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Asia in Review

Grasp the pattern, read the trend

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Dear Readers,

You are receiving this week's issue of Asia in Review (AiR) for a second time due to a technical error during the upload process. Articles from the international relations section were inadvertently replaced with content from last week's edition.

We regret the delay caused while resolving this issue and apologize for the inconvenience.

Best regards,

Duc Quang Ly

Deputy Editor-in-Chief

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

China: Rising violence exposes deep social grievances

(lb) A series of violent attacks across China this month left 43 dead and over 70 injured, spotlighting unresolved social grievances exacerbated by economic challenges. The incidents, ranging from knife assaults to car-ramming attacks (see AiR No. 47, November/2024, 3), have ignited debate among observers and on Chinese social media about their root causes and the government's response.

Freedom House's China Dissent Monitor attributes these events to widespread frustrations caused by the economic downturn. With worker protests and labor disputes on the rise, unresolved grievances are pushing some individuals to desperate measures. For example, a 21-year-old student in Wuxi killed eight people and injured 17 at a vocational school on November 16, reportedly over dissatisfaction with his internship pay. Such incidents underscore the

precarious conditions faced by vulnerable groups, particularly migrant workers who lack adequate social safety nets or unemployment insurance.

Observers note that China's mechanisms to resolve disputes often fail to provide timely or effective remedies, leaving citizens feeling trapped. Legal avenues are slow and inaccessible for many, while censorship of violent incidents on platforms like Weibo prevents public discourse. These efforts to suppress information hinder authorities' ability to understand and address the underlying causes, further fueling public anxiety about random violence in crowded public spaces.

In response, President Xi Jinping called for strengthening risk prevention and swiftly addressing disputes. Local governments have begun identifying high-risk individuals, such as the unemployed and those with low incomes, for targeted intervention. However, analysts warn that such measures may only offer a temporary solution. As economic pressures grow, sustaining social programs and avoiding more repressive policies will remain critical challenges for Chinese authorities. [VOA News] [South China Morning Post]

China: Corruption scandals widen across Guangdong province

(lb) Guangdong province, a key economic hub in China, is facing a growing number of corruption investigations targeting high-ranking officials. Among the latest is Xu Jianhua, former Party secretary of Dongguan, detained on November 20 for "serious violations of discipline and law," a term commonly associated with corruption. Xu, who retired in 2016, was known for leading a 2014 crackdown on prostitution in Dongguan, dubbed "sin city."

Xu, 66, previously served as director of the Dongguan People's Congress and Party secretary of Shaoguan before becoming director of the Guangdong Provincial Development and Reform Commission in October 2010. He retired in 2016 and was investigated in November 2024. [China Daily]

Xu's detention follows charges against former Dongguan mayor Li Yuquan and Zhong Ganquan, a former political advisory leader. These cases are part of a broader trend in Guangdong, where 42 current and former Dongguan officials have been investigated this year alone, often linked to land sales. According to a political analyst from Sun Yat-sen University, local

governments heavily influence land transactions, creating opportunities for corruption.

Huizhou, another Guangdong city, has seen similar scandals. At least seven of ten former municipal leadership committee members have been detained in recent years, including prominent figures such as former mayor Chen Yiwei. Infighting among officials contributed to economic stagnation in Huizhou, with GDP growth slowing from an annual average of 14.1 percent (2008-2013) to 5.5 percent (2016-2020).

Across Guangdong, the scale of anti-corruption efforts has intensified, with 109 department-level and 1,321 division-level officials punished by September 2024, marking a nearly 50 percent increase from the same period last year. [South China Morning Post]

China: Former Chinese central bank official accused of cryptocurrency bribery

(lb) China has initiated its first cryptocurrency-related corruption case, accusing Yao Qian, the former director of digital currency research at the People's Bank of China (PBOC), of accepting bribes through virtual currencies. Yao, who later held a senior regulatory position at the China Securities Regulatory Commission (CSRC), is alleged to have abused his authority to benefit technology firms in exchange for financial gain. According to the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI), Yao's actions represented a significant breach of duty, leading to his expulsion from the Communist Party and dismissal from public office. [China Daily]

The case is part of China's broader anti-corruption campaign targeting sectors like finance to strengthen investor confidence. The CCDI revealed that Yao leveraged his reputation as a financial technology expert to improperly assist companies in expanding their operations, while personally profiting from cryptocurrency transactions to cover expenses. Authorities have seized his illicit gains, and the case has been referred to prosecutors for further investigation.

Yao, 54, holds a degree in computer science and joined the CSRC in 1997, where he rose to prominent leadership positions. In 2020, he became the director of the CSRC's technology supervision department, focusing on data and cybersecurity oversight. During his time at the PBOC from 2017 to 2019, he played a key role in establishing China's digital currency

research institute, a landmark initiative in the global financial technology sector. [Blockhead]

While China largely views cryptocurrencies as a source of financial instability, a Shanghai court recently acknowledged the legality of cryptocurrency ownership as a virtual commodity with property attributes. However, business activities involving digital currencies remain prohibited, reflecting Beijing's cautious stance in contrast to growing acceptance in Western nations. [South China Morning Post] [Crypto News Flash]

China: Country's richest man slams tech giants and governments in rare public statement

(jf) China's wealthiest individual, Zhong Shanshan, has criticized online shopping platforms, blaming them for initiating price wars that have negatively impacted businesses and industries amid the country's economic slowdown. His comments, which included rare criticism of the Chinese government, were largely censored by state media. [Bloomberg Billionaires Index]

Zhong, the founder of bottled water and soft beverage company Nongfu Springs, condemned the fierce pricing competition during a visit to eastern China. He specifically singled out Pinduoduo, an e-commerce giant known for its aggressive discounting strategy, accusing it of undermining pricing systems and harming domestic brands and industries. He claimed that the platform's practices have driven a race to the bottom in the industry, eroding value and quality across sectors.

Significantly, he criticized the Chinese government for failing to address this damaging trend, accusing Beijing of neglecting its oversight responsibilities. Although such remarks from high-profile business figures are unusual and often carry risks, Zhong reportedly said that the authorities had failed to intervene, allowing pricing wars to disrupt economic stability.

Pinduoduo, established in 2015, has gained significant traction by capitalizing on budget-conscious consumers in an economic environment marked by slowing growth and job market challenges. Its competitive pricing has driven its expansion, but critics argue it has done so at the expense of other businesses. [Reuters]

Zhong's comments come at the end of a challenging year for the billionaire. Earlier in the year, he faced

nationalist criticism accusing him of lacking patriotism, which negatively affected Nongfu Springs' share value and sales. This campaign briefly knocked him off the top spot on China's rich list. Despite these setbacks, Zhong has regained his position as the wealthiest person in China, with a net worth of USD 52.2 billion, according to the Bloomberg Billionaires Index. [CNN 1]

The situation draws comparisons to Alibaba co-founder Jack Ma, who faced significant consequences after criticizing China's regulatory system in 2020. Ma's remarks led to the halting of Ant Group's IPO and a broader crackdown on the tech sector, including companies like Pinduoduo. [CNN 2]

China: Overseas Chinese activists mark two years since white paper protests

(lb) Chinese exiles marked the second anniversary of the White Paper Movement, a protest against strict COVID-19 lockdowns in 2022, with candlelight vigils in cities such as Amsterdam, Berlin, London, San Francisco, and Tokyo. The movement began after a deadly fire in Urumqi, Xinjiang, where lockdown measures were blamed for hindering emergency response and causing ten deaths. Protesters held blank papers as a symbol of resistance to censorship, which gave the movement its name.

Exiled participants shared their experiences of police brutality and detention during the crackdown. Some, like Jack Wei from Chengdu, recalled being forced to sign repentance letters, while others, like Huang Yicheng, managed to evade capture and later advocate for arrested protesters. Activists also highlighted Beijing's transnational repression, which continues to target critics abroad.

The movement has left a lasting legacy, inspiring a new generation of Chinese activists and reinvigorating overseas democracy movements once dominated by figures from the Tiananmen Square protests. Symbols like blank papers and candles remain powerful for young advocates, who face growing risks in China's tightening authoritarian environment.

While Beijing shows no sign of easing its grip, overseas activists vow to keep raising awareness of social and human rights issues in China. Many, like Amsterdam vigil organizer Rei Xia, see activism as central to their lives. They emphasize the need for international attention to China's repression and the social crises it exacerbates. [VOA]

China: UNICEF urges action to tackle challenges in children's mental health

(lb) China is grappling with significant mental health challenges among children and adolescents, an issue highlighted on World Children's Day during an event co-hosted by the Ministry of Education and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). According to UNICEF Representative to China, Amakobe Sande, one in seven children aged 10 to 19 globally lives with a diagnosed mental health condition, underscoring the urgent need for timely intervention and support. Sande stressed the importance of addressing these issues early to prevent long-term consequences. [UNICEF] [UNICEF, X]

Zhou Li, a senior official at the Ministry of Education, detailed collaborative efforts with the National Health Commission and other departments to enhance mental health initiatives in schools. These efforts include targeted policies and awareness campaigns designed to help educational institutions better support students facing mental health challenges.

While China has made progress in expanding mental health education, notably through a 2023 campaign aimed at increasing awareness, experts emphasize that persistent efforts are needed to foster understanding, reduce stigma, and provide accessible mental health resources for children and adolescents. [State Council PRC]

China - Hong Kong: Court sentences 45 democracy activists under national security law

(lb) A Hong Kong court has sentenced 45 democracy supporters to prison terms ranging from four years and eight months to ten years under the National Security Law, marking the city's largest trial of its kind. The activists were charged with "conspiracy to commit subversion" for organizing a pro-democracy primary election in 2020. Two of the 47 defendants were acquitted. Prominent figures Benny Tai and Joshua Wong received sentences of ten years and four years and eight months, respectively. [Hong Kong Free Press]

The prosecution argued that the primary election, intended to select pro-democracy candidates for the Legislative Council, Hong Kong's parliament, was a subversive act aimed at disrupting the city government. More than 600,000 people participated in the primary election, which was held prior to the

government's postponement of the Legislative Council elections, citing the COVID-19 pandemic (see AiR No. 28, July/2020, 2).

The arrests in January 2021 involved a significant crackdown by Hong Kong's newly established national security police, who apprehended 55 people and formally charged 47 (see AiR No. 2, January/2021, 2). The trial has faced delays, with many defendants held without bail for more than three years.

The case has amplified concerns over Hong Kong's diminishing political freedoms and the use of the National Security Law to target dissent. Beijing insists the law safeguards stability and economic success, but critics argue it suppresses opposition and undermines the judicial independence once defining the city's global reputation.

The trial and its outcome have drawn calls for the release of those convicted and for the restoration of democratic processes in the territory. The case has drawn widespread criticism for eroding freedoms promised under the "one country, two systems" arrangement established in 1997 when Hong Kong returned to Chinese rule. [Radio Free Asia] [AP News] [Human Rights Watch]

China - Hong Kong: Media tycoon Jimmy Lai testifies in high-profile national security trial

(lb) Jimmy Lai, founder of the now-defunct Apple Daily newspaper and a prominent supporter of Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement, testified in his defense for the first time during a high-profile national security trial in Hong Kong. The 77-year-old media tycoon faces charges of colluding with foreign forces and sedition under the Hong Kong national security law enacted in 2020 (see AiR No. 26, June/2020, 5).

Prosecutors allege that Apple Daily's publications lobbied for international sanctions against Hong Kong's leaders, violating the law. Lai's defense maintains that his actions ceased after the legislation's enactment.

Lai, who has been in detention since 2020, denies all charges and could face life imprisonment if convicted. During his testimony, Lai emphasized his opposition to violence during the 2019 protests and dismissed accusations of advocating for Hong Kong or Taiwan independence as baseless. He described the allegations as a "conspiracy" to undermine him, asserting that Apple Daily's operations upheld values

of democracy and personal freedoms. [South China Morning Post] [BBC]

Like other national security cases, Lai's trial is being conducted without a jury and under judges appointed by a national security committee. Supporters lined up in the rain outside the courthouse to show solidarity with Lai, who they view as a symbol of Hong Kong's pro-democracy aspirations.

The trial underscores the ongoing impact of Hong Kong's national security law, which has dramatically reshaped the city's political landscape. The trial also coincides with broader crackdowns on pro-democracy figures in Hong Kong, with over 40 activists recently sentenced on subversion charges (see article above). Critics argue the law has stifled freedoms, while Chinese and Hong Kong officials claim it has restored stability.

The trial has drawn significant international attention, with calls for Lai's release from British Prime Minister Keir Starmer and promises of intervention from former US President Donald Trump, who has recently been re-elected. The case has heightened tensions between Beijing and Western governments, with Hong Kong's leader reiterating the city's commitment to the rule of law amid criticism. [CNN]

China - Hong Kong: Court upholds equal housing and inheritance rights for same-sex couples

(lb) Hong Kong's Court of Final Appeal unanimously upheld earlier rulings granting married same-sex couples equal access to public housing and inheritance rights. The decision, based on equality provisions in the city's mini-constitution, marks another significant legal victory for the LGBTQ+ community since 2023.

The court rejected the government's argument that same-sex couples were not comparable to heterosexual couples in accessing welfare benefits. Chief Judge Andrew Cheung emphasized that limited resources do not justify discriminatory allocation of social benefits. Judges Joseph Fok and Robert Ribeiro further ruled that existing inheritance laws were unconstitutional.

The cases involved couples like Nick Infinger and his husband, whose Canadian marriage was not recognized, and Edgar Ng, who sought to protect his husband's inheritance rights. Ng's husband, Henry Li,

continued the legal battle after Ng's tragic death in 2020.

While the court ruled against same-sex marriage last year, it acknowledged the need for legal frameworks to address basic social rights for LGBTQ+ couples, which the government has yet to implement. Advocates like Jerome Yau of Hong Kong Marriage Equality called the decision a clear affirmation of same-sex marriage equality with heterosexual unions. [Reuters]

China surpasses Germany and Japan in industrial robot adoption

(lb) China has overtaken Germany and Japan in industrial robot adoption, reflecting its push for automation in manufacturing, according to the International Federation of Robotics (IFR). In 2023, China recorded 470 robots per 10,000 employees, an increase from 402 in 2022, ranking third globally behind South Korea and Singapore. Germany and Japan reported ratios of 429 and 419, respectively. South Korea leads with 1,012 robots per 10,000 employees, while Singapore follows with 770. The US ranks eleventh at 295. [IFR]

China's rapid ascent in automation began in 2019 when it entered the top 10. Within four years, the country doubled its robot density, driven by substantial investments aimed at enhancing productivity and international competitiveness. Despite its large manufacturing workforce of 37 million, China has achieved significant automation gains through initiatives such as the 14th Five-Year Plan, which targets 20 percent annual growth in robotics sales and aims to double robot density by 2025.

Support from local governments, including subsidies in cities like Shanghai and Shenzhen, has encouraged companies to integrate more robots. Globally, the average robot density reached 162 units per 10,000 employees in 2023, up from seven years ago. [South China Morning Post]

China: More policy support for foreign trade development announced

(jf) China has introduced a series of measures aimed at fostering steady foreign trade growth and bolstering economic recovery, as detailed in a notice from the Ministry of Commerce.

The new policies encourage insurance companies to enhance their underwriting support for "little giant" firms and "hidden champions." These terms describe China's innovative small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that dominate niche markets with advanced technologies and significant global market shares.

Banks are being urged to streamline financial services for foreign trade companies, focusing on credit approvals, loan processing, and repayments while ensuring proper checks on trade authenticity and risk management. Additionally, financial institutions are encouraged to increase financing for micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises, adhering to market-oriented and law-based principles.

The measures also emphasize improving cross-border trade settlement processes, boosting cross-border e-commerce, expanding agricultural product exports, and supporting the import of essential equipment and energy resources. Moreover, the plan highlights promoting green and border trade innovation, facilitating cross-border business travel, enhancing maritime transport for trade, and strengthening employment services for foreign trade enterprises.

China's ongoing efforts aim to enhance its competitive edge in international trade and foster mutually beneficial relationships with global partners. The country's 22 pilot free trade zones (FTZs), which span coastal, inland, and border regions, have played a significant role, contributing roughly 20 percent of total foreign investment and trade volume. Foreign trade in these zones grew by nearly 12 percent year-on-year in the first three quarters of 2024.

Overall, China's foreign trade from January to October saw a 5.2 percent year-on-year increase, reaching RMB 36.02 trillion (USD 5 trillion). Exports rose by 6.7 percent, while imports increased by 3.2 percent, underscoring progress in trade despite global challenges. [State Council] [Reuters]

China: Consumption stimulus debate continues with no clear resolution

(lb) China's policymakers and economists remain divided over the best approach to stimulate domestic consumption, with sluggish consumer spending and income constraints posing challenges. The debate has intensified following Macau's decision to offer its permanent residents a cash handout of MOP 10,000 (USD 1,247) to boost consumption. Proposals on the mainland range from direct cash transfers to

expanding social welfare programs, highlighting differing views on achieving sustainable economic recovery. [Macau Daily Times]

Some economists advocate for enhanced social welfare, suggesting measures like broader unemployment benefits, affordable housing, and easing social security costs for businesses. Others propose direct cash transfers to low-income groups, arguing this could lead to significant consumption and GDP growth. Liu estimates that a cash handout of RMB 10,000 (USD 1,380) to China's lowest-income 20 percent could drive a 4 percent boost in GDP.

Despite calls for action, concerns about inflation and long-term effectiveness have tempered enthusiasm for large-scale handouts. Current government measures include ultra-long-term special bonds worth RMB 300 billion (USD 42.5 billion) to fund equipment upgrades and consumer goods trade-ins. However, these programs have been criticized for front-loading demand without addressing broader spending reluctance among households, especially in major cities like Beijing and Shanghai, where retail sales growth remains subdued. [South China Morning Post 1] [VoA]

In October, China's retail sales grew by 4.8 percent year-on-year, an improvement over September but still below last year's levels. Economists suggest additional fiscal measures, focusing on services consumption in areas like elderly care, healthcare, and childcare. Global financial leaders, including CEOs from Goldman Sachs and Morgan Stanley, have emphasized the importance of boosting domestic consumption to restore foreign investor confidence in China's economy. [South China Morning Post 2]

China: Baidu reports little improvement in advertising as revenue falls 3 percent

(jf) Baidu, China's largest search engine operator, reported on November 21 that it has yet to see significant improvement in advertising or consumer spending, even as government stimulus measures aim to revive the country's slowing economy. The company's third-quarter revenue dropped by 3 percent, reflecting continued struggles in the advertising market.

Online advertising, which makes up over half of Baidu's revenue, has been hit hard by weak consumer demand and cautious spending, particularly from small and medium-sized businesses. Baidu CEO Robin Li noted

during an earnings call that, despite recent government efforts, the stimulus measures have not yet translated into tangible benefits for offline merchants. Li expresses that so far in Q4, there has not been a notable improvement in advertising spending patterns, and consumer spending remains subdued.

Revenue from Baidu's online marketing division fell 4 percent year-on-year to RMB 18.8 billion (USD 2.6 billion), slightly missing analysts' expectations of RMB 18.89 billion. However, Baidu has managed to offset some of this weakness through its non-advertising businesses, particularly its AI Cloud segment.

