford University Press, 296 pages, published Apr 5, 2024. For a review, see [Foreign Affairs]

**Tyler W. Williams*, If All the World Were Paper: A History of Writing in Hindi*,** Columbia University Press, 461 pages, published October 1, 2024. For a review, see [ARB]

**Rosemary Wakeman*, The Worlds of Victor Sassoon: Bombay, London, Shanghai, 1918–1941*,** University of Chicago Press, 264 pages, published 12 July 2024 For a review, see [ARB]

**Wang Feng*, China's Age of Abundance: Origins, Ascendance, and Aftermath*,** Cambridge University Press, 272 pages, published April 4, 2024. For a review, see [Foreign Affairs]

**Simon Parkin*, The Forbidden Garden of Leningrad: A True Story of Science and Sacrifice in a City under Siege*,** Sceptre, 384 pages, published 14 Nov. 2024. For a review, see [Guardian]

## Calls

The **Faculty of Law at Otego University** invites paper proposals for its ***"Charting the Future of Private Law in Aotearoa New Zealand Symposium,"*** to be held on February 10, 2025. The deadline for abstract submission is December 1, 2024. For more information, see [University of Otego].

**University of Villanova School of Law** invites paper proposals for its symposium ***"Islamic and Jewish Law in the Modern Economy,"*** to be held on May 5-6, 2025. The deadline for abstract submission is December 1, 2024. For more information, see [Calling All Papers].

The **John L. Weinberg Center for Corporate Governance** and the **Department of Finance at the Lerner College of Business & Economics, at the University of Delaware**, invites paper proposals for the **2025 University of Delaware Weinberg Center Corporate Governance Symposium and John L. Weinberg/IRRCi Research Paper Award Competition**, to be held on March 14, 2025. The deadline for abstract submission is November 22, 2024. For more information, see [University of Delaware].

## Jobs and Positions

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** is offering an **Internship** in Ankara, Turkey.

Applications are accepted until December 3, 2024. More information is provided at [UNDP].

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** is seeking a **Consultor Individual Especialista Financiamiento Sostenible** under UNDP-SLV-00375 to be based in El Salvador. Applications are accepted until November 29, 2024. More information is provided at [UNDP].

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** is seeking a professional for **Translating & Proofreading of UNDP Preparedness Package from English to Russian** to be based in Switzerland. Applications are accepted until further notice. More information is provided at [UNDP].

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** is seeking an **Individual Consultant for Supporting Research and Analysis** under UNDP-IC-2024-037 to be based in India. Applications are accepted until November 28, 2024. More information is provided at [UNDP].

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** is seeking a **National IC: Power Sector Implementation Support Consultant** under UNDP-IC-2024-376 to be based in Pakistan. Applications are accepted until November 27, 2024. More information is provided at [UNDP].

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** is seeking a **National IC: HTMS Training Consultant** under UNDP-IC-2024-289 to be based in Pakistan. Applications are accepted until November 27, 2024. More information is provided at [UNDP].

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** is seeking a **Consultoría Individual para la Asesoría Técnica en la Adquisición** under UNDP-HND-00227 to be based in Honduras. Applications are accepted until November 26, 2024. More information is provided at [UNDP].

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** is seeking an **Individual Consultant (Knowledge Management) - LTA for Facilitating NAP on B+HRs** under UNDP/PN/56/2024 to be based in Nepal. Applications are accepted until December 2, 2024. More information is provided at [UNDP].

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** is seeking an **Individual Consultant (Capacity Building) - LTA for Facilitating NAP on B+HRs** under UNDP/PN/58/2024 to be based in Nepal.

Applications are accepted until December 2, 2024. More information is provided at [UNDP].

The **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** is seeking a **Consultant – Developing a Tailored Green UPSHIFT Programme in the Region** to be based in Bangkok, Thailand. Applications are accepted until December 9, 2024. More information is provided at [UNICEF].

The **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** is offering an **Internship for Partnerships and Resource Mobilization Section** at the UNICEF Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia in Belgium. Applications are accepted until November 24, 2024. More information is provided at [UNICEF].

The **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** is seeking a **Regional Advisor Polio, P5, Fixed-Term** at the UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia in Islamabad, Pakistan. Applications are accepted until December 1, 2024. More information is provided at [UNICEF].

The **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** is seeking a **Community of Practice (CoP) Management Consultant** for the Vaccine Centre at UNICEF Supply Division in Copenhagen or remote work. Applications are accepted until November 24, 2024. More information is provided at [UNICEF].

The **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** is seeking an **International Consultant** to support UNICEF Eswatini Country Office in the development of the 2026-2030 Country Programme Document and related documents in Mbabane, Eswatini (remote work with two visits to Eswatini). Applications are accepted until November 22, 2024. More information is provided at [UNICEF].

The **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** is seeking an **International Editor for CO End-Year Summary Narrative (EYSN) and CO Snapshot of UNICEF's Work for Cambodia Children 2024-2025** to be based in Cambodia. Applications are accepted until November 29, 2024. More information is provided at [UNICEF].

The **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** is seeking an **International Consultant to Conduct a Skills Gap Analysis of Staff in UNICEF Cambodia** to be based in Cambodia. Applications are accepted until November 27, 2024. More information is provided at [UNICEF].

The **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** is offering an **Internship in Business Administration (Finance Section)** at UNICEF's Global Shared Services Centre in Budapest, Hungary. Applications are accepted until November 20, 2024. More information is provided at [UNICEF].

The **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** is offering a **Supply and Logistics Internship** in Yaounde, Cameroon. Applications are accepted until November 22, 2024. More information is provided at [UNICEF].

The **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** is seeking a **WASH Officer, NO-B** in Vientiane, Lao PDR (open to Laotian nationals only). Applications are accepted until November 29, 2024. More information is provided at [UNICEF].

The **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** is seeking experts for a **Roster of Consultants for Outcomes Based Finance (OBF) Programme Expertise** at the Education Outcomes Fund (EOF), a UNICEF Hosted Fund in the United Kingdom (remote work). Applications are accepted until January 10, 2025. More information is provided at [UNICEF].

The **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** is offering a **Long Term Agreement (LTA) for Engagement of Individual Consultants for Sign Language Interpretation** with UNICEF in Uzbekistan. Applications are accepted until December 1, 2024. More information is provided at [UNICEF ].

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**Team:**

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