For the quarter ending September 30, Baidu's total revenue reached RMB 33.56 billion (USD 4.63 billion). Net income grew 14 percent year-on-year to RMB 7.63 billion, significantly surpassing the consensus forecast of RMB 4.67 billion. Despite the challenges in advertising, Baidu's efforts in AI and autonomous driving underscore its commitment to innovation and maintaining its leadership in China's tech landscape. [Reuters] [South China Morning Post]

China: Enormous gold deposit found in Hunan

(jf) A massive gold deposit, estimated to hold over 1,000 tons, has been discovered in Hunan province, Central China. The Wangu gold field, located in Pingjiang county, revealed more than 40 gold veins within 2,000 meters below ground, containing an estimated 300 tons of gold.

Further analysis suggests the total reserves at depths up to 3,000 meters exceed 1,000 tons, with a valuation of approximately RMB 600 billion (USD 83 billion). Many of the rock samples taken during drilling showed visible gold, with some ore containing as much as 138 grams of gold per ton at the 2,000-meter depth. [China Daily]

The Wangu goldfield has solidified its status as one of China's key gold-mining regions, supported by significant investments exceeding RMB 100 million (USD 13.8 million) since 2020 for mineral exploration by provincial authorities. Gold demand in China has experienced remarkable growth in recent years, fueled by heightened economic uncertainty at both domestic and global levels. Retail investors and consumers flocked to gold as a safe-haven asset.

China has increased its focus on mineral exploration in recent years, with its 2021-2025 development plan emphasizing bolstering domestic reserves and production. In 2023 alone, exploration investments rose by 8 percent year-on-year to RMB 110.5 billion (USD 15.3 billion), contributing to significant discoveries in strategic resources such as oil, natural gas, rare earths, and gold.

Recent exploration efforts have borne fruit. In September, 4.96 million tons of rare earth reserves were identified in Sichuan's Liangshan Yi autonomous prefecture. Earlier in the year, Qinghai province uncovered 43.2 tons of gold reserves. Meanwhile, Shandong's Xiling gold mine reported an additional 200 tons of gold in May, bringing its total reserves to 580 tons. [South China Morning Post]

China: Police abuse of power against businesses investigated

(jf) A recent report from prosecutors in Zhejiang, China, has exposed how abuse of power by law enforcement can victimize private businesses and entrepreneurs. The case in question, originating in May of last year, revealed how two public security officials exploited their authority for personal financial gain across Zhejiang and Jiangsu provinces.

The case involved two police officers who accessed police databases to gather sensitive information. Their actions targeted entrepreneurs in multiple provinces. One such entrepreneur, Shen, was deceived by them luring him from his home in Jiangsu to an undisclosed location under the pretense of an investigation and offering to resolve Shen's legal concerns in exchange for payment. Sensing the danger, Shen managed to escape and reported the incident to local authorities in Zhejiang. The two officers were eventually convicted of abuse of power, receiving prison sentences of eight and seven months, respectively.

The case is part of a broader national campaign launched in February to protect private companies and address corruption, illegal enforcement, and cross-regional judicial exploitation. A report from China's top prosecutor revealed that in the first half of the year, 62,000 individuals were prosecuted for crimes undermining the market economy – a significant 36.5 percent increase from the previous year.

This year alone, prosecutors have identified over 1,300 instances of profit-driven law enforcement. Among these, 24 cases required deeper investigation,

revealing severe misconduct, such as unlawful arrests, excessive coercive measures leading to fatalities, and improper seizure of property beyond legal authority. [South China Morning Post]

China: New initiative to establish national digital infrastructure by 2029

(jf) China has unveiled a bold initiative to establish a national digital infrastructure by 2029, aiming to position data as a critical resource. The National Data Administration (NDA) released draft guidelines highlighting the growing demand for effective data circulation, usage, and value extraction in the context of a rapidly expanding digital economy. The government plans to balance efficiency and equity while unlocking the full potential of data resources.

The guidelines aim to streamline data-sharing processes, strengthen national security, and promote responsible information exchange across sectors. By introducing national standards for data quality and management, the proposal supports broader goals for China's digital economy. [State Council]

The NDA's plan is structured into three phases. From 2024 to 2026, foundational standards for data management will be developed through technological trials in key industries, focusing on unified identification, registration, and interface protocols. Between 2027 and 2028, the emphasis will shift to enabling large-scale data-sharing frameworks across major cities. By 2029, a fully operational national data infrastructure is expected to be in place, optimizing data circulation and bolstering public services.

Regional disparities are a significant consideration in the phased approach. For example, the “Eastern Data, Western Computing” project – mentioned in the guidelines – addresses resource imbalances by linking computing centers in more developed eastern areas with the resource-rich western regions. This project, launched in 2022, is set to become operational next year and will serve as a cornerstone of the broader national initiative.

The infrastructure will encompass all aspects of data management, including collection, transmission, processing, usage, and security. Industries such as manufacturing, healthcare, digital finance, and agriculture are expected to benefit, with significant emphasis placed on creating a secure data-sharing environment. Real-time threat detection and cybersecurity measures are key components of the

framework to safeguard sensitive information. [South China Morning Post]

China: Huawei to launch the first mobile phone with homegrown operating system

(jf) Huawei is making waves with its latest Mate 70 series, which runs on the company's own HarmonyOS Next operating system, marking a significant departure from the dominance of Apple's iOS and Google's Android in the global mobile phone market. This release symbolizes a comeback for Huawei, a company that faced significant setbacks due to strict U.S. sanctions in recent years but has seen a resurgence with strong sales growth. Experts view this move as a pivotal step in China's push to reduce reliance on Western technology.

Set to debut at a launch event at Huawei's Shenzhen headquarters, the Mate 70 has already garnered attention, with over three million units pre-ordered via Huawei's online shopping platform. Unlike its previous iterations, which were based on Android's open-source framework, HarmonyOS Next represents a fully independent system.

Huawei's resurgence occurs amidst ongoing tensions between Beijing and Washington. U.S. officials have raised concerns over Huawei's technology, alleging potential misuse for surveillance purposes, accusations the company denies. Since 2019, U.S. sanctions have severely restricted Huawei's access to global supply chains and critical components, initially crippling its smartphone production.

The release of HarmonyOS Next also coincides with a growing tech rivalry that shows no signs of abating. U.S. President-elect Donald Trump has vowed to escalate tariffs on Chinese imports, citing concerns over trade practices, which could further impact the global tech landscape. [France 24]

China: Public security minister calls for addressing root causes of security risks

(lb) Wang Xiaohong, China's Minister of Public Security, has emphasized the importance of tackling the root causes of risks to public safety and social stability. During a two-day inspection in Liaoning Province, Wang urged police authorities to comprehensively

identify and address security risks, including social conflicts and disputes, to ensure long-term stability.

Wang, who is also a member of the Secretariat of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, highlighted the need for detailed risk inspections and effective dispute resolution to prevent recurring conflicts. He called for efforts to ensure that the resolution of cases leads to the genuine settlement of underlying disputes.

The minister directed police forces to strengthen preventive measures, particularly in high-risk areas, and to enhance patrols in public spaces to maintain order. He underscored the importance of improving police capabilities in early warning systems, efficient risk handling, and conflict resolution.

Wang also advocated for the development of "new-quality" combat capabilities within police forces to better address evolving security challenges. [State Council PRC]

China: Air force announces competition for innovative, cost-efficient drones

(jf) China's air force is preparing to host a unique competition next month aimed at discovering innovative, low-cost drones, marking a rare public event that could pave the way for procurement deals for winning designs. The initiative highlights the growing role of drones in modern warfare and reflects China's push to leverage its industrial strength for military advancements.

The contest seeks to foster innovation within China's industrial and technological sectors and to drive the development of "new quality capabilities". The drones will be evaluated in six categories: reconnaissance and guidance, detection and strike integration, anti-armor targeting, reconnaissance and mapping, search and strike, and transport and delivery. Simulated targets and systems designed to jam communications, and navigation will be employed in flight tests, ensuring the competition mimics real-world conditions. Scoring will weigh heavily on technology, which accounts for 70 percent of the evaluation, while cost-effectiveness will make up the remaining 30 percent.

Top-performing drones in each category will receive first, second, and third prizes, with winning entries included in a procurement catalog from which the PLA Air Force could make purchases. The competition is open to "non foreign controlled" Chinese entities, with

no restrictions on the number of categories a participant can enter.

This event is noteworthy as it opens the door for civilian drone manufacturers to potentially secure military contracts, an unusual move for the PLA Air Force. It underscores the increasing integration of civilian technological expertise into military modernization efforts. Shenzhen-based DJI, a global leader in drone manufacturing with an estimated 80 percent market share, illustrates the strength of China's electronics supply chain, which enables cost-competitive production of advanced UAV systems.

The contest aligns with President Xi Jinping's broader vision to transform the PLA into a modern military power on par with the United States in the Pacific region by 2027, and to achieve "world-class" status by 2049. By emphasizing drone innovation, China continues to solidify its position as a leading global producer and exporter of UAVs, supported by substantial investments in cutting-edge military technology. [South China Morning Post]

The move comes after last month, the US Treasury Department announced sanctions on Chinese companies believed to be involved in making drone engines and parts used by Russia in long-range attacks against Ukraine while DJI filed a lawsuit against the US Department of Defense (DoD) to challenge its designation as a "Chinese military company," (see AiR No. 43, October/2024, 4).

China: Two SuperView Neo-2 radar satellites launched

(jf) China successfully launched two radar satellites on November 24, marking another step in the development of a state-owned firm's ambitious 28-satellite remote sensing constellation.

These satellites are equipped with advanced synthetic aperture radar (SAR) technology, featuring phased-array radar payloads that deliver a resolution of 0.50 meters. Utilizing third-generation Gallium Nitride components, the payloads are optimized for increased power efficiency and reduced energy loss. The satellites are designed to collect high-precision data, such as Digital Elevation Models (DEM) and radar orthoimages, and will be deployed for managing natural resources, enhancing urban security, responding to emergencies, and supporting maritime operations.

The mission on November 24 marks China's 57th orbital launch of 2024, as the country aims for a record-breaking year with around 100 launches planned. Although both China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation, a main contractor for the Chinese space program, and commercial space actors are slightly behind their targets of 70 and 30 launches respectively, China continues to expand its launch infrastructure. [Space News]

Japan: Ruling party proposes revision of political funds control law

(ml) The ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has drafted a proposal for political reform, aiming to revise Japan's Political Funds Control Law. Key measures include abolishing political activity funds for individual lawmakers, banning foreigners and foreign corporations from purchasing political fundraising party tickets, and imposing penalties for violations. The proposal reinforces existing laws prohibiting donations from foreigners to eliminate external influence in Japanese politics.

The draft also emphasizes transparency, with plans to establish a third-party organization to oversee political funds, likely under Diet jurisdiction, although Komeito has suggested administrative oversight. In addition, the proposal includes suspending public subsidies to parties whose lawmakers breach the law and creating an online database for public access to political funds reports.

However, it does not address abolishing corporate or organizational donations, a key demand from opposition parties, including the main opposition Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan which has identified donations from companies and organizations as a "hotbed of corrupt, money-driven politics." [The Asahi Shimbun]

The LDP intends to pass the bill in the extraordinary Diet session beginning November 28. Discussions with opposition parties, including the Constitutional Democratic Party, Japan Innovation Party, and others, are expected to commence this week to seek broader consensus on the reforms. [The Japan News]

The proposal comes against the backdrop of a political funding scandal involving unreported revenues generated by LDP factions through fundraising activities and implicating senior LDP lawmakers. This scandal is widely seen one of the factors that has led to crushing defeat of the government coalition of LDP

and its junior partner Komeito in the October 27 House of Representatives election in which the coalition lost majority. Since then, Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba has been leading a minority government, reliant on support of opposition parties for legislation (see AiR No. 44, October/2024, 5).

Japan: Record high stress levels reported among teachers

(dql) A survey by the Japan Mutual Aid Association of Public School Teachers, which represents educators from public elementary, junior high, and high schools, found that nearly 12 percent of teachers experienced high stress levels in 2023, the highest recorded since the survey began in 2016.

With the exception of 2020, when the COVID pandemic caused school closures, stress levels have consistently risen. Additionally, the percentage of teachers taking sick leave due to mental health issues reached 0.71 percent in 2022. Junior high and high school teachers, particularly those in their thirties and forties, reported the highest levels of stress.

From 2016 to 2022, a survey of approximately 1.7 million people identified two primary causes of stress: administrative workload (21.4 percent) and interaction with challenging students (19 percent). For the first time, "interaction with parents" ranked fourth at 12.4 percent, reflecting the impact of "monster parents" making unreasonable demands.

Based on its findings, the association emphasized the need to improve the work environment to prevent further stress-related issues and sick leave. [Nippon.com]

Japan: Pharmacy chain and family of medication error victim agree on settlement

(dql) A settlement was reached on November 22 between Sugi Pharmacy, a major Japanese pharmacy chain, and the family of a 74-year-old Tokyo woman who died after allegedly receiving incorrect medication. The family, who had sought JPY 40 million (approximately USD 258,000) in damages, will receive the full amount along with a formal apology from the pharmacy.

The incident occurred in November 2021, when the woman became unconscious after taking medicine dispensed by a Sugi Pharmacy store. She was hospitalized with hypoglycemic encephalopathy, a brain dysfunction caused by low blood glucose levels, and passed away five months later. The error reportedly involved a drug to lower blood sugar being mistakenly included in her medication packets, despite it being unrelated to her preexisting condition. [The Mainichi]

Japan: New greenhouse gas emissions target set

(dql) Japan is considering a new greenhouse gas emissions target of a 60 percent reduction from fiscal 2013 levels by fiscal 2035. This ambitious goal that requires accelerated adoption of renewable energy and increased reliance on nuclear power builds on the current target of a 46 percent reduction by fiscal 2030 and aligns with Japan's commitment to achieving net-zero emissions by 2050 under the Paris Agreement.

The updated target will be discussed at a joint meeting of the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry and the Environment Ministry, with plans to submit it to the United Nations by February. Under the Paris Agreement, countries must submit updated targets by February 2025 to meet global temperature goals.

The target will also guide Japan's forthcoming energy strategy for fiscal 2040, emphasizing renewable energy sources like solar and wind, alongside nuclear power, to decarbonize the energy sector, which is a major source of emissions.

Despite these ambitious plans, Japan’s greenhouse gas emissions in fiscal 2022 stood at 1.085 billion tons of CO2 equivalent, marking a 22.9 percent decrease from fiscal 2013. Achieving the 60 percent reduction target will require significant efforts from the industrial sector while balancing climate goals with economic growth. [Nikkei Asia]

Japan: JERA to restart Taketoyo power station with biomass co-firing by 2026

(sw) Japan's leading power generator, JERA, announced plans to restart coal and biomass co-firing at its Taketoyo thermal power station in central Japan by the end of fiscal year 2026. The facility, with a 1,070 MW

capacity, has been offline since a fire broke out on January 31.

Initial operations will resume with an 8 percent biomass co-firing rate – below the originally planned 17 percent – to prioritize safety. Coal-only operations will temporarily commence in January 2025 during peak demand seasons to maintain electricity supply stability. [Reuters]

Japan: Cabinet greenlights JPY 39 trillion economic package

(dql) Japan's government has approved a JPY 39 trillion (USD 250 billion) economic package that is aimed at mitigating inflation and revitalizing the economy. Important measures include subsidies to tackle rising energy costs, cash handouts to low-income households, and raising the tax-free salary threshold to strengthen disposable income. The package comes amid economic challenges posed by a weaker yen and persistent inflation, which have strained consumer spending.

The package allocates JPY 21.9 trillion (USD 141 billion) to inflation-related measures, including subsidies for electricity, gas, and fuel prices. Low-income households will receive cash benefits of JPY 30,000 (USD 194) and an additional JPY 20,000 (USD 129) per child. Investments of JPY 19.1 trillion (USD 123 billion) are directed toward economic stimulation, including a multiyear program exceeding JPY 10 trillion for AI and semiconductor development. Approximately JPY 7.2 trillion (USD 47 billion) is earmarked for public safety initiatives in response to natural disasters and rising crime.

Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba's administration, which recently lost its majority in the House of Representatives (see AiR No. 44, October/2024, 5), plans to finance the package through a JPY 13.9 trillion (USD 90 billion) supplementary budget, which is set to be deliberated in an extraordinary parliamentary session.

Ishiba emphasized the importance of wage growth and economic revitalization, particularly in regional areas. The package is projected to reduce consumer prices by 0.3 percentage points and boost inflation-adjusted GDP growth by 1.2 percentage points annually.

Highlighting the constraints of Prime Minister Ishiba's minority coalition government, consisting of his Liberal Democratic Party and Komeito, the opposition

Democratic Party for the People (DPP) successfully secured a concession to raise the current non-taxable income threshold of USD 6,600 in exchange for its support of the package. Debates continue over the scale of this increase, as the DPP's proposal could potentially reduce annual tax revenues by up to JPY 8 trillion (USD 52 billion). [The Asahi Shimbun]

Critics have labeled the package as politically motivated, citing Japan's precarious fiscal health. [Kyodo News]

Japan: Amazon raided

(dql) Japan's Fair Trade Commission carried out an on-site inspection of Amazon Japan on November 26 suspecting it of violating anti-monopoly laws. The company is accused of pressuring sellers to lower prices in exchange for favorable product placement on its e-commerce platform.

This raid follows a previous investigation in 2018, when Amazon Japan was accused of forcing suppliers to bear costs associated with discounted product sales. The company resolved that case by agreeing to improve its business practices. [Reuters]

Separately, Amazon may also face a European Union investigation next year for allegedly favoring its own brand products on its online marketplace, as EU regulators prepare cases under new antitrust rules. [Business Standard]

Japan: New strategy to boost defense industry and equipment export in the making

(dql) Japan is currently formulating a long-term strategy aimed at enhancing the country's defense industry and expand equipment exports to address challenges like limited market scale and low profitability. The strategy, expected next year, will involve multiple ministries, including Defense and Economy, Trade, and Industry, aiming to foster collaboration among businesses, government, and academia to advance key technologies and production bases.

The initiative views defense production and technology as critical components of national defense capabilities. It also emphasizes defense equipment transfers as a

strategic tool to bolster security ties and support nations facing coercion.

The plan seeks to revitalize Japan's defense industry, which has suffered from limited sales channels and company withdrawals. A panel of experts will determine priority fields, strengthen supply chains, and ensure industrial resilience. The strategy will be reviewed every five years. [Kyodo News]

Japan: Police seek arrest of Chinese boy accused of smearing Yasukuni shrine

(dql) Tokyo police have issued an arrest warrant for a Chinese teenager who is accused of defacing the Yasukuni Shrine in August by writing the Chinese word for "toilet" on a stone pillar using a black felt-tip pen. Security footage captured him climbing onto the pedestal of the pillar on the night of August 18, with the graffiti later posted on Chinese social media.

The suspect, who has since returned to Hong Kong, faces charges of property damage and desecration of a place of worship. The same pillar was previously vandalized in May with the English word "toilet" in red spray paint, resulting in the indictment of a Chinese man in July. Two other Chinese suspects involved in the earlier incident remain on wanted lists after leaving Japan.

The Yasukuni Shrine, which commemorates Japan's war dead, including wartime leaders convicted as war criminals, remains a source of diplomatic tension with China and other Asian nations. [The Asahi Shimbun] [Kyodo News]

Japan: Advanced radar system for hypersonic missile defense to be developed

(sw) The Acquisition, Technology & Logistics Agency (ATLA), under Japan's Defense Ministry, plans to develop a next-generation radar system to counter hypersonic missiles, which are faster and less predictable than conventional ballistic missiles. The project, aimed at enhancing interception capabilities, is expected to cost approximately JPY 3 billion (USD 19.5 million), with core technology development targeted by fiscal 2029.

Hypersonic missiles, capable of exceeding Mach 5, include glide vehicles and cruise missiles, both of which are challenging to intercept due to irregular flight paths. Countries like China, Russia, and North Korea are advancing such weaponry, with Russia deploying them in Ukraine.

ATLA's radar system will incorporate advanced semiconductor chips to detect targets at greater distances and manage multiple incoming missiles during saturation attacks. It will complement domestically developed interceptor missiles currently in research.

This effort runs parallel to Japan-U.S. collaboration on interceptor missiles for Aegis ships but focuses exclusively on domestic technology.

ATLA has allocated JPY 2.1 billion (USD 13.6) in its initial budget request for the next fiscal year to support the plan's development, full operations are anticipated within a decade. [Japan News Yomiuri]

Japan: Fire halts JAXA's epsilon S rocket engine test

(sw) Japan's space agency, JAXA, aborted an engine test for its Epsilon S rocket on November 26, following a large fire at the Tanegashima Space Center, with footage showing flames and smoke billowing from the site. Journalists reported a significant explosion shortly after the test began.

No injuries were reported, and an investigation is underway. Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshimasa Hayashi emphasized the importance of flagship rockets for Japan's space development, stating JAXA would conduct a thorough review and implement countermeasures.

The incident casts doubt on JAXA's plans to launch the Epsilon S by March 2025, as the timeline is no longer feasible. This echoes another setback that occurred in March when a rocket developed by the Tokyo-based private company Space One exploded just seconds after its launch. [DW]

Mongolia: President vetoes 2025 budget

(fs) President of Mongolia Ukhnaagiin Khürelsükh has vetoed the draft law on the 2025 state budget, citing

concerns over its economic strategy, compliance with legal requirements, and fiscal responsibility.

Khürelsükh emphasized the necessity of adopting a deficit-free budget to address global market fluctuations, stabilize inflation, and increase foreign currency reserves, arguing that such measures are critical to safeguarding taxpayers, businesses, and the broader economy from potential international economic instability.

He also said the budget failed to uphold essential principles of governance, such as efficiency, transparency, and equitable allocation of funds, raising alarms about excessive operational expenses and the growing deficit detailed in the 2024-2028 government plan, which could exacerbate public debt levels.

The veto also addressed procedural violations, noting that Parliament had approved amendments prior to the legal enactment of the budget, thereby breaching constitutional principles.

Khürelsükh has directed Parliament to revise the budget in line with these concerns to ensure compliance with constitutional and macroeconomic stability guidelines. The legislature must now address these issues to advance the budget legislation. [GoGo] [Montsame]

Mongolia: Scientific research to be prioritized

(fs) Enkhbayar Batshugar, the Chairman of the Standing Committee on Innovation and Electronic Policy of Mongolia's State Great Khural, the country's parliament, visited the Science and Technology Fund under the Ministry of Education and Science to discuss enhancing the economic impact of Mongolian scientific research.

Batshugar emphasized the importance of science, technology, and innovation as pillars of national development and economic competitiveness. He proposed several measures, including encouraging private-sector involvement, fostering public-private partnerships, supporting tech-based startups, and conducting intellectual property evaluations for state-funded research.

The Standing Committee on Innovation committed to providing policy support to implement these initiatives effectively.

Over the past 30 years, approximately 4,600 research projects have been funded through the national budget. [News.mn]

Mongolia: Ministry of Education launches fast-track teacher training amid national shortage

(fs) The Ministry of Education has introduced a 45-day fast-track teacher certification program to address a critical nationwide teacher shortage of 4,217 positions, as announced by Minister of Education Purevsurengiin Naranbayar.

Despite public opposition, the program will begin shortly, with registration open until November 22 at the Mongolian National University of Education (MNUE).

The Teacher's Association of Mongolia voiced strong opposition, arguing it "undermines the dignity of the teaching profession, infringes on societal interests, and violates students' right to quality education and professional services." Truth and Right Party leader A.Otgonbaatar even threw an egg at Minister of Education P.Naranbayar on September 16 as a way of protest.

Head of the General Department of Education T. Nyam-Ochir stated that 3,200 teaching vacancies have been filled, leaving over 1,000 positions open. [UB Post] [GoGo] [UB Post 2]

Mongolia: Ulaanbaatar submits 2025 budget draft

(fs) Deputy Governor of Ulaanbaatar Davaadalai Tumendalai presented the 2025 Budget Draft for Ulaanbaatar City to Bayar Amarbayasgalan, Chairman of the Citizens' Representative Khural of the Capital City, on November 25.

Key priorities in the draft include stimulating economic growth through public-private partnerships, transitioning ger districts into residential zones to reduce air pollution, and expanding road networks while reforming public transport to alleviate congestion. Continuing prior investment projects, the draft also emphasizes improving public service accessibility.

Aligned with the Governor's 2024-2028 Action Plan, the budget targets five strategic areas: regional development, human development, economy, green development, and governance. Notable infrastructure projects include the "Metro" high-capacity transit system, "Tuul" highway, New Zuunmod City, and the Selbe subcenter residential complex.

A total of 164 projects across urban infrastructure, utilities, education, health, and green spaces are scheduled for implementation. [Montsame]

Mongolia: Amendments to Nuclear Energy Law approved by parliament

(fs) Mongolia's Parliament has approved amendments to the Nuclear Energy Law and associated bills, introducing significant changes to attract investment.

The revisions enable the government's 34 percent equity stake in mining projects to be replaced by Special Royalties for Mineral Resource Utilization (AMNAT). This new structure includes a base AMNAT rate of 5 percent on sales, a special rate of 5 percent, and a market-dependent progressive rate ranging from 0-9 percent.

The amendments also allow the conversion of ordinary shares into preferred shares with a 10 percent dividend guarantee, ensuring Mongolia avoids financial liabilities while prioritizing dividends. Provisions extend investment contracts up to 20 years and mandate funding for post-mining restoration to be secured in a special foreign currency account at the Bank of Mongolia.

Some members of the parliament criticized the amendments, citing inadequate environmental and resource management regulations. [Bloomberg TV Mongolia]

Mongolia: Ulaanbaatar district heating project is expanded

(fs) The Ulaanbaatar district heating project has been expanded, completing 1.3 km of new heating pipelines in Bayangol District and nearing 95 percent completion of 1.8 km pipelines in Amgalan, Bayanzurkh District.

Supported by a EUR 9.5 million concessional loan from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), a EUR 4.5 million grant from the

European Union, and EUR 1.5 million in Austrian technical assistance, the project aims to improve the reliability and efficiency of Ulaanbaatar's heating infrastructure, being the first significant foreign investment in Ulaanbaatar's heating system in two decades.

With the new pipelines operational, the centralized heating network can now serve 150-200 additional residential buildings, benefiting around 15,000 households, offices, and businesses. This expansion supports the city's redevelopment plans and is expected to contribute to air pollution reduction.

Since 2022, the project has modernized critical infrastructure, such as upgrading 3.3 km of pipelines and increasing capacity at key pump stations. Future efforts will introduce smart meters, expand network coverage, and support renewable energy integration. [EU Delegation to Mongolia]

Mongolia: Xanadu Mines unveils copper targets at Sant Tolgoi Project

(fs) Xanadu Mines Ltd has reported strong surface copper assay results at the Sant Tolgoi Project in Zavkhan Province, Western Mongolia. The project focuses on gathering crucial data to pinpoint potential drill targets within the Sant Tolgoi Intrusive Complex.

Four high-priority targets have been established, prompting plans for 3,000 meters of reconnaissance drilling to assess the presence of high-grade massive sulphide copper and nickel deposits.

Xanadu's Vice President of Exploration Andrew Stewart emphasized the project's potential, describing it as a good opportunity to uncover a magmatic copper and possibly nickel-PGE district in an underexplored region of Mongolia. Follow-up drilling is scheduled for the first half of 2025. [Aki Press]

Mongolia: Ulaanbaatar unveils infrastructure plans under the 20-Minute City concept

(fs) Governor of the Capital City and Mayor of Ulaanbaatar Nyambaatar Khishgee outlined upcoming infrastructure projects as part of the 20-Minute City initiative aimed at reducing traffic congestion and improving urban mobility.

Key projects include the phased construction of two-level roads between 2024 and 2028, with a traffic-light-free ring road as a priority. A consultancy tender for the ring road design closes on November 25, and feasibility studies are set for completion by 2025. The project will be funded through fees collected from the Tuul Highway and other road charges.

Additional plans include a new bridge connecting Tuul Highway and Nisekh Road, with construction starting in 2026.

Progress on the Yaarmag-Kharkhorin cable car line has been delayed due to contractor issues, but its first phase is expected to be operational next year. This line is deemed to be essential, as Yaarmag Road sees up to 90,000 vehicles during peak hours.

Nyambaatar also emphasized public participation in deciding the National Park-Shangri-La Center route via a public survey. [Akipress]

North Korea: Construction workers risk life and limb to deliver on shoddy housing for flood victims

(jb) In the runup to the Workers' Party plenary meeting in early December, flood recovery and reconstruction projects are being hastily pushed to completion to present recovery as a key achievement at the meeting.

State authorities have commanded construction groups to finish the ongoing housing projects for flood victims with little safety equipment and faulty construction materials such as weak cement. Pictures of weak scaffolding have also emerged, raising concern for the lives of construction workers.

Workers were reported to reject the housing themselves even if it was offered for free, citing safety concerns. A disproportionate ratio of few workers to large numbers of supervisors at several sites has also thrown off progress in these projects. The order to complete all ongoing projects came from North Korean leader Kim Jong Un himself, during an on-site visit on November 4. [Daily NK English]

North Korea: Foreign currency earning centers raided by state authorities

(jb) Inspectors from North Korea's state security forces began sweeping through institutions and centers tasked with earning foreign currency on November 4, with operations continuing into late November. These quarterly raids have become increasingly stringent, with inspectors investigating potential connections between these centers and foreign entities perceived as hostile, particularly South Korea and the United States. Authorities suspect these entities of coordinating efforts to disrupt foreign trade and promote anti-socialist sentiment within the country.

The inspections focus on monitoring activities within the centers, banning all foreign media influences, and reinforcing socialist values among workers. Inspectors also ensure the mandatory portraits of the ruling Kim family are properly maintained.

A significant issue in the oversight of these centers is the inconsistent enforcement of foreign exchange collection methods. While the government does not impose uniform guidelines for generating foreign currency, state security forces are now rigorously ensuring financial quotas are met within a strictly controlled work environment. [Daily NK English]

North Korea: Won depreciates, citizens resort to foreign currency

(jb) Soaring exchange rates have led to the North Korean won depreciating in the foreign exchange market, with the US dollar (USD) and Chinese yuan (CNY) rising by several hundred won at a single moment.

Citizens dealing with the currency crisis have resorted to using the dollar and yuan as their currencies of choice to conduct marketplace transactions in the local economy. However, owing to merchants overcharging citizens in the hopes of keeping up with increasing exchange rates and declining customers who trade with the won, transactions have become increasingly costlier for even grains and groceries.

Following several years of deprioritizing the US dollar in North Korea’s local economy, the dollar has come back into play, with market vendors preferring to conduct transactions exclusively in the dollar or yuan. Previously, although vendors would prefer foreign currency for imported products, locally made goods were traded using the North Korean won. However, the crisis has led to vendors using the yuan as a primary currency in northern provinces and the dollar as a generally traded currency across the nation.

Financial researchers weighing in on the issue have argued that the circulation of foreign currency must reduce significantly before state authorities can exercise any viable fiscal policy to bring the won back into circulation and adjust its values to the dollar and yuan. [Daily NK English]

North Korea: Economic hardship propels urban to rural migration

(jb) As rising costs of living and an economic crunch make life in urban spaces difficult to sustain, North Korean citizens have begun to shift to rural areas in Hongwon and Riwon provinces from cities such as Hamhung in South Hamgyong province hoping for a reprieve.

The incoming winter has posed an additional problem to city dwellers who are on the lookout for fuel for heating amidst rising fuel prices. The migration will see many city dwellers turning to agriculture to make a living, despite city life being coveted in the past. As rural to urban migration remains difficult due to restrictions on movement, urban to rural migration in fear of impoverished urban living conditions is being viewed favorably as no such restrictions on it exist at present. [Daily NK English]

North Korea expands key missile facility linked to Russia's war in Ukraine

(mc) North Korea has decided to expand its "11 February" factory, which produces KN-23 short-range ballistic missiles reportedly used by Russia in the Ukraine war, according to data released on November 25 by the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies (CNS) and South Korea's SI Analytics.

Satellite images from October show new construction at the facility, located within the Ryongsong Machinery Complex in Hamhung. The expansion includes an additional assembly building and worker accommodations, estimated to be 60-70 percent the size of the existing facility. Improvements were also detected at underground plant entrances, indicating an effort to boost production capacity.

The KN-23 missiles, referred to as Hwasong-11 in North Korea, have played a significant role in Russia's missile strikes on Ukraine. North Korean state media reports indicate that the "11 February" factory

produces various military components, including missile bodies and tail kits.

The factory's expansion is expected to enhance North Korea's regional defense capabilities. Analysts suggest it may also signal North Korea's commitment to the strategic partnership agreement recently signed with Russia. [Reuters]

North Korea: Senior state security official executed for information exchange

(jb) A report has emerged on the execution of a Colonel, surnamed Cho, belonging to the 31st Border Guard Brigade under the Border Security Command, a section of the North Korean Ministry of State Security.

Cho was arrested in March for leaking sensitive information to Chinese traders through an SD card containing state documents from his ministry. The information was delivered to the traders during his patrol of North Pyongan province with his brigade. The state documents are reported to be first-class and second-class secret in nature.

Cho's execution and rank, as well as the reason for his execution, was announced during an emergency lecture on November 6-7 for state security department heads belonging to the 25th, 27th, 29th and 31st Border Guard Brigades. The information has leaked to the public much more recently. Security officials are on heightened watch following the news announcement. [Daily NK English]

North Korea: Inter-Korean power lines dismantled

(bw) North Korea has begun dismantling power lines installed by South Korea to supply electricity to the now-defunct Kaesong Industrial Complex, signaling further erosion of inter-Korean ties.

Surveillance by South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) confirmed that North Korean soldiers have started removing cables near the Gyeongui Line, while transmission towers remain intact.

The power infrastructure, built by South Korea's Kepco KPS in 2007, consisted of 48 pylons spanning 16 kilometers, delivering electricity from Paju's Munsan Substation to Kaesong. Power supply ceased in 2016

following North Korea's nuclear tests and briefly resumed in 2018, only to be cut entirely after Pyongyang destroyed the Inter-Korean Joint Liaison Office in 2020.

Since declaring South Korea a "hostile state" in December 2022, North Korea has intensified efforts to dismantle inter-Korean infrastructure. This includes removing rails, streetlights, and train storage facilities along the Gyeongui and Donghae lines, as well as fences and streetlights along key roads in 2023.

South Korea's Ministry of Unification condemned North Korea's actions as "unlawful infringements on property rights" and demanded an immediate halt. Officials are exploring legal measures but have yet to announce specific plans. [Korea Joongang Daily]

South Korea: Opposition party leader acquitted of perjury charges

(jb) The leader of the main opposition Democratic Party (DP), Lee Jae-myung, has been acquitted of perjury charges related to a 2002 case. In the first trial held on November 25, the Seoul Central District Court cited insufficient evidence in its verdict.

The charges stemmed from allegations that Lee had requested a witness to provide false testimony in a case where he was accused of impersonating a prosecutor while investigating a real estate scandal during his time as a lawyer. Although Lee was briefly convicted for the impersonation, he maintained his innocence and later went on to serve as the governor of Gyeonggi Province. The presiding judge in the perjury case ruled that the connection between Lee and the alleged false witness was tenuous, leading to the dismissal of the charges.

Lee and the DP have faced several scandals in recent years. Despite this, the party has worked to strengthen internal solidarity in the National Assembly amid growing protests and dissatisfaction with the Yoon Suk Yeol administration and the ruling People Power Party. [The Chosun Daily]

Earlier this month, Lee was sentenced by the same court to a suspended prison term for violating election law by making false public statements during his 2022 presidential campaign, which he narrowly lost to Yoon (see AiR No. 47, November/2024, 3).

If the conviction stands, Lee would be disqualified as a lawmaker and barred from running in the 2027

presidential election, where he is currently favored. However, Lee, who faces five other trials on corruption and other charges, is likely to challenge any guilty verdict, and it is questionable that Supreme Court will resolve these cases before the election. [AP News]

South Korea: National Assembly tussles over budgetary decisions

(jb) The 2025 budget is currently under debate in the National Assembly, where the ruling People Power Party (PPP) and the main opposition Democratic Party (DP) are negotiating their priorities ahead of the December 2 deadline.

The proposed budget amounts to KRW 677.4 trillion (USD 490.7 billion), marking a 3.2 percent increase from this year's KRW 656.6 trillion (USD 503.5 billion). The fiscal balance for 2025 is projected at 1.0 percent of GDP, improving from a 1.8 percent deficit in 2024. However, the government debt-to-GDP ratio is expected to rise to 48.3 percent, up from 47.4 percent in 2024. The government aims to keep debt below 50 percent of GDP through 2028. [Ministry of Economy and Finance] [Reuters]

The budget allocates the largest share to the health, welfare, and employment sectors, with KRW 249 trillion (USD 178 billion) set aside, followed by KRW 111.3 trillion (USD 80 billion) for public administration and local governments, and KRW 98.5 trillion (USD 70 billion) for education.

The DP has advocated for a welfare-focused approach, with party leader Lee Jae Myung proposing cash handouts and high school tuition waivers. Holding 170 out of 300 seats in the National Assembly, the DP has significant leverage over the PPP, which controls only 108 seats. The DP is pushing to reduce special activity expenses for the Presidential Office, police, and prosecution, and is advocating for budget cuts to several Yoon administration projects. However, the DP has avoided antagonizing the judiciary due to Lee's pending legal cases (see article above). [The Korea Times 1]

In contrast, the Yoon administration and the PPP have proposed reduced government spending, focusing instead on modest increases for key sectors. The administration's priorities for the 2025 budget include welfare for vulnerable groups, stimulating economic growth, structural reforms, and strengthening global leadership through diplomacy. [The Korea Times 2]

Addressing growing economic and social disparity is another key priority for the Yoon administration, which has discussed the possibility of a supplementary budget to address income inequality and improve access to education for the middle and working classes. President Yoon has indicated support for such a budget, emphasizing efforts to tackle social polarization during the second half of his term, which ends in 2027. [The Korea Herald]

South Korea: President Yoon vetoes third bill on special counsel to investigate First Lady

(dql) President Yoon Suk Yeol vetoed a bill on November 28 that would have introduced a special counsel investigation into allegations against first lady Kim Keon Hee, marking the third such bill to be vetoed. This veto comes 12 days after the National Assembly passed the bill on November 14, in a vote boycotted by Yoon's ruling People Power Party. Yoon had previously vetoed two similar bills in December 2023 and September, which were later scrapped in revotes (see AiR No. 41, October/2024, 2, AiR No. 2, January/2024, 2).

The latest bill broadens the scope of the investigation to include accusations that Kim meddled in the 2022 presidential election and the 2022 by-election and 2023 general election nomination processes. Other allegations include her involvement in stock manipulation and accepting a luxury bag from a pastor.

A key change in the updated bill is a new process for selecting the special counsel, involving recommendations from the Supreme Court chief justice, with input from the opposition parties. However, the Ministry of Justice criticized a clause allowing the opposition to request new candidates if they find the list unsuitable.

The bill is set for a revote on December 10. If it fails, the opposition may propose a fourth version. This marks the 25th bill vetoed by Yoon since taking office in May 2022, with only one bill – the revised investigation into the Itaewon tragedy – being passed after a veto. [The Korea Herald]

South Korea: Cabinet reshuffle rumor dispelled by Presidential Office

(jb) In an announcement on November 22, the Presidential Office dismissed rumors of a potential Cabinet or Presidential Office reshuffle, stating that such a change would require significant time and effort and could not happen abruptly.

Speculation arose about President Yoon Suk Yeol's plans to reorganize the Cabinet in December, following his return from the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Peru. However, given the ongoing parliamentary debate over a supplementary budget and necessary budget adjustments due to external factors, a personnel change in the Cabinet is unlikely until these financial matters are resolved.

The Presidential Office also urged the press to exercise flexibility when reporting on any potential Cabinet reshuffles. [The Korea Times]

South Korea: President Yoon and first lady change phones amid controversies

(bw) President Yoon Suk Yeol and First Lady Kim Keon Hee have stopped using their mobile phones and replaced them with new ones. This decision follows Yoon's statement at a November 7 press conference, where he acknowledged that both he and his wife should have switched to new phones after his inauguration.

His comments came in response to criticism of the First Lady using her personal phone for communications linked to controversies surrounding her.

As public sentiment against the couple grows, it appears Yoon is seeking to enhance security and distance himself from past issues. The presidential office later confirmed that Yoon and the First Lady would receive new numbers for their personal phones. [The Korea Times]

South Korea: Labor Union and Farmers' Association protest against government

(mc) The Confederation of Korean Trade Unions, South Korea's largest labor union, and Junnong, the farmers' union, held a rally in Seoul on November 20 to protest the economic policies of President Yoon Suk Yeol's administration. This marked their second demonstration in recent weeks, following one earlier this month (see AiR No. 46, November/2024, 2).

Approximately 6,000 protesters participated, citing worsening economic conditions, including high inflation and declining rice prices, as key grievances. The rally temporarily blocked roads near Seoul City Hall, prompting the deployment of 113 police units to manage potential disruptions. [Yonhap Agency News]

South Korea: IMF team lowers growth outlook

(bw) The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has revised South Korea's 2024 GDP growth forecast to 2.2 percent, down from an earlier 2.5 percent, citing global uncertainties and a sluggish domestic demand recovery.

The announcement was made after the IMF team, led by its Korean missions chief Rahul Anand, made a two-week visit to South Korea for an annual meeting with the finance ministry, the Bank of Korea (BOK) and other relevant institutions to discuss the country's economy and policy measures.

Anand stated that South Korea's real gross domestic product is anticipated to grow by 2 percent in 2025 as the economy aligns with its potential growth and closes the output gap.

The IMF recommended a policy approach for South Korea involving monetary normalization, exchange rate flexibility, gradual fiscal consolidation, and targeted financial measures to maintain macroeconomic stability and reinforce economic recovery. [Yonhap News Agency]

South Korea: Samsung expected to make personnel reshuffle

(bw) Samsung Electronics is expected to announce a major personnel reshuffle this week to address its declining business performance and prepare for future challenges, according to industry sources. [Yonhap News Agency]

The company began laying off chip business executives on November 25 and may reveal new presidents as early as Wednesday. Typically done in December, the reshuffle has been expedited in light of disappointing earnings and the global semiconductor industry's challenges.

Samsung chief Lee Jae-yong expressed resolve to navigate the crisis, with a global strategy meeting planned for mid-December following the reshuffle.

The company has reportedly been grappling with sluggish memory chip and smartphone sales and delays in its high-bandwidth memory (HBM) business. Recording an operating profit of KRW 9.1 trillion (USD 6.5 billion) in the third quarter, falling short of market expectations of KRW 10.8 trillion (USD 7.7 billion). The company's stock price dropped from KRW 80,000 (USD 57.25) in July to KRW 50,000 (USD 35.78) in recent weeks. [The Chosun Daily]

Samsung's decline this year has also been accompanied by other South Korean conglomerates like SK Group and LG Group, all looking to reshuffle executives and revive their losses by the end of this year.

South Korea: New multidomain unit for future warfare readiness to be launched

(bw) South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) plans to establish a specialized unit to enhance readiness in space, cyber, and electronic warfare, reflecting the evolving security landscape and high-tech advancements.

The envisioned unit, set to be established under the JCS' strategy division, is expected to serve as an overarching unit within the JCS to carry out integrated operations in various areas of future warfare. Part of the Defense Innovation 4.0 initiative, the effort emphasizes using technologies like artificial intelligence to boost defense capabilities.

The restructuring proposal requires Cabinet approval, expected as early as next month, to address growing strategic and cognitive warfare demands. [Yonhap News Agency]

Taiwan: Labor minister resigns amid outrage over workplace bullying and staffer suicide

(sk) Premier Cho Jung-tai has accepted the resignation of Labor Minister Ho Pei-shan following the suicide of a ministry employee allegedly subjected to workplace bullying by his supervisor. Ho's tenure, lasting only six months, marks the shortest in the ministry's history.

Hung Sun-han, a Democratic Progressive Party's member in the Legislative Yuan, was appointed as the new Labor Minister. [CNA 1, in Chinese] [CNA 2, in Chinese] [CNA 3, in Chinese]

The incident gained public attention on November 4, when the body of the 39-year-old employeewas discovered at an office of the government. Speculation on social media suggested that bullying by his supervisor, Hsieh Yi-jung, contributed to his tragic death. On November 19, the Ministry of Labor released its investigation results, which failed to establish a direct link between Wu's suicide and workplace bullying. The report characterized Hsieh's behavior as harsh but claimed her actions were driven by good intentions rather than malice. This response sparked public outrage over perceived toxic workplace culture and the ministry's dismissive tone, ultimately leading to Ho's resignation. [Focus Taiwan] [Up Media, in Chinese]

On November 20, President Lai Ching-te publicly apologized for the loss and pledged to conduct further investigations to uncover the truth behind Wu's death. Supervisor Hsieh was dismissed and issued a video apology addressing the controversy. [CNA 4, in Chinese] [CNA 5, in Chinese]

Taiwan: Protest staged over rural government dental program

(am) Approximately 2,000 people protested in Taipei on November 24 against the Ministry of Health and Welfare's (MOHW) rural healthcare program, aimed at addressing limited dental care in rural Taiwan. The three-year program allocates NTD 2.4 billion (USD 74 million) to recruit and train dental professionals, including those with foreign academic qualifications, to provide dental services.

Critics, including the Taiwan Dentists group, argue that the program undermines the professionalism of licensed dentists by allowing internships for unlicensed individuals. Protesters called for the closure of this "back door" and for amendments to the Physicians Act to limit such internships.

Legislators from both the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and the opposition Kuomintang (KMT) joined the protest, along with healthcare professionals, who demanded clarity on the recognition of foreign academic qualifications.

An online petition also called for the program to include only fully licensed dentists to ensure high-quality dental care in rural areas. [Taiwan News]

Taiwan: Foreign domestic workers call for higher wages

(am) Foreign domestic worker groups protested on November 24, demanding better wages and working conditions. Key demands included raising monthly wages from NTD 20,000 (USD 614) to NTD 28,590 (USD 877), in line with Taiwan's upcoming minimum wage, as well as granting national holidays, inclusion in long-term care plans, and enhanced privacy and rights protections.

The Ministry of Labor (MOL) acknowledged the demands but emphasized the need to balance the financial burdens on employers. Liang Li-fang of the Awakening Foundation highlighted wage stagnation and gender discrimination, as over 220,000 predominantly female domestic workers face undervaluation.

Other groups, such as the Serikat Buruh Industri Perawatan Taiwan (SBIPT), called for the removal of limits on foreign workers' stays and for simplifying the process of changing employers. The MOL accepted the petition and stated it would consider wage increases, noting that 77,079 employers currently benefit from subsidies for hiring foreign caregivers.

Employers who violate wage standards face fines ranging from NTD 60,000 to NTD 300,000 (USD 1,841 to USD 9,207). [Taiwan News]

Taiwan: Carbon control and trading system to be implemented in 2028

(am) Taiwan's Environment Minister, Peng Chi-ming, has announced plans to implement a comprehensive carbon emission control and trading system by early 2028. The initiative includes a phased increase in carbon fees, ranging from NTD 1,000 (USD 30) to NTD 2,000 (USD 61) per ton. [CNA]

While the higher fees may pose minimal challenges for upstream companies, Peng acknowledged potential pressure on midstream and downstream suppliers. To mitigate these concerns, the ministry has decided not to further raise carbon fees at this stage. Currently, carbon fees are collected from major emitters with

annual emissions exceeding 25,000 tons. However, Peng indicated that the reporting threshold will be reduced to 5,000 tons in the future to broaden accountability.

The initiative will also involve collaboration with Financial Supervisory Commission Chair Peng Jin-lung and Finance Minister Chuang Tsui-yun to secure financial industry support for Taiwan's net-zero transition. [Taiwan News]

Taiwan: Government to establish funds for AI, health care, green growth and youth development

(dql) Premier Cho Jung-tai has unveiled plans of the government to establish five NTD 10 billion (USD 308.2 million) funds to promote Taiwan's competitiveness in artificial intelligence, smart health care, green growth, cultural and creative industries, and a new Youth Overseas Dream Fund. The initiative, to be proposed at the Economic Development Commission's meeting in December, aims to sustain Taiwan's economic growth, which exceeded 4 percent this year and averaged 3.14 percent annually under former President Tsai Ing-wen's tenure.

The Youth Overseas Dream Fund will support young people's participation in international volunteering, internships, and learning activities. "Smart health care" focuses on integrating IoT, big data, and AI into health care delivery, while "green growth" emphasizes balancing economic development with environmental sustainability.

With regards to energy policy, Cho reaffirmed efforts to transition from coal to natural gas and expand renewable energy while indicating openness to nuclear power if safety, waste disposal, and public consensus are addressed. Taiwan's electricity mix in 2023 consisted of 42.2 percent coal, 39.5 percent natural gas, 9.5 percent renewables, 6.3 percent nuclear, and 2.4 percent other sources.

Cho added that the government aims to maintain GDP growth above 3 percent, increase per capita GDP to USD 40,000 by 2027 (from USD 32,319 in 2023), keep unemployment below 3.5 percent, and stabilize inflation at 2 percent. A dedicated team has been established to strengthen Taiwan-U.S. trade ties, pursue a bilateral trade agreement, and seek membership in regional trade pacts. [Focus Taiwan]

Taiwan: Threats of violence over documentary on organ harvesting in China

(dql) According to Taiwan's National Security Bureau (NSB) 28 threatening emails have been recieved, including bomb threats, since the screening of the documentary *State Organs* in October. Some movie theaters showing the award-winning film received threats of explosions or gunfire if the screenings continued. Although the threats were not carried out, police have increased security at theaters in Taipei, New Taipei, and Kaohsiung.

The award-winning documentary explores the issue of government-sanctioned forced organ harvesting in China. The NSB suspects that "cyber warriors" linked to the Chinese government sent the emails.

The National Police Agency traced the emails to overseas IP addresses in multiple countries, suggesting the use of virtual private network (VPN) software to mask the senders' locations. [Focus Taiwan]

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

Bangladesh: Students plan to launch political party by February 2025

(lm) Leaders from the Anti-Discrimination Student Movement and Jatiya Nagorik Committee, which led the July-August mass protests, are planning to launch a new political party by early February 2025. The party

will focus on addressing key issues like unemployment, economic development, and national unity, avoiding extreme political ideologies.

While the two platforms will continue as "pressure groups," the new party will aim to field candidates from various political backgrounds, prioritizing youth leadership and inclusivity, especially for women. The party plans to break away from divisive politics and focus on agenda-driven governance. [The Daily Star 1]

Meanwhile, the Anti-Discrimination Student Movement has expanded its central executive committee by adding 18 new members, bringing the total number of committee members to 45. [The Daily Star 2]

Bangladesh: Jamaat-e-Islami proposes electoral reforms; BNP pushes for urgent elections

(lm) Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami, Bangladesh's largest Islamist political party and a strong political force in the country, has presented a set of proposals for electoral reforms aimed at strengthening Bangladesh's democratic processes. These proposals include the reintroduction of a caretaker government system for overseeing national elections and a two-term limit for the president and prime minister.

Jamaat's proposals focus on restoring the caretaker government system, which was a significant feature of Bangladesh's electoral framework until 2011. The system had allowed a non-partisan government to manage the election process, ensuring neutrality. Jamaat also called for increasing the number of election commissioners to six and emphasized that the Election Commission (EC) should have the authority to take action against misconduct during elections.

A key proposal from Jamaat is the opposition to the use of electronic voting machines (EVMs) in elections, advocating instead for traditional paper-based voting. The party also recommended that the armed forces be granted magistracy powers during elections, with deployment decisions made by the president. Jamaat has expressed concerns over the current setup, which they believe lacks sufficient oversight and transparency.

Jamaat also seeks reforms in election-related legal processes. The party has suggested that the High Court bench handling electoral petitions should dispose of all cases within 12 months and called for the restoration of a provision in the Representation of the People

Order, 1972, which allows the EC to postpone elections if necessary.

Historically, Jamaat-e-Islami has played a controversial role in Bangladesh's politics. Founded in 1941, it is one of the country's oldest political parties. Under the rule of the Awami League of ousted Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Jamaat faced accusations of war crimes, including collaboration with Pakistan during the 1971 war of indepedence. In recent years, Jamaat's role in politics has been marked by significant political clashes, especially with the ruling Awami League, which has led to Jamaat losing its registration as a political party in 2018. [The Daily Star 1]

Meanwhile, Tarique Rahman, acting chairman of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), has stressed the urgent need for elections in the country. Rahman criticized the current "broken system" under the Awami League, stating that delaying elections would exacerbate ongoing problems in public healthcare, education, and farmers' struggles, along with political biases in the judiciary and civil service. Rahman emphasized that only through free and fair elections can Bangladesh rebuild and ensure equality, inclusivity, and development for all. [The Daily Star 2]

Bangladesh: Interim government appoints new Election Commission led by AMM Nasir Uddin

(lm) Bangladesh's interim government, led by Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus, has formed a new Election Commission (EC) as part of its reform agenda to oversee the 13th parliamentary election. AMM Nasir Uddin, a retired bureaucrat who previously served in key ministries, including energy and health, has been appointed Chief Election Commissioner (CEC), joined by four commissioners: retired additional secretary Md Anwarul Islam Sarkar, retired district judge Abdur Rahman Masud, retired joint secretary Begum Tahmida Ahmad, and retired Brigadier General Abul Fazal Md Sanaullah.

The formation of the new EC comes after the previous commission, led by Kazi Habibul Awal, resigned on September 5, leaving the commission vacant for the first time since its founding in 1972. A six-member search committee led by Justice Zubayer Rahman Chowdhury was tasked with recommending candidates, and Nasir Uddin, proposed by both the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) – the main political rival of the ousted Awami League – and other parties,

emerged as the unanimous choice for CEC. [Dhaka Tribune 1] [Prothom Alo]

In his initial statement, CEC Nasir Uddin pledged to ensure free, fair, and credible elections while maintaining the commission's independence. He emphasized learning from the mistakes of previous commissions to avoid allegations of bias and highlighted the importance of involving all political parties in the electoral process. Nasir assured that the EC would act as a neutral body focused on protecting voters' rights and upholding its constitutional duties. [The Daily Star]

The BNP has welcomed the new EC, expressing optimism about its potential to restore public confidence in the electoral process. BNP Joint Secretary General Ruhul Kabir Rizvi emphasized the importance of the EC operating independently from executive interference. Meanwhile, BNP Standing Committee Member Amir Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury described the formation of the new commission as a positive step toward democratic stability, with both domestic and international stakeholders closely observing its performance.

BNP senior leader Dr. Abdul Moyeen Khan also praised the interim government for forming the EC, describing it as a critical reform to ensure credible elections. He called on the government to avoid unnecessary delays in announcing an election timeline and underscored the importance of reforms that support a transparent and fair election. [Dhaka Tribune 2] [Dhaka Tribune 3]

Despite widespread support for the new EC, concerns persist about potential delays in holding the national election. BNP leader Zainul Abedin Farroque has warned against reforms that could unnecessarily prolong the electoral process, arguing that delays might fuel conspiracies and unrest. Farroque accused former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina of orchestrating plots from abroad to hinder the establishment of a democratic government. He urged the government to prioritize timely elections to counter such challenges and to withdraw all cases against BNP Acting Chairman Tarique Rahman and other party members. [Dhaka Tribune 4]

The interim government, however, remains cautious about announcing a specific election date. Officials have clarified that Muhammad Yunus alone would determine and announce the election date, emphasizing transparency and accountability in the process. [Dhaka Tribune 5]

Bangladesh: Sheikh Hasina faces massacre charges, probe deadline set for December 17

(lm) Bangladesh's former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, now in exile in India, is facing charges of "massacres, killings, and crimes against humanity" linked to a violent crackdown during protests that led to her removal from power in August. The International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) in Dhaka has set a December 17 deadline for investigators to complete their probe and submit a report.

The charges stem from a brutal police response to a student-led uprising this past summer, which resulted in over 1,000 deaths and thousands of arrests. Prosecutor Mohammad Tajul Islam accused Hasina and her government of enabling mass violence, citing "command responsibility" for the deadly actions of law enforcement. The prosecutor described her regime's actions as some of the worst human rights abuses in the country's history.

Hasina, who fled to New Delhi on August 5 via helicopter, was summoned to appear before the tribunal on November 25. However, she remains a fugitive, with prosecutors reiterating demands for her extradition. Interpol's assistance has been sought, though India, a member of the organization, is not obligated to act on such requests without adhering to its own legal framework.

The tribunal also brought charges against 13 other individuals, including 11 former ministers, a bureaucrat, and a judge, accusing them of planning and inciting the violence. According to Islam, the defendants ordered "shoot-on-sight" policies and obstructed efforts to prevent what has been described as genocide during the crackdown.

The protests, which initially began as a call to abolish a controversial government job quota system favoring ruling party supporters, quickly escalated into demands for Hasina's removal from office. In response, her administration launched what is now seen as one of the bloodiest crackdowns in Bangladesh's history. Peaceful demonstrators were met with tear gas, beatings, and live ammunition, leaving more than 1,000 dead within three weeks.

Interim leader and Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus, who assumed power following Hasina's ouster, has pledged to pursue her extradition and hold her accountable. Yunus has stated that as many as 3,500 individuals were abducted during her nearly 16-year rule, which he described as "autocratic." While such

efforts signal a strong push for justice, they also risk straining Bangladesh's diplomatic relations with India, which maintained close ties with Hasina during her tenure. [Al Jazeera]

Bangladesh: Former ministers, high-ranking officials remanded over July-August uprising violence

(mt/vk) A series of arrests and remand orders have been issued in connection with murder cases stemming from the violent July-August mass uprising in Bangladesh, reflecting escalating legal scrutiny of former political leaders and officials.

Former Inspector General of Police Chowdhury Abdullah Al-Mamun is on a three-day remand, while former Law, Justice, and Parliamentary Affairs Minister Anisul Huq has been placed on a five-day remand. Both are implicated in cases related to deaths during the protests. [BSS News 1] [Bss News 2]

In another case, former Narsingdi-3 lawmaker Md Shirajul Islam Mollah was arrested over the killing of an electrician during an anti-discrimination rally in Mohammadpur on July 20. Similarly, former lawmaker Abdullah Al Islam Jakob is on a three-day remand for alleged involvement in the same incident. [BSS News 3] [Bss News 4]

In parallel, several former ministers have been implicated in multiple cases linked to casualties during the unrest. [Bss News 5]

In a separate operation, the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) arrested Azizul Haque, a notorious criminal linked to multiple cases, after he had been in hiding for 22 years. His arrest was unrelated to the protests but adds to the wave of legal actions amid heightened law enforcement activity. [BD News]

Bangladesh: Interim government to appeal High Court order on battery-run rickshaw ban

(lm) Bangladesh's interim government has announced plans to appeal a High Court order issued on November 19, requiring battery-run rickshaw operations in Dhaka to cease within three days. The appeal, to be filed at the Supreme Court, seeks to clarify whether these vehicles can continue to operate

under a regulated framework. The High Court's directive, which tasked key officials with enforcing the ban, has sparked widespread protests. [New Age]

In response to the order, battery-run rickshaw drivers have staged large-scale demonstrations across Dhaka, blocking roads and railways in areas such as Mohammadpur, Dhanmondi, Jatrabari, and the National Press Club. These protests caused severe traffic disruptions, with significant gridlocks reported. Protesters are demanding the withdrawal of the ban and have issued a seven-day ultimatum for the government to finalize a regulatory framework to allow their continued operation.

The Rickshaw, Battery Rickshaw-Van, and Easybike Sangram Parishad, a collective representing the drivers, highlighted the vehicles' critical role in providing affordable transportation and supporting millions of workers. The group's demands include registration and licensing of battery-run rickshaws, compensation for victims of recent violence, and the establishment of dedicated charging stations. They have warned of further protests if their demands are not met.

While the government acknowledges the economic impact of the ban, authorities cite safety and traffic concerns. [Prothom Alo] [The Business Standard]

Bangladesh: Three High Court judges resign

(vk) Three High Court judges in Bangladesh—Justice Salma Masud Chowdhury, Justice Quazi Reza-Ul Hoque, and Justice AKM Zahirul Hoque—have resigned after being barred from judicial duties for five years due to allegations of misconduct. Their resignations were accepted by President Mohammad Shahabuddin. [Bss News]

Bangladesh: Press freedom faces increasing challenges under interim government

(lm) Bangladesh's media landscape is facing growing challenges as protests, legal actions, and interim government measures increasingly target journalists and media outlets. These actions highlight concerns about press freedom under the interim government,

which has been dealing with escalating political tensions.

On November 24, police clashed with protesters outside the Prothom Alo office in Dhaka, using tear gas and sound grenades to disperse crowds protesting against alleged Indian aggression. The protesters accused Prothom Alo and The Daily Star – two of Bangladesh's largest and most influential English-language newspapers – of supporting such actions, leading to violent confrontations. Earlier, similar protests had occurred outside the offices of the two newspapers. [Dhaka Tribune 1]

The Newspaper Owners' Association of Bangladesh (NOAB) condemned these actions, calling them attempts to disrupt media operations and undermine press freedom. Noab urged the government to take strict measures against mob justice. [The Daily Star 1]

In response, Information Adviser Nahid Islam emphasized that the government would not tolerate any attacks on media outlets. He stated that those responsible for the vandalism of media offices would be held accountable, while peaceful protests and legal actions should be the proper means of addressing grievances. The government also assured the public that attacks on media outlets, such as the Prothom Alo's Rajshahi office, would not be tolerated. [The Daily Star 2]

In addition to these attacks, Bangladesh's Financial Intelligence Unit (BFIU) has taken further steps to target journalists by freezing the bank accounts of 18 media figures. This includes prominent names from several media organizations, raising concerns about the government's growing influence on press operations and financial independence. While the reasons for the freezing of these accounts have not been disclosed, it has led to further anxiety about the future of press freedom in the country. [The Business Standard]

Amid these developments, a murder case was filed implicating 14 journalists, including Md Hedait Hossain of the Dhaka Tribune, related to the death of a student during a protest. The case, filed months after the incident, is controversial, with concerns about its legitimacy and the targeting of journalists amidst growing political pressures. [Dhaka Tribune 2]

These actions, coupled with the harassment of journalists such as Nurul Kabir of New Age, whose harassment at the Dhaka airport sparked government inquiries, paint a troubling picture of press freedom in Bangladesh. While the interim government has

pledged to address harassment and uphold media rights, the growing number of incidents suggests that press freedom may continue to be under threat. [Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha] [Dhaka Tribune 3]

Bangladesh: BJP Chairman proposes addition of punishment clause for derogatory remarks against Islam

(mt) Bangladesh Jatiya Party (BJP) Chairman Andaleeve Rahman Partho has recommended the inclusion of a punishment clause in the Constitution to address incidents of derogatory remarks against Islam and Prophet Muhammad (SM). Speaking at a discussion on constitutional reform in Dhaka, Partho emphasized the need for constitutional changes that reflect the evolving times but stated that only an elected government holds the moral right to carry out such amendments. He expressed concern over the increasing trend of attacking religion under the guise of modernity and globalization over the past two decades. [BD News 24]

Bangladesh: Cyberbullying emerges as a growing challenge

(asa) More than half of internet users in Bangladesh have experienced cyberbullying, with women disproportionately affected, according to insights shared during a roundtable discussion titled "Unmasking Violence: Combating Misinformation, Disinformation & Cyberbullying." The event, organized by USAID and the Dhaka Tribune as part of the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence, underscored the urgent need for comprehensive action against online harassment.

Speakers highlighted the severe psychological impact of cyberbullying on women and emphasized existing gaps in digital literacy, fact-checking infrastructure, and policies to combat online abuse. Sirazum Munira Raiyan from the Youth Policy Forum and other panelists called for heightened public awareness, legal reforms, and collective societal efforts to address cyber harassment.

USAID representative Troy Beckman encouraged media and youth leaders to amplify women's voices, while Supreme Court lawyer Barrister Miti Sanjana pointed to social stigma and victim-blaming as

significant barriers to justice for female victims. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: Protesters reject new government job age limit, demand 35 years

(lm) Protesters rallied at Shahbagh on November 24, rejecting the government's decision to set the age limit for public sector jobs at 32 years. Demonstrators demanded the age limit be extended to 35 years, aligning with recommendations from a prior reform committee that also suggested an age limit of 37 for women.

Citing systemic challenges such as delays in education and workforce entry, the protesters argued for more accommodating policies to address the needs of the youth. Under tight police security, they pledged to continue their efforts until their demands are met. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: 552 child marriages prevented in vulnerable districts

(lm) Bangladesh has one of the highest child marriage rates in the world, with 51.4 percent of girls married before the age of 18. Districts such as Chapainawabganj, Gaibandha, and Kurigram are among the most affected. Harmful social norms and poverty perpetuate child marriage and related practices like dowry, with a 2019 survey revealing that 89 percent of children aged 10–14 also face violence at home.

In a positive development, 552 child marriages have been prevented in the past two years in three districts under the SSBC project, a collaboration between World Vision Bangladesh, UNICEF, and the European Union. Through community discussions and interventions, the project has promoted behavioral and social changes.

During a roundtable on November 24, stakeholders discussed the need for systemic measures to eliminate child marriage. Speakers highlighted poverty, climate change, and a lack of women’s empowerment as key challenges. Efforts to circumvent preventive measures, such as families secretly arranging marriages, were also noted.

Religious leaders and youth advocates emphasized the importance of societal transformation, with proposals to involve policymakers, improve educational access, and strengthen community frameworks. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: Dengue claims 11 more lives as 2024 fatalities rise to 459

(lm) Dengue has claimed 11 more lives, raising the total death toll for 2024 to 459, according to the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS). The fatalities include five in the Dhaka North City Corporation, four in the Dhaka South City Corporation, and two in Khulna division.

During the same period, 1,079 new dengue cases were reported, bringing the total number of infections since January 1 to 86,791. Currently, 3,720 patients are receiving treatment in hospitals across the country. Of the newly admitted patients, 194 were in Dhaka North City Corporation hospitals, while 121 were hospitalized in Dhaka South City Corporation facilities.

The rising figures follow the record-breaking dengue outbreak in 2023, which resulted in 1,705 deaths—the highest annual toll to date—and over 321,000 reported cases. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: Interim government seeks review of energy deals, including Adani agreement

(lm) Bangladesh's interim government has initiated a comprehensive review of major energy projects signed during the tenure of deposed Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. The National Review Committee on the Ministry of Power, Energy, and Mineral Resources, formed on November 24, has recommended appointing an international legal and investigation agency to scrutinize agreements for potential violations or irregularities.

Among the projects under review is the Adani (Godda) BIFPCL 1234.4 MW coal-fired power plant, a subsidiary of India's Adani Power Limited. Six other projects include one with a Chinese company that constructed a 1320 MW coal-fired power plant and agreements with Bangladeshi business groups allegedly close to the previous regime.

According to a statement from Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus's office, the committee has found substantial evidence suggesting the need to "scrap or reconsider" these agreements in compliance with international arbitration laws. Additional time has been requested to analyze further contracts signed under the Quick Enhancement of Electricity and Energy Supply Act of 2010 (Amended 2021), which enabled expedited deals without competitive bidding.

The Adani Group recently raised concerns over an unpaid USD 800 million power supply bill from Bangladesh. Bangladesh's state-run Power Development Board acknowledged paying USD 150 million so far, citing a dollar shortage. Speculation has grown over whether Bangladesh will continue receiving dedicated power from Adani's Godda plant after India's recent legal amendments allow Adani to sell power domestically.

India's Ministry of External Affairs previously emphasized the importance of power and energy cooperation as a pillar of India-Bangladesh relations. [The Hindu]

Bangladesh: Jamuna Rail Bridge to open in January 2025

(vk) The double-line railway bridge over the Jamuna River, anticipated to be the largest dedicated rail bridge in Bangladesh, is set to open in January 2025. Spanning 4.8 kilometers, the dual-gauge, double-track bridge will include a gas pipeline facility and enhance both domestic and international railway connectivity.

Financed by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), the main structure is being constructed approximately 300 meters upstream of the existing Bangabandhu Bridge.

Upon completion, the bridge is expected to establish a dedicated railway network connecting northern regions with the rest of the country. Officials project that this enhanced infrastructure will contribute to economic growth, boosting Bangladesh's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). [Bss News]

Bangladesh: Interim government approves five major development projects

(mt) The interim government, under the leadership of Chief Advisor Muhammed Yunus, has approved five

significant development projects valued at approximately USD 508 million. Among them is the 'Modern Waste and Discarded Oil Removing Management' initiative at Mongla Port in Khulna, aimed at improving environmental sustainability.

Of the total funding, USD 405 million will come from foreign aid, with the remaining USD 93 million financed by the government. Other approved projects include grid network expansion, initiatives to promote youth entrepreneurship, and enhancements to Chattogram's sewerage system. [BD News]

Bangladesh: Protests over student's death escalate into violent clashes, army deployed

(lm/mt) Dhaka has been engulfed in widespread unrest following allegations of medical negligence at Dhaka National Medical College and Hospital (DNMCH), which allegedly led to the death of a student from Dr. Mahbubur Rahman Mollah College (DMRC). Demonstrations erupted at DNMCH, where students vandalized hospital property, shattered glass panes, and looted nearby showrooms.

The unrest quickly spread to Shahid Suhrawardy College, where violent clashes broke out between students and outsiders. Vehicles and classrooms sustained significant damage, and a first-year exam had to be suspended. Demonstrators, including students from over 35 colleges, blocked the DNMCH main gate, vandalized its nameplate, and broke through police barricades to voice their demands. [First Post] [The Daily Star]

The protests were fueled by the death of a DMRC student admitted to DNMCH with dengue on November 16, who reportedly succumbed to alleged medical negligence two days later. Tensions escalated further after accusations of attacks on demonstrators by students from Kabi Nazrul and Suhrawardy Colleges during earlier protests. [Dhaka Tribune]

In response, police and army personnel were deployed to contain the violence, supported by six platoons of Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) in Jatrabari and Demra. The Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) has vowed to apprehend those responsible for the clashes within 24 hours. [BSS News 2]

The interim government has called for calm, warning against further instigation and emphasizing that any

attempts to destabilize educational institutions will be met with strict action. [BSS News 3]

Bangladesh: 10 injured in clash between Butex and Dhaka Polytechnic students

(lm) At least 10 students were injured on November 24 during a clash between students from the Bangladesh University of Textiles (Butex) and Dhaka Polytechnic Institute in Tejgaon, Dhaka. The conflict, which reportedly began as an argument between students of Shaheed Aziz Hall (Butex) and Latif Hall (Dhaka Polytechnic), escalated into a broader skirmish involving students from other halls. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: Retired law enforcement officers to aid traffic control

(lm) Bangladesh's Home Affairs Adviser Lieutenant General (Retd) Md Jahangir Alam Chowdhury announced plans to hire retired law enforcement officers to form a community police force for traffic management. The initiative was discussed during a meeting of the Law and Order Advisory Committee at the Ministry of Home Affairs on November 24. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bhutan: Government backtracks on priority development fund decision

(mt) The Bhutanese government has reversed its decision to implement the Priority Development Fund (PDF), formerly known as the Constituency Development Grant (CDG), citing risks to democracy and constitutional concerns. Despite internal party pressure, the government recognized the fund's potential misuse as a political tool during elections, undermining free and fair competition.

The PDF proposed allocating funds for short-term constituency projects, but critics, including the Election Commission of Bhutan, warned it could compromise equality, enabling MPs to gain undue electoral advantage. The finance minister highlighted constitutional issues and stressed the importance of adhering to democratic principles.

The government instead pointed to the substantial funds allocated to local governments under the 13th

Plan—BTN 72 billion (USD 864 million), including BTN 15.17 billion (USD 182 million) for the fiscal year 2024-25—as sufficient for developmental needs. [Kuensel]

Bhutan: Opposition leader calls for reforms in civil service

(mt) The Opposition Leader has raised urgent concerns about the state of Bhutan's civil service, citing critical staff shortages, leadership gaps, and inefficiencies that threaten the 13th Five-Year Plan's development goals. Over 2,700 civil servants have exited the system within a year, leaving local governments and key agencies severely understaffed, affecting public service delivery and operational efficiency.

The Opposition Leader has recommended swift recruitment of qualified personnel, a review of the divisive forced ranking system, and clear mandates for agencies. He has also emphasized the need for a strategic human resource development plan to enhance professionalism and accountability. These reforms, he argued, are essential for addressing the crisis and ensuring the civil service's role in national progress. [Bhutan Times]

Bhutan: Health Minister discusses private healthcare regulations and ongoing reforms

(mt) Health Minister Tandin Wangchuk informed the National Assembly on November 19 that comprehensive rules and regulations for private healthcare services are nearing completion and will soon be submitted to the Cabinet. Addressing concerns raised by South-Thimphu MP Tshewang Rinzin, the Minister highlighted that the government's commitment to public healthcare remains strong, with private services being allowed to supplement public offerings. The absence of proper regulations, which led to the suspension of private practices in 2018, has now prompted the government to draft new guidelines to ensure quality standards, particularly in areas like dental care. The rules aim to improve healthcare service delivery while addressing the challenges posed by rising private healthcare costs and ensuring that public facilities are not compromised by a shift of healthcare professionals to the private sector. [Kuensel 1]

The Minister also provided an update on ongoing reforms to Bhutan's healthcare system, including the restructuring of the National Medical Services and improving medical supply chains. Efforts to enhance outreach clinics and emergency services, along with the acquisition of advanced diagnostic equipment, are part of broader initiatives to address critical shortages and improve healthcare efficiency. Additionally, Lyonpo Tandin Wangchuk outlined the government's strategy to ease pressure on the JDWNRH emergency department, including refurbishing old wards and increasing staffing. The government also continues to seek support from international donors for essential medical equipment and infrastructure development. [Kuensel 2]

Bhutan: National Council supports ADR Bill

(mt) On November 21, Bhutan's National Council (NC) largely supported the Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) (Amendment) Bill of Bhutan 2024. The bill proposes changes to 159 provisions of the original ADR Act of Bhutan 2013 and introduces four new provisions to improve dispute resolution processes and bolster Bhutan's position as an international arbitration hub.

ADR offers alternatives like mediation and arbitration to settle disputes without resorting to litigation. The Bhutan ADR Centre (BADRC) in Thimphu has been central to these efforts since 2018. The amendments aim to align Bhutan's ADR framework with international standards, attracting more foreign investment.

While most provisions were accepted, MPs raised concerns over Sections 5 and 14, particularly regarding the resignation of civil servants appointed to the ADR Centre. These issues will be revisited before the final bill is adopted in December 2024.

New provisions include government funding for the ADR Centre's operations, though some MPs worry this could compromise its independence. Despite these concerns, the ADR Centre has handled over 277 cases, largely involving public contract disputes, and the amendments seek to enhance the efficiency, accessibility, and transparency of the ADR system. [Kuensel]

Bhutan: Parliamentarians call for reforms to protect acquitted defendants in corruption cases

(mt) During a review of the Anti-Corruption Commission's (ACC) 2023-24 Annual Report, members of the National Assembly (NA) called for reforms to protect individuals who are acquitted in corruption cases. The report revealed that out of 101 defendants charged with corruption during the fiscal year, 87 were convicted, six were acquitted, and eight cases were deferred.

Deputy Speaker Sangay Khandu emphasized the need for reforms, noting that those acquitted often face interrogations, detentions, and suspensions without compensation or legal recourse. Thrimshing-Kangpara MP Damche Tenzin added that individuals found innocent often endure societal and mental challenges, and their rehabilitation should be prioritized.

In response, the NA recommended that the Good Governance Committee propose measures for compensation and rehabilitation for those acquitted or whose cases are dismissed, with a report to be submitted in the next session. The committee was also tasked with compiling a report on corruption-related judgments, restitution, and asset recovery.

Additionally, MPs called for expanding online services to improve transparency and reduce corruption risks. The NA suggested the establishment of a joint parliamentary committee with the National Council to review the ACC's annual report and National Integrity Assessment Reports.

The ACC's report raised concerns over limited funding, staff shortages, and a high attrition rate, which hinder the Commission's effectiveness. With an attrition rate of 17.9 percent, the ACC lost 18 employees in just six months. The House endorsed all the proposed reforms with 38 votes in favor. [Kuensel]

Bhutan: Major changes underway in Marriage Act

(mt) The National Council's (NC) Natural Resources and Environment Committee (NREC) has reviewed and proposed significant amendments to the Marriage (Amendment) Bill of Bhutan 2024. The Bill, initially passed by the National Assembly (NA), has been introduced to address current challenges, especially

rising divorce rates, which are becoming a significant social issue in Bhutan.

The Marriage Act of Bhutan, established in 1980, was seen as outdated and in need of reform to reflect the country's changing societal dynamics. One major proposed change involves revising the compensation system (known as the gaw) for divorce victims. Under the new provisions, the gaw for divorce cases will increase by three months of national daily wage for each category. For example, in cases where a marriage lasts over seven years, the victim would now receive approximately Nu 64,500 (USD 766) instead of the previous amount of around Nu 45,000 (USD 549).

The amendment also introduces a proposal for child alimony to be set at 40 percent of the paying individual's monthly income. However, some concerns were raised, particularly about the affordability of these increases for lower-income families. Bhutan's National Statistics Bureau recorded 1,313 divorce cases in 2022, highlighting the growing issue. Some NC members suggested adding a grace period for divorcing couples to reconsider, similar to practices in the UK and Ireland, which could allow couples more time to reconcile.

While the proposed changes aim to strengthen the Marriage Act, there were disagreements during the NC's deliberations about unclear language in some provisions. The final Bill is expected to be adopted on December 3, 2024. Members are also concerned about the social impact of rising divorce rates, particularly on children, and emphasized that a robust Marriage Act is crucial to addressing these issues. [Kuensel]

Bhutan: NA adopts motion to draft Pension Act to address NPPF challenges

(mt) On November 22, the National Assembly (NA) of Bhutan adopted a motion calling for the drafting of a Pension Act to address critical governance and management issues within the National Pension and Provident Fund (NPPF). The motion, tabled by the Good Governance Committee, highlighted the absence of a formal National Pension Policy, despite the NPPF's 42-year history as a state-owned enterprise.

The committee emphasized that the NPPF continues to operate under rules set by an executive order, rather than a comprehensive legal framework. This lack of a Pension Act has resulted in significant governance challenges and limited the NPPF's ability to operate with full autonomy. Additionally, the committee noted

that the absence of a clear policy has led to civil servants resigning before enrolling in the pension scheme, with 4,710 civil servants leaving between January 2021 and August 2024, representing 15.7 percent of the workforce.

The current pension scheme, which only covers public servants, is a contribution-based system benefiting just 9 percent of the population. Although the Labour Act mandates private companies with more than five employees to enroll in the pension scheme, the NPPF lacks the authority to enforce compliance, creating a significant gap in Bhutan's social security coverage.

The committee also raised concerns about the growing disparity between the number of pensioners and contributors, as life expectancy rises, and the stagnation of the membership base. Furthermore, the NPPF's investments, primarily in loans to financial institutions at low interest rates, have yielded minimal returns, limiting the fund's growth.

The committee recommended strengthening social security for Bhutan's aging population, which is projected to reach 7.4 percent by 2027. MPs urged immediate policy interventions to ensure that pensions are more attractive and provide sustainable social security under the NPPF.

Following a vote of 39 in favor, three against, and two abstentions, the NA adopted the motion, directing the Ministry of Finance to draft the National Pension and Provident Fund Bill, which will be presented in the upcoming winter session after consultations with key stakeholders. [Kuensel]

Bhutan: National Council calls for unified approach to address needs of persons with disabilities

(mt) The National Council has called for a unified approach to better address the needs of persons with disabilities (PWDs) by maximizing resources and improving coordination. In response, the government has tasked the Office of the Cabinet Affairs for Strategic Cooperation with updating the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities action plan. This includes initiatives such as retrofitting schools, enhancing teacher training, providing assistive technologies, and improving health outreach programs like "Service with Care and Compassion." The government is also working on employment quotas, urban accessibility studies, and ensuring heritage sites

accommodate PWDs, demonstrating its commitment to inclusivity.

However, a recent audit by the Royal Audit Authority highlighted significant gaps in the implementation of disability education programs. The audit revealed issues such as poor coordination between the education and health ministries, a lack of special education resources, and insufficient early intervention services. Many planned initiatives for students with disabilities were either delayed or not fully executed, particularly in older schools lacking proper accessibility. These findings underscore the need for more effective planning, budgeting, and coordination to align national policies with the realities on the ground. [Kuensel][Bhutan Times]

Bhutan: National Council highlights inconsistencies in teacher transfer rules

(mt) The National Council's special committee on education has uncovered serious issues with the inconsistent application of teacher transfer rules, which create disparities between urban and rural teachers. While the Bhutan Civil Service Rules and Regulations (BCSR) 2023 outline transfer guidelines, the committee found significant gaps between policy and practice, resulting in an unfair system. Teachers in rural areas, who face more challenges, such as isolation and fewer resources, are often overlooked for transfers, while urban teachers benefit from better opportunities, further exacerbating inequities in the education system.

This imbalance has far-reaching consequences, including low morale among rural teachers, which can affect the quality of education for students in remote areas. The committee has called for clearer, more transparent transfer policies that acknowledge the sacrifices of rural teachers, including incentives like accelerated promotions or allowances for rural service. By improving teacher transfer systems and ensuring fairness across urban and rural schools, Bhutan can address these inequities and support a more balanced education system that benefits all students, regardless of their location. [Kuensel]

Bhutan: Princess Sonam launches justice sector strategic plan II

(mt) Bhutan's Princess Sonam Dechan Wangchuck, President of Bhutan National Legal Institute, launched the Justice Sector Strategic Plan II (JSSP II) for 2024-2029 in Thimphu on November 19. The plan focuses on reforming Bhutan's justice system by expanding legal aid services, enhancing accessibility, and harmonizing laws to address emerging challenges. It aims to improve transparency, professional development, and digital transformation while contributing to the country's socio-economic development goals. The initiative seeks to provide equal access to justice, promote social cohesion, and preserve Bhutanese identity, with technical support from UNDP and UNICEF. [Kuensel]

Bhutan: Leveraging carbon markets for sustainable development

(mt) Bhutan is tapping into carbon markets to generate funds for renewable energy projects and climate adaptation, leveraging its carbon-negative status. With climate change impacts like extreme weather events, Bhutan has faced challenges despite its environmental leadership. The World Bank is helping Bhutan set up a carbon crediting system, awaiting resolutions on Article 6 of the Paris Agreement, which covers carbon markets. Bhutan has already signed a carbon credit agreement with Singapore and seeks debt-free funds through carbon trading to support its conservation efforts.

Article 6 of the Paris Agreement facilitates carbon markets, allowing countries to trade emission reductions, but it remains controversial due to concerns over transparency and effectiveness. Critics argue that it could enable rich countries to continue emitting by buying credits rather than reducing emissions. Despite these concerns, Bhutan's Prime Minister sees carbon markets as crucial for funding sustainable development, positioning the country as an example of how economic resilience and environmental stewardship can work together. [Kuensel]

Bhutan: Experts explore cannabis policy reform for economic growth

(mt) At a recent international conference in Paro, experts suggested Bhutan could balance cannabis control with its economic potential. A study by Professor Jay Wexler of Boston University and

Associate Professor Sonam Tshering of JSW School of Law highlighted benefits like job creation, tax revenue, and reduced criminal justice costs. The study, *Cannabis Policy in Bhutan: Examining Cannabis Regulation through GNH,* advocated aligning cannabis policy with Gross National Happiness (GNH) values, promoting medical research, and exploring export potential.

Bhutan's cannabis resources remain largely untapped, despite strict regulations under the NDPSSA Act 2015 allowing limited industrial and research uses. Critics argue that broader rural participation in the cannabis industry could enhance inclusive economic benefits. Globally, over 20 European countries have legalized medical cannabis, and Bhutan has begun exploring similar possibilities, including a four-acre research-focused marijuana plantation in Samtse. [Kuensel]

Bhutan: National Assembly debates challenge of YenlagThroms

(mt) The National Assembly discussed the pressing challenges surrounding YenlagThroms, or satellite towns, focusing on unclear classification and inadequate funding. MPs raised concerns about reclassifying some YenlagThroms as Gewog Throms, leading to the withdrawal of municipal services such as waste management and water supply. Minister for Infrastructure and Transport Lyonpo Chandra Bdr Gurung clarified that a 2016 Supreme Court writ had halted the formal establishment of YenlagThroms, complicating development efforts. Despite ongoing projects under the 12th and 13th Five-Year Plans, resource constraints have limited progress.

MPs criticized the current funding structure, with only 10 percent of Dzongkhag budgets allocated to YenlagThroms, arguing it is insufficient for infrastructure and service demands. Opposition Leader Dasho Pema Chewang proposed forming a high-level committee to address these issues. While the government acknowledged the importance of YenlagThroms, MPs emphasized the need for equitable resource allocation and clearer policies to ensure sustainable development for these vital centers. [Bhutan Times]

Bhutan: Reviewing the tourism sector

(mt) Tshewang Rinchen, Chairperson of the Economic Affairs Committee (EAC), presented a review report on Bhutan’s tourism sector during the 34th session of the

National Council on November 15. The report outlined Bhutan's tourism policy evolution, focusing on the "High Value, Low Volume" strategy and the implementation of the Tourism Levy Act of 2022. While the policy aims to preserve Bhutan's cultural and environmental integrity, it has faced challenges, including regional disparities in tourism development.

Western Dzongkhags, like Thimphu and Paro, dominate the tourism landscape, while central and eastern regions struggle due to poor infrastructure and high costs like the Sustainable Development Fee (SDF). The report emphasized the need for targeted investments and region-specific adjustments to promote balanced tourism development and called for a collaborative approach to address these challenges. [Bhutan Times]

Bhutan: Government allocates funds for highland communities and new insurance scheme

(mt) The Bhutan government has allocated USD 1.35 million to support highland communities, focusing on increasing livestock productivity and promoting economic growth. This funding is part of a broader initiative to address challenges faced by highlanders, such as livestock diseases, shrinking rangelands, and changing climatic conditions. Key measures include enhancing the yak population, providing improved artificial insemination services, and allocating significant amounts for rangeland restoration, livestock vaccinations, and modified tents for highlanders. Furthermore, the government aims to explore value-added products like cheese production and expand farmers' groups and cooperatives to boost market opportunities. [Kuensel 1]

In a parallel effort to safeguard farmers against climate change and wildlife-related risks, the government has proposed the introduction of a National Crop and Livestock Insurance Scheme, with an estimated cost of USD 7.4 million over four years. The scheme aims to provide financial protection for farmers and ensure more affordable premiums by balancing government support with farmer contributions. The new insurance-based model is designed to offer greater financial stability compared to previous trust fund proposals. With government subsidies for premiums, the scheme will be piloted next year, ensuring better risk management and security for the agricultural sector. [Kuensel 2]

Bhutan: Challenges in the construction sector and procurement system

(mt) The construction sector in Bhutan is facing a significant crisis, with an estimated 70 percent of contractors reportedly without work and struggling financially. Contractors, like many in the private sector, express growing frustration over limited opportunities, opaque procurement processes, and a lack of clear government action to stimulate economic growth. These concerns reflect deeper structural challenges in the country's economic model.

Contractors have reported selling assets, such as machinery and vehicles, to manage loan repayments as non-performing loans rise. Many are frustrated by the slow rebound of the economy post-pandemic and question the government's handling of promised budgets and stimulus measures. While efforts to review procurement rules offer some hope, contractors argue that the current system is marred by favoritism and a lack of transparency, with allegations of direct awards bypassing formal processes.

The Construction Association of Bhutan (CAB) warns that many contractors are on the brink of financial collapse. While government officials acknowledge the oversaturation of contractors—over 2,800 registered nationwide—CAB insists that fair competition and adherence to standardized procedures could alleviate some of the challenges. Contractors also call for performance-based qualifications to ensure quality work and reduce market saturation. [Kuensel 1]

The private sector at large, often referred to as the engine of economic growth, is showing signs of stagnation. Despite the rollout of an economic stimulus fund, questions remain about its efficacy and whether certain activities genuinely stimulate economic recovery or are politically motivated handouts.

If the private sector continues to falter, the consequences could be severe, including increased unemployment and greater dependence on government support. Critics urge the government to engage more closely with private sector stakeholders, address systemic inefficiencies, and ensure transparency in awarding contracts. Long-term reforms, such as improving procurement processes, reducing market saturation, and building capacity for contractors, are seen as critical to revitalizing both the construction sector and the broader economy. [Kuensel 2]

India: BJP secures Maharashtra in a landmark comeback, Congress struggles to regroup

(lm) Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) achieved a decisive victory in Maharashtra, India's wealthiest state, regaining political dominance five months after a significant setback in the parliamentary elections. The BJP-led alliance won over 230 of the 288 legislative assembly seats, with the BJP alone securing 132 seats. This marks the party's best performance in Maharashtra, a critical state politically and economically, with a GDP of USD 510 billion.

The victory demonstrates the BJP's strategic pivot from a Modi-centric campaign to a focus on local issues and female-centric welfare initiatives, such as the Laadki Bahin Yojna, which benefited 23.4 million women. Analysts credit the success to effective coalition management, grassroots mobilization by the Sangh Parivar, and a well-organized campaign by the BJP's cadre-based allies.

The Indian National Congress (INC), which once dominated Maharashtra, suffered its worst-ever performance, winning just 16 seats. Analysts attributed this to the party's lack of consolidation and failure to effectively campaign, in contrast to the BJP's disciplined approach. The INC-led alliance also suffered from internal divisions over campaign issues and power-sharing.

Jharkhand: BJP falters amidst tribal and Muslim consolidation

In Jharkhand, Chief Minister Hemant Soren's impactful welfare programs, such as the Maiya Samman Yojana, which provided women INR 1,000 (USD 12) per month, resonated strongly with tribal and Muslim voters, the JMM's core support base. This helped counter anti-incumbency sentiments following Soren's arrest in a money laundering case earlier this year. Soren's arrest, which the JMM portrayed as political harassment by the BJP, galvanized voter support, further boosted by the active campaign of his wife, Kalpana Soren.

The BJP's divisive rhetoric focusing on "Bangladeshi infiltration" and land-grabbing allegations failed to resonate, particularly in tribal areas, where the JMM-led bloc secured a near sweep, winning 27 of 28 reserved seats for Scheduled Tribes. Prominent BJP leaders, including Prime Minister Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah, campaigned extensively but failed to sway voters. [The Hindu]

INC continues to falter nationwide

The INC party remains in disarray after a series of electoral losses, including in Haryana and Indian-administered Kashmir. Analysts suggest the party has been overly reliant on alliances with regional parties, leading to diminished influence and weakened negotiation power.

The road ahead: Delhi and Bihar

The BJP's resurgence in Maharashtra and its losses in Jharkhand set the stage for upcoming elections in Delhi and Bihar. These results reflect a shifting political landscape: the BJP has rebounded from its parliamentary election losses, while the opposition, led by INC, struggles to regain momentum. With the BJP's disciplined approach and welfare-focused strategies, it has reasserted itself as a dominant force in Indian politics, leaving the opposition scrambling to regroup. [Al Jazeera]

India: Winter Session of Parliament disrupted over Adani bribery allegations

(rsv/lm) The Winter Session of Parliament, which began on November 25, was marred by disruptions and adjournments in both Houses as opposition parties demanded a debate on the indictment of Gautam Adani in the United States.

The U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) and Department of Justice have charged Adani and his nephew, Sagar Adani, with orchestrating a USD 265 million bribery scheme tied to a USD 750 million bond offering. These allegations are part of a broader scandal involving contracts, including India’s largest solar power project, projected to generate USD 2 billion in profits over 20 years.

The SEC’s summons, issued on November 20, requires the Adanis to respond within 21 days. The lawsuit seeks monetary penalties and restrictions on their ability to serve as officers of publicly listed companies. Federal prosecutors have also issued arrest warrants, accusing the Adanis of misrepresenting compliance with anti-bribery laws. The Adani Group has denied the allegations, calling them "baseless," and clarified that the indictment involves only Adani Green Energy, which constitutes about 10 percent of the conglomerate's operations. [The Kathmandu Post]

These charges follow earlier allegations by Hindenburg Research, which accused the conglomerate of financial misconduct. [The Hindu 2]

Political fallout and allegations

Opposition parties, led by the Indian National Congress (INC), accused the government of shielding Adani, citing long-standing ties between Modi and the businessman dating back to Modi's tenure as Gujarat Chief Minister. INC leader Mallikarjun Kharge called for immediate discussions, arguing that the allegations have tarnished India's global image and put retail investors at risk.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi criticized the Opposition, accusing them of exploiting the issue for political gains and disrupting parliamentary proceedings. He emphasized the need for healthy debates and criticized opposition parties for creating chaos despite repeated electoral defeats. Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar, chair of the Upper House, rejected 13 notices for a discussion, citing procedural rules. Both Houses will reconvene on November 27 after a one-day adjournment to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Constitution's adoption.

The session, scheduled to run until December 20, has an ambitious legislative agenda, including 15 bills. Key measures include the Merchant Shipping Bill, Coastal Shipping Bill, and Indian Ports Bill, focusing on maritime compliance and port regulations. Amendments to the Waqf Act and other legal reforms are also on the table. [The Hindu 1]

Market and financial impact

The controversy has significantly impacted the Adani Group's market position. Adani dollar bonds fell to near one-year lows as lenders reconsidered their exposure. Bonds issued by Adani Ports maturing in 2027 dropped to 88.98 cents on the dollar, while longer-dated bonds saw losses of 8–10 cents. Adani's listed stocks have lost USD 27.9 billion in market value over two sessions.

Despite these setbacks, Adani Group cited USD 6.33 billion in cash reserves, asserting that it can meet its debt obligations for the next 28 months. However, the conglomerate faces heightened scrutiny from global investors and lenders, with some banks reportedly pausing new credit lines. [Reuters]

India: Supreme Court dismisses petitions challenging inclusion of 'socialist' and 'secular' in Preamble

(lm) The Supreme Court of India has dismissed a series of petitions challenging the inclusion of the words "socialist" and "secular" in the Preamble of the Constitution, introduced through the 42nd Amendment in 1976. The bench, led by Chief Justice of India (CJI) Sanjiv Khanna and Justice Sanjay Kumar, affirmed that the amendment powers of Parliament extend to the Preamble, rejecting arguments that the inclusion was unconstitutional or retrospective.

The bench highlighted that socialism in the Indian context signifies a welfare state, a concept distinct from its interpretations in other countries. CJI Khanna emphasized that socialism in India supports a welfare-oriented approach while allowing the private sector to thrive. Similarly, the Court reiterated that secularism is a fundamental part of the Constitution's basic structure, as established in the landmark SR Bommai case. [Live Law]

India: Prashant Kishor calls Bihar a 'failed state,' outlines Jan Suraaj's vision

(lm) Prashant Kishor, leader of Jan Suraaj, a reformist political movement focused on grassroots-driven governance, described Bihar as "literally a failed state" needing urgent transformation. Speaking to the Bihari diaspora in the US, he criticized the state's developmental stagnation, citing societal hopelessness and systemic challenges but expressed confidence in Jan Suraaj's ability to secure victory in the 2025 Assembly elections.

Kishor proposed lifting Bihar's alcohol ban to fund education reforms, aiming to elevate the state to middle-income status by 2029–2030. He called on the diaspora to actively support the movement, emphasizing that meaningful change requires long-term commitment. Despite Jan Suraaj's recent bypoll losses, Kishor remains optimistic, framing his party as the catalyst for Bihar's revival. [The Indian Express]

India: Supreme Court considers prosecuting Delhi Police Commissioner over air pollution measures

(lm) The Supreme Court of India is deliberating prosecuting the Delhi Police Commissioner under Section 14 of the Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM) Act for failing to adequately deploy officers at all entry points to Delhi on

November 18, the day when Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP)-IV restrictions were implemented to curb air pollution.

A bench led by Justice A.S. Oka questioned whether written orders had been issued to post police officers at all checkpoints to prevent the entry of polluting trucks into the capital. While the Delhi government clarified that the Delhi Police falls under the jurisdiction of the central government, it pointed out that the CAQM had directly instructed the police.

The central government acknowledged that police officers were deployed at only 23 of the 113 total entry points, leaving nearly 100 checkpoints unmanned. This lapse allowed polluting heavy trucks and vehicles from outside Delhi to violate the GRAP-IV ban and enter the city. Justice Oka criticized this selective deployment, suggesting that the lack of coverage could lead to legal action against the Commissioner of Police under the CAQM Act.

Additional Solicitor General Aishwarya Bhati informed the court that officers were subsequently deployed at all entry points following a Supreme Court directive on November 22. [The Hindu]

India: Four dead in clashes over mosque survey in Uttar Pradesh

(rsv) Four people, including three Muslim men, died and dozens were injured in Sambhal, Uttar Pradesh, as protests over a court-ordered survey of the Shahi Jama Masjid escalated into violent clashes on November 24. The mosque, a federally protected Mughal-era monument, became a flashpoint following claims it was built on the ruins of a Hindu temple. The violence has reignited concerns over religious tensions and the political use of historical grievances in India.

Protesters opposed to the survey threw stones and torched vehicles, prompting police to respond with tear gas and rubber bullets. Authorities reported that four security personnel were killed when a vehicle rammed into them, but witnesses allege the deaths resulted from security forces speeding away from advancing protesters. At least 25 arrests have been made, and cases have been filed against over 2,000 people, including Zia-ur-Rehman Barq, a Samajwadi Party MP accused of inciting violence. Barq denies the allegations, calling the incident a preplanned targeting of Muslims.

The court-mandated survey, initiated by a petition alleging that Mughal emperor Babur built the mosque over a Hindu temple, has drawn sharp criticism from Muslim groups, who argue it violates the Protection of Places of Worship Act, 1991. The law prohibits altering the religious character of places of worship as they existed on August 15, 1947. Critics have also accused the state's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government of orchestrating the survey to stoke communal tensions.

Opposition leaders, including former Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Akhilesh Yadav, condemned the violence and called for a judicial inquiry. Asaduddin Owaisi, leader of the All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen, labeled the killings "state-sanctioned murders" and questioned the court's ex-parte decision to order the survey without consulting mosque caretakers. Indian Union Muslim League MP Muhammed Basheer criticized the incident as a blatant violation of the law and called for Parliament to address the issue.

The Shahi Jama Masjid controversy follows a broader pattern of disputes involving historic mosques, often fueled by claims from Hindu nationalist groups linked to the BJP. These groups allege that Mughal rulers demolished Hindu temples to construct mosques, but critics argue such actions undermine India's secular democracy and exacerbate communal tensions. The recent clashes come in the wake of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's inauguration of a controversial Hindu temple built on the site of the demolished Babri mosque, further emboldening Hindu nationalist narratives. [Al Jazeera] [BBC] [TheWire]

India: Supreme Court orders SIT probe into custodial torture in RG Kar protests case

(lm) The Supreme Court of India has ordered a Special Investigation Team (SIT) probe into allegations of custodial torture against a woman arrested during protests over the rape and murder of a doctor at R.G. Kar Medical College and Hospital in Kolkata. Modifying a Calcutta High Court order that initially directed a Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) probe, the Supreme Court ruled that the investigation would be handled by a SIT comprising senior IPS officers from West Bengal state.

The case revolves around allegations made by two women who were arrested on September 7 and held in police custody at Falta Police Station in the Diamond Harbour district. They later alleged physical torture, including hematoma injuries, during their detention.

Medical reports presented contrasting findings: while a jail doctor reported signs of trauma, a medical officer at Diamond Harbour Medical College recorded no external injuries. These discrepancies raised concerns about the treatment of the detainees in custody.

This development comes as the trial in the R.G. Kar rape-murder case, which sparked the protests, is underway in Kolkata. [The Hindu]

Maldives: Parliament passes bills allowing president to appoint ACC and EC leaders

The Maldives Parliament has passed two government-proposed bills granting the President the authority to appoint the President and Vice-President of the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) and the Election Commission (EC). The ACC Act Amendment, submitted by People's National Congress (PNC) MP Adam Zahir, and the EC Act Amendment, submitted by PNC MP Abdulla Shareef, were approved without changes by the Committee on Independent Institutions.

Under the new amendments, the President will now have the authority to select leaders for both commissions from among their members, subject to approval by a majority vote in Parliament. Additionally, the current Presidents and Vice-Presidents of the ACC and EC will remain in office until they voluntarily resign. [the edition]

Maldives: Parliament dismisses EC members, ACC officials resign amid allegations of misconduct

(sl/lm) The Maldives Parliament has dismissed Elections Commission (EC) Vice President Ali Nashath and member Mohamed Asif over allegations of misconduct, including the misuse of the election database and profiting from its sale during the 2023 presidential election. However, Parliament voted to retain Dr. Mohamed Zahir, the third EC member implicated in the case. The dismissal of Nashath and Asif followed recommendations by the Committee on Independent Institutions based on a report outlining 19 charges. The floor vote saw 69 and 68 MPs supporting their dismissal, while 70 MPs voted against removing Zahir. The reasons for the ruling party's decision to protect Zahir despite the allegations remain unclear. [the edition 1]

Meanwhile, Abdul Salaam, Vice President of the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), and member Thoha Mohamed resigned before Parliament could vote on their dismissal, also recommended by the Committee on Independent Institutions. The committee's report accused Salaam of halting an investigation into the Binveriya Housing Scheme and improperly blocking charges against a former Attorney General. Thoha faced allegations of undue influence in granting over MVR 200,000 (USD 13,000) in compensation to a dismissed staff member, overriding legal advice, and being listed as an attorney at a law firm, violating constitutional rules against holding other positions. [the edition 2]

In his resignation letter, Thoha cited an inability to work independently due to the allegations and the resulting no-confidence motion. Salaam also confirmed his resignation. The Secretary General of Parliament, Fathimath Niusha, emphasized that the ACC Act prohibits members from succumbing to external influence or allowing personal interests to interfere with decision-making, violations both officials were accused of. [the edition 3]

The Committee on Independent Institutions had recommended the dismissal of several EC and ACC members, including Salaam, Thoha, Nashath, Asif, and Zahir, but not Civil Service Commission President Mohamed Nasih. [the edition 4]

Maldives: Constitutional amendments ratified amid legal challenges

(sl/lm) On November 20, President Dr. Mohamed Muizzu ratified a series of amendments to the Constitution of the Republic of Maldives. The amendments, introduced by Hulhudhoo District MP Mohamed Shaheed of the ruling People's National Congress (PNC), include a controversial provision mandating the loss of parliamentary seats for MPs who resign, change parties, or are expelled during their term. Independent MPs who join political parties mid-term would also forfeit their positions.

Additional amendments include a requirement for public referendums to alter key constitutional provisions affecting citizens' rights and the Exclusive Economic Zone. Another amendment now mandates parliamentary approval for the presence of foreign military personnel in the Maldives for purposes beyond training activities.

The amendments passed Parliament with 78 votes in favor and 13 against, exceeding the required two-thirds majority of 70 votes out of 83 active MPs. On the same day, a draft law on combating desertion was also referred to a parliamentary committee and approved without changes. [the edition 1]

The amendments have sparked significant legal and political opposition. Former Kendhoo MP and lawyer Ali Hussain has filed a constitutional petition with the Supreme Court seeking to annul the changes, arguing that they undermine the Constitution's fundamental structure and democratic principles. The Supreme Court has not yet decided whether to hear the case.

Opposition parties, including the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) and The Democrats, have joined the lawsuit. Both parties argue that the amendments infringe upon the people's right to elect their representatives and compromise the separation of powers by concentrating authority in the hands of a single party. MDP's statement emphasized that the changes deprive citizens of their democratic rights, while The Democrats highlighted concerns over the erosion of lawmakers' constitutionally guaranteed privileges. [the edition 2] [the edition 3]

Maldives: Parliament approves extensions for senior secretariat officials

(lm) The Maldives Parliament has approved the extensions of terms for three senior members of the Parliamentary Secretariat. Fathimath Niusha was unanimously confirmed as Secretary General, while Fathimath Filza was approved as Counsel General. Tholhath Hassan, appointed Sergeant at Arms in March, also received approval to continue in his role.

Under parliamentary regulations, the positions of Secretary General, Counsel General, and Sergeant at Arms must be appointed within the first two terms of a newly formed Parliament unless otherwise determined. These positions are critical, with the Secretary General ranked as the most senior official after the Speaker and Vice-Speaker, followed by the Sergeant at Arms.

While the regulations mandate a public application process for these roles, both this term and the previous one saw the appointments made without public announcements or open applications. Each position carries a term of five years, ensuring continuity in the administrative and operational functions of Parliament. [the edition]

Maldives: Failure to comply with Information Commissioner's orders may lead to imprisonment, says former Prosecutor General

(lm) Former Prosecutor General Hussain Shameem has highlighted that under the Right to Information (RTI) Act, an Information Officer who fails to comply with an order from the Information Commissioner for 45 days without lodging an appeal can face criminal charges. The offence could result in imprisonment for up to 4 months and 24 days, with harsher penalties possible for senior State officials or repeat offenders.

The RTI Act enables individuals to request information from any office. If access is denied or there is no response, the matter can be brought to the Information Commissioner, whose rulings carry the same legal weight as a lower court's decision. Typically, the Commissioner orders the disclosure of information within five days, and appeals must be lodged with the High Court within 30 days.

Shameem noted that non-compliance with the Commissioner's ruling, without an appeal, transforms it into a legally binding order. Article 65 of the RTI Act allows the Information Commissioner to refer cases of non-compliance to the Prosecutor General's Office after 45 days. Shameem further explained that providing the requested information after the deadline does not absolve the offender of legal consequences.

During Shameem's tenure as Prosecutor General, the Information Commissioner referred a case against the President's Office for non-compliance. The matter was handed over to the police for investigation, but it remains unresolved. [the edition]

Maldives: CSC President cleared of allegations by parliamentary committee

(lm) The Parliamentary Committee on Independent Institutions has decided against dismissing Civil Service Commission (CSC) President Mohamed Nasih, citing a lack of evidence supporting allegations of misconduct and abuse of authority.

A complaint had been filed accusing Nasih of actions unfit for his position, including alleged spying on staff, irregular appointments, and favoritism. Specific allegations included installing monitoring software on

employees' computers, altering policies to favor certain appointees, bypassing standard protocols for staff assignments, and granting civil service positions based on political connections rather than qualifications.

The committee's report, released on November 25, outlined the accusations but noted that Nasih had submitted documents in his defense. After reviewing the evidence, the committee found insufficient proof to support the claims. As a result, the members unanimously voted against his dismissal, allowing Nasih to continue in his role as CSC President. [the edition]

Maldives: Foreign Ministry exceeds political appointee limit set by Foreign Service Act

(lm) Information disclosed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs reveals that the ministry has consistently employed political appointees in excess of the limit established by the Foreign Service Act since its ratification in 2021. According to the Act, political appointees should not exceed 20 percent of foreign service staff, but the current proportion stands at 48 percent.

The Foreign Service Act's Article 41 mandates that political appointees, including positions such as Minister of State, Ambassador-at-Large, and Deputy Minister, along with other political hires, must remain within the 20 percent cap relative to the total foreign service staff. However, out of the ministry's 269 employees, 129 are political appointees compared to 140 foreign service employees. This far exceeds the permissible number of 28 political appointees under the Act.

This discrepancy has been a longstanding concern, with Maldivian embassies often criticized for employing a disproportionately high number of political staff compared to career foreign service employees. The current administration's figures follow a similar pattern observed during the previous administration, which employed 116 political appointees out of a total of 253 staff. [the edition]

Maldives: Ruling People's National Congress begins internal elections for over 1,900 posts

(lm) The ruling People's National Congress (PNC) held its largest internal elections on November 23, 2024, to fill over 1,900 posts across its organizational structure. The election, described by PNC Election Committee President and Health Minister Dr. Abdulla Khaleel as the largest of its kind in the Maldives, saw voting across 91 islands, with 34,900 eligible members participating.

Key positions included constituency presidents, vice presidents, and leaders of various initiatives. Additional elections were held for youth and women's branch presidents, totaling 420 posts. [the edition 1]

PNC Chairperson and Parliament Speaker Abdul Raheem Abdulla attributed the party's rapid membership growth to President Dr. Mohamed Muizzu's policies. He noted the President's initial goal of 75,000 members within the administration's first year had been far surpassed, with the party now claiming membership close to 100,000. Abdul Raheem emphasized grassroots outreach and denied allegations of financial incentives for membership.

While the Elections Commission currently lists PNC's official membership at 28,983, Abdul Raheem stated that 97,000 valid membership forms await verification and expects the count to exceed 100,000 once processed. He highlighted the dramatic rise from just 3,000 members in November 2023 as evidence of the party's growing influence. [the edition 2]

Maldives: Revised submission procedure for the Government of Maldives Gazette

(sl) Starting from November 24, 2024, the procedure for submission for publication in the Government of Maldives Gazette will be updated according to a directive issued by the President's Office on Sunday.

Legal documents for publication in the Government of Maldives Gazette should now be sent to legalaffairs@po.gov.mv. If amendments are required to documents already submitted, the revised versions must be addressed to the Presidential Office under Directive No. 4/2015. This applies to official documents and letters that require the President's signature.

All revised documents must include a cover letter signed by a responsible person, such as a minister or other official. Documents from state bodies and institutions that do not fall under the ministry's jurisdiction must be signed by a responsible official and sent to the above email address. The directive also

requires that documents be checked for compliance with legal and language standards, and all corrections must be made before publication.

Ministries and relevant institutions are also instructed to contact the Attorney General's Office for legal advice before preparing documents for publication. Each institution is required to appoint a focal point responsible for this process, providing their name, title, and contact information.

Although the procedures for submitting documents to the Office of the President have been updated, the existing guidelines under President's Office Directive No. 11/2010 (governing the actions of Government offices and agencies) and Directive No. 25/2010 (concerning Government offices) remain unchanged. [The President's Office – Republic of Maldives]

Maldives: The Committee expedites review of proposed ban on Israeli passport holders

(sl) Parliament's Committee on National Security Services has decided to fast-track its review of a proposed amendment to the Immigration Act that would ban Israeli passport holders from entering the Maldives. The move comes amid growing criticism over delays since the bill, introduced by Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) MP Meekail Ahmed Naseem on May 19, remained stalled in committee for months.

Originally slated for completion by February 2025, the committee has revised its timeline to finalize the bill by December this year. Stakeholder consultations are set to begin immediately with political parties, the Attorney General's Office, the Ministry of Economic Development, the Ministry of Tourism, Maldives Immigration, the Maldives Association of Tourism Industry (MATI), and relevant NGOs.

Committee Chair, Eydhafushi MP Ahmed Saleem, stated that administrative adjustments were made to expedite the process, with discussions scheduled to commence tomorrow. The delays have drawn criticism from the MDP and members of the public, who have accused the ruling People's National Congress (PNC) of intentionally stalling the bill despite holding a parliamentary supermajority. Earlier attempts by the MDP to pass a resolution to expedite the bill were blocked by government-aligned members. [the edition 1]

Adding to the debate, PNC Parliamentary Group Leader and Inguraidhoo MP Ibrahim Falah has called for consultations with Palestinians and Arab nations before finalizing the ban. During a recent committee meeting, Falah emphasized the need to assess the potential impact of the ban on Palestine and the benefits it might bring to Palestinians. He also highlighted the presence of thousands of Muslims residing in Israel and suggested that the perspectives of other Arab nations should be considered. [the edition 2]

Maldives: Parliament Committee to consult stakeholders on proposed ban of Israeli passport holders

(sl) The Parliamentary Committee on National Security (241) has agreed to meet with relevant authorities, including political parties, government agencies, and tourism sector organizations such as the Maldives Association of the Tourism Industry (MATI) and the Maldives Association of Travel Agents and Tour Operators (MATATO). The discussions will focus on the implications of Israeli passport holders entering the Maldives, in connection with a proposed bill to ban the issuance of Israeli passports.

President Dr. Mohamed Muizzu's cabinet decided on June 2 to amend the bill to ban Israeli passports. However, parliament had already received a separate bill from the main opposition, the Maldives Democratic Party (MDP), calling for a complete ban on travelers holding Israeli passports. The bill, submitted by MP Mikail Ahmed Nasim, proposes adding a clause to Article 8 of the Immigration Act to ban all Israeli passport holders, including those with dual citizenship. Following the cabinet's decision, the People's National Congress (PNC) announced plans to present the bill to parliament and incorporate the government's proposed changes during the committee stage. On June 10, 2024, the bill was unanimously sent to the National Security Services Committee with 88 votes.

The committee began reviewing the draft law only on November 12, setting a February 2025 deadline for its completion. The committee reconvened on November 21, one day after the parliament rejected an MDP resolution seeking to expedite the bill.

At the November 21 meeting, Deputy Speaker Ahmed Nazim proposed consultations with key stakeholders, noting that many Israeli passport holders do not reside in Israel but in other countries. He emphasized the need for more information on this matter. MK Kelaa

Abdulla Sharif supported the proposal, highlighting that only a small number of Israelis travel to the Maldives, typically surfers visiting specific islands.

As a result, the committee members voted to gather the necessary statistics and consult with stakeholders. Meanwhile, the MDP expressed concern over delays in the bill's progress. [SunOnline]

Maldives: Supreme Court to deliver final ruling on Fathimath Hana's death sentence

(lm) The Supreme Court of the Maldives was set to deliver its final ruling tomorrow on the death sentence passed on Fathimath Hana for her role in the 2012 murder of lawyer Ahmed Najeeb. The verdict announcement was scheduled for November 26, marking the culmination of a lengthy legal process.

Hana and her former partner, Ahmed Murrath, were convicted of holding Najeeb hostage, extorting money from him, and subsequently murdering him with a sharp object at Murrath's residence. Both were sentenced to death by the Criminal Court, a decision later upheld by the High Court.

While Murrath's death sentence was reaffirmed by the Supreme Court in 2016, it remains unimplemented. Hana's case was referred to the apex court by the State after she chose not to appeal the High Court ruling, seeking to reaffirm the original sentence.

The five-judge bench, led by Chief Justice Muhthasim Adnan and comprising Judges Aisha Shujune Mohamed, Mahaz Ali Zahir, Husnu Suood, and Mohamed Ibrahim, concluded hearings in the case in April 2021.

During the hearings, Hana claimed that Najeeb was brought to Murrath's house for legal advice regarding a property matter. She stated that events took a dark turn when she expressed discomfort over Najeeb’s behavior, prompting Murrath to restrain him. According to Hana, the pair later used Najeeb's cash card to withdraw money before returning to the house. She alleged she awoke the next day to find Najeeb already murdered.

The State, however, argues that the death penalty is permissible under Islamic Shariah, citing Hana’s sound mental state, the heirs' demand for capital punishment, and the absence of evidence to exempt her from the sentence.

The decision will mark a significant chapter in the high-profile case that has spanned over a decade. [the edition]

Maldives: Travel expenses exceed budget by USD 195,000

Statistics from the Ministry of Finance reveal that travel expenses have surpassed this year's budget allocation by MVR 3 million (USD 195,000), bringing the total cost to MVR 231 million (USD 15 million). The approved budget had allocated MVR 228 million (USD 14.82 million) for travel, with no additional funding included in the supplementary budget.

Within the travel budget, MVR 69 million (USD 4.49 million) was designated for foreign travel, MVR 54 million (USD 3.51 million) for air travel, and MVR 45 million (USD 2.93 million) for sea travel. This year's travel expenses represent a 7 percent increase compared to the same period last year, during which MVR 216 million (USD 14.05 million) was spent.

To date, the Maldivian government has spent MVR 40 billion (USD 2.6 billion) from the state budget, with the largest expenditures allocated to salaries for government employees and office operational costs, amounting to MVR 28 billion (USD 1.82 billion), or 70 percent of total expenses.

Following the recent approval of a supplementary budget, the total budget for the year is expected to reach MVR 55 billion (USD 3.58 billion). [the edition]

Maldives: Vice President highlights SMEs as key to President Muizzu's national development vision

(sl) Speaking at the opening ceremony of the Maldives MSME Awards 2025, Vice President Uz Hussein Mohamed Latif emphasized that fostering an innovative economy is a cornerstone of national development, reflecting the vision of President Dr. Mohamed Muizzu. He highlighted the critical role small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) play in the economy, noting their significant contributions to job creation, innovation, and overall economic growth.

The Vice President praised the dedication of SME entrepreneurs, recognizing their vital efforts toward advancing the nation's progress in areas such as social

development, sustainability, and prosperity. He also pointed to the emergence of new dimensions in the 21st century, including the arts, digital markets, and international business opportunities. He stressed the importance of equipping entrepreneurs with the necessary skills and knowledge to adapt to evolving markets.

Concluding his remarks, the Vice President called for more substantial efforts to support SMEs. He advocated for enhanced financial assistance, comprehensive technical training, and legal concessions to stimulate their growth and strengthen their role in the nation's economic future. [The President's Office – Republic of Maldives]

Maldives: High Court orders suspension of Heavy Load islands' sale

(lm) The Maldives High Court has ordered a halt on the implementation of a Civil Court ruling permitting the Bank of Maldives (BML) to sell three islands owned by Heavy Load Maldives due to a loan default. Heavy Load Maldives, a company owned by former Deputy Speaker of Parliament 'Reeko' Moosa Manik and his family, had appealed the Civil Court's decision.

In October, the Civil Court ruled that BML could sell the islands after Heavy Load Maldives failed to repay a loan of USD 11 million (MVR 170 million). Following the ruling, BML announced the sale of Laamu Atoll's Fares Island, Kuda Fares Island, and Bodu Huraa Island. The islands include the Rahaa Resort, which operates on Fares and Kuda Fares Islands, while Bodu Huraa was allocated for agricultural use.

In its order issued today, the High Court instructed that the sale be suspended until a decision is reached on the appeal. The head lease for the islands extends until 2064.

Rahaa Resort, situated on Fares and Kuda Fares Islands, features 100 beach villa beds and offers water sports, diving, and spa facilities, making it a key tourism asset. The outcome of the appeal could significantly impact both the resort operations and Heavy Load Maldives' financial obligations. [the edition]

Maldives: Authorities seize Sri Lankan vessel carrying USD 65 billion in drugs

(lm) Maldivian authorities have intercepted a Sri Lankan vessel carrying 468.6 kilograms of illicit drugs valued at MVR 1 billion (USD 65 million). The operation highlights President Dr. Mohamed Muizzu's commitment to making the Maldives a drug-free nation, which he reaffirmed as a top priority.

The Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF) Coast Guard seized the vessel near Haa Dhaalu Atoll Makunudhoo early Sunday following an intelligence tip-off. Five Sri Lankan nationals were on board. The vessel was taken to Kulhudhuffushi Harbour, where a search uncovered 344 kilograms of methamphetamine and 124.6 kilograms of cocaine.

Commissioner of Police Ali Shujau stated that the Drug Enforcement Unit is leading the investigation. President Muizzu praised law enforcement for their efforts, emphasizing the government's dedication to eradicating drug trafficking in the Maldives. [the edition 1] [the edition 2]

Nepal: Prime Minister Oli defends BRI strategy ahead of China visit

(dg/lm) Nepal is finalizing a revised framework for Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects as Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli prepares for his official visit to China from December 2–4. The updated "Framework for Cooperation on Jointly Building the BRI" focuses on infrastructure and connectivity projects funded through grants rather than loans to avoid increasing Nepal's debt burden. This revision follows extensive consultations with a four-member taskforce comprising representatives from the ruling Nepali Congress (NC) and Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist) (CPN-UML).

Revised BRI plan

The new framework replaces the 2017 agreement and emphasizes grants for sovereign-initiated projects, prioritizing infrastructure initiatives like the Tokha-Chhahare Tunnel, the Syabrubesi-Rasuwagadhi Highway upgrade, and the Jilong-Kathmandu Railway. Nepal also seeks agreements on hydropower projects, cross-border electricity transmission lines, and the operationalization of ports such as Lizi-Nechung (Mustang) and Zhangmu-Khasa (Tatopani). These projects align with Nepal's vision of becoming a land-linked country through the Trans-Himalayan Multidimensional Connectivity Network (THMCN), encompassing railways, ports, and digital

infrastructure. [The Kathmandu Post 1] [The Kathmandu Post 2]

Loan concerns and economic priorities

In his consultations with former prime ministers and foreign ministers, Oli assured attendees that Nepal would not sign any loan agreements during his China visit, addressing public concerns over potential "debt traps." He emphasized Nepal's focus on implementing past agreements, expanding transmission lines, boosting Nepali exports to China, and expediting pending assistance agreements. The taskforce reviewing the BRI plan has excluded contentious provisions such as border security and legal assistance agreements to avoid geopolitical complications.

Oli also raised the possibility of converting loans for the Pokhara International Airport into grants, citing its low revenue generation. Additionally, the government is advocating for the full implementation of the 2016 Nepal-China Trade and Transit Agreement, which grants Nepal access to seven Chinese sea and land ports. [The Kathmandu Post 3]

Diplomatic balancing act

Amid criticism from opposition leaders like former Prime Minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal, who accused him of "playing the China card," Oli defended his focus on China over India for his next diplomatic engagement. Speaking at a rally, he emphasized Nepal's sovereign right to maintain balanced relations with its neighbors. He reiterated the unity between UML and NC in prioritizing national interests and public welfare. [The Kathmandu Post 4]

Foreign Minister Arzu Rana Deuba, set to visit Beijing on November 28, will finalize the agenda for Oli's visit in discussions with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi. The visit is expected to include signing the revised BRI framework and agreements on energy, transportation, and trade projects.

In a related development, Nepal-China collaboration under China's Vibrant Village initiative has led to the establishment of the Mountain Tea Chinese Factory in Nuwakot. This initiative, part of the Tea Value Chain Enhancement Project, aims to boost tea production, improve quality, and provide training to over 600 tea-processing households. [The Kathmandu Post 5]

Nepal: Tensions escalate between ruling Communist Party, Kathmandu mayor

(lm) The conflict between Kathmandu Metropolitan City (KMC) Mayor Balendra Shah and the ruling Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist) (CPN-UML) has intensified after the KMC fined the CPN-UML NPR 100,000 (USD 740) for littering during a mass rally at Durbarmarg on November 24. The rally, part of the UML's "Awakening rally against anarchy," left significant debris, prompting the fine.

CPN-UML General Secretary Shankar Pokhrel called the fine politically motivated, alleging bias as similar penalties were not imposed on other parties. The KMC defended its actions, citing evidence from inspections. This marks the latest in a series of clashes between Mayor Shah and CPN-UML Chair KP Sharma Oli, including disputes over corruption allegations, land management policies, and governance failures.

Critics argue the KMC must apply penalties consistently to avoid perceptions of partisanship, while analysts note both sides appear engaged in political stunts rather than constructive governance. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Nepal: RSP faces turmoil as Lamichhane remains in custody amid fraud investigations

(lm) The Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) is grappling with significant challenges following the arrest of its chairperson, Rabi Lamichhane, on charges of cooperative fraud, organized crime, and money laundering. Lamichhane, a former home minister and deputy prime minister, was detained on October 18 from the RSP central office in Kathmandu. His arrest has triggered extensive investigations and exposed vulnerabilities within the two-year-old party.

The Kaski District Court recently extended Lamichhane's custody by 15 days, marking over 40 days of detention, as authorities investigate allegations of financial irregularities linked to the now-defunct Gorkha Media Network. Lamichhane is accused of diverting NPR 30 million (USD 222,000) and misusing funds from cooperatives such as the Kathmandu-based Swarnalaxmi Cooperative, Pokhara-based Suryadarshan Cooperative, and Butwal-based Supreme Cooperative. The Swarnalaxmi case alone involves an estimated NPR 1.11 billion (USD 8.2 million), impacting 645 depositors.

Lamichhane, along with former Nepal Police DIG Chhabi Lal Joshi and Kumar Ramtel, is under investigation in Kathmandu, Kaski, and Rupandehi

districts. Police have also issued arrest warrants for 24 others, including Gorkha Media chair GB Rai, who remains at large despite an Interpol red notice. [The Kathmandu Post 1]

Lamichhane's arrest has created confusion within the RSP, which is heavily reliant on his leadership. Critics within the party have expressed concerns over its direction and internal coherence. A leaked internal report in 2023 blamed Lamichhane for the party's declining public image, leading to internal divisions and the expulsion of the report's author, Mukul Dhakal.

The party's protests following Lamichhane's arrest, claiming political motivations behind the charges, failed to garner public support. In response, the RSP shifted its strategy, aligning its protests with campaigns for the December 1 by-elections, where it has fielded candidates in 27 constituencies. However, its inability to field a candidate in the Kirtipur mayoral election and poor performance in the Ilam-2 by-election highlight its struggles in grassroots organization and expansion.

The RSP's initial electoral success in 2022, where it emerged as the fourth-largest party, was largely attributed to public disenchantment with traditional political parties. Analysts argue that the party's momentum was not grounded in a robust political agenda but in widespread frustration with Nepal's political establishment. Lamichhane's arrest has exposed the party's lack of a clear leadership strategy and structural depth. [The Kathmandu Post 2] [The Kathmandu Post 3]

Nepal: Kirtipur mayoral by-election tests traditional parties amid independent surge

(lm) The upcoming December 1 mayoral by-election in Kirtipur Municipality has emerged as a litmus test for traditional political parties, with a notable rise in independent candidates challenging the status quo. The by-election follows the death of former Mayor Rajkumar Nakarmi of the Nepali Congress (NC), who had won the seat in the 2022 local elections.

A total of 20 candidates, including nine from political parties and 11 independents, are in the fray. Key candidates include Krishnaman Dangol from the ruling coalition Nepali Congress, Surendra Manandhar from the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) (Unified Marxist–Leninist) (CPN-UML), and Shiva Sharan Maharjan from the opposition CPN (Maoist Centre). Independent candidates such as Rajman Manav, who has gained

attention for his social activism, add complexity to the race. Manav has also received support from Dharan Mayor Harka Sampang, an influential independent figure.

The election dynamics are influenced by the division between the municipality's core Newar-dominated area and its peripheral regions, which house a diverse population, including migrants. While traditional parties like Nepali Congress and CPN-UML are focused on retaining their vote bases, the Maoist Centre has formed alliances with the CPN (Unified Socialist) and Janata Samajbadi-Nepal to bolster its chances.

The Nepali Congress faces added pressure to retain the seat it won previously, but internal divisions and former party members running as independents, such as Kabir Kumar Maharjan and Dinesh Kumar Adhikari, complicate its campaign. Meanwhile, CPN-UML's Manandhar is confident, though locals believe the contest could see tough competition between Nepali Congress and the Maoist Centre. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: District attorney drops human trafficking case against Koshi lawmaker

(lm) The Kathmandu District Attorney's Office has decided not to prosecute Lilaballabh Adhikari, a Koshi provincial assembly member and former provincial minister, over allegations of human trafficking. The decision cited insufficient evidence, including the absence of Adhikari's involvement in initial testimonies, no links through call records or messages with suspects, and a forensic examination showing no match with his handwriting on forged documents.

The investigation revealed that Adhikari voluntarily disclosed his presence at Narita Airport in Japan to Nepal Police, differentiating him from other suspects deported under exclusion orders. CCTV footage from Tribhuvan International Airport confirmed he traveled alone, and his alleged meeting with other suspects in transit was deemed incidental.

While Adhikari's exoneration has raised questions about the investigation's transparency, critics are calling for a more thorough review of the evidence presented. Adhikari had been arrested in Biratnagar on November 10, following allegations of involvement in the case. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: House of Representatives secretary Suresh Adhikari resigns citing health issues

(lm) Suresh Adhikari, secretary of Nepal's House of Representatives, has resigned from his position, citing health concerns. Adhikari, who assumed office in July after retiring as Secretary of the Ministry of Education, submitted his resignation to President Ramchandra Paudel over the weekend.

Adhikari's appointment on July 2 was made by President Paudel based on the recommendation of Speaker Devraj Ghimire, filling a vacancy left after Padma Prasad Pandey was appointed General Secretary of the Federal Parliament in February. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Police investigate Durga Prasai on cybercrime charges as court grants 5-day remand

(lm) The Kathmandu District Court has authorized police to detain controversial medical entrepreneur Durga Prasai for five days following his arrest on cybercrime charges. Prasai was apprehended on November 19 by the Central Investigation Bureau (CIB) of Nepal Police after he disseminated allegedly false information about Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli on social media.

Prasai is accused of publicizing fabricated documents via video call, claiming that Prime Minister Oli had invested NPR 32.5 billion (USD 240.5 million) in a Cambodian telecom company. The purported documents, which included a falsified signature and incorrectly spelled name, went viral on social media and were reported by some media outlets. Prasai also claimed to have spent over NPR 10 million (USD 74,000) to obtain these documents.

The investigation will focus solely on cybercrime under Section 47 of the Electronic Transaction Act 2008. This law penalizes the publication of prohibited material on electronic media with fines up to NPR 100,000 (USD 740), imprisonment of up to five years, or both. Repeat offenders face increased penalties.

Prasai, previously arrested under the same act in September, had been released on bail in October. He had faced accusations of character assassination by members of the Rastriya Swatantra Party. Prasai, once affiliated with the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified

Marxist–Leninist) and close to party chair Oli, was expelled from the party in 2023 after leading a campaign to reinstate Nepal's monarchy. He had also organized events in support of former King Gyanendra Shah in his home district of Jhapa. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Tribhuvan University Service Commission cancels recruitment exams over corruption concerns

(lm) The Tribhuvan University Service Commission has annulled all examinations and results related to administrative and technical posts advertised in 2017, citing procedural corruption. The cancelled posts included roles such as administrative officer, accounts officer, and assistant legal advisor. The decision follows a review revealing irregularities in processes like coding, decoding, script evaluation, and interviews.

The exams had been under scrutiny since 2018, when the Commission for the Investigation of Abuse of Authority (CIAA) charged former TU Service Commission chairman Chaitanya Sharma and others with altering results. A Special Court found them guilty, and subsequent Patan High Court rulings mandated adherence to legal protocols for publishing results. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Umesh Shrestha appointed as Nepali Congress treasurer

(lm) Nepali Congress President Sher Bahadur Deuba has appointed Umesh Shrestha as the party's treasurer, exercising his authority under clause 21(4) of the party's constitution. Shrestha, a businessman and former state minister for Health, assumes the role three years after the party's 14th general convention.

Shrestha, who ran unsuccessfully in the 2022 House of Representatives election from Chitwan-2, faced criticism within the party for his candidacy, with some members alleging favoritism over long-serving leaders. His extensive career spans over four decades in the education sector, where he held leadership roles in the Private and Boarding Schools' Organisation Nepal (PABSON), which represents private school operators, and the Higher Institutions and Secondary Schools' Association Nepal (HISSAN), which advocates for higher education institutions and secondary schools.

The Nepali Congress is now gearing up for its 15th general convention, slated for next year in accordance with the party statute. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Prime Minister Oli emphasizes commitment to social security on Social Security Day

(rs) On the 7th Social Security Day, Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli reaffirmed Nepal's dedication to comprehensive social security, underscoring its recognition as a constitutional fundamental right. He highlighted the government's systematic action plans and budget allocations to strengthen social welfare programs.

Oli reflected on the inception of Nepal's social security initiatives in 1994 under the CPN-UML government, which introduced allowances for senior citizens, single women, and vulnerable groups. He emphasized the importance of contribution-based schemes aimed at fostering social justice, equality, and welfare across the nation. [The Himalayan Times]

Nepal: 156 vie for roles in transitional justice commissions amid calls for public hearings

(lm) A total of 156 candidates, including retired judges, legal experts, rights activists, and conflict victims, have applied for positions in Nepal's two transitional justice commissions as the extended deadline closed on Tuesday. The commissions—Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and Commission of Investigation on Enforced Disappeared Persons (CIEDP)—are tasked with addressing atrocities from the 1996-2006 Maoist insurgency.

The recommendation committee, led by Khamma Khati, is scrutinizing the applications, with a list of candidates expected to be published soon. Candidates applied individually or were nominated by organizations, some with and others without their consent. Among the applicants, 31 are vying for the two chairperson positions.

For the first time, individuals victimized by either the state or the Maoist rebels are seeking leadership roles in the commissions. Applicants include former Supreme Court justices, retired high court judges,

human rights commission members, professors, bureaucrats, and prominent activists.

The commissions, defunct since July 2022, have faced criticism for their limited progress, having only collected complaints and conducted preliminary investigations. The TRC has received 63,718 complaints, while the CIEDP has approximately 2,400 pending cases. Recent amendments to the transitional justice law allow for an additional three months to accept applications, potentially increasing the workload.

Conflict victims and human rights activists are demanding mandatory public hearings for shortlisted candidates, arguing that current provisions for presentations and feedback are inadequate. The amended Act sets a four-year term for the commissions to complete their work, with possible extensions if necessary. These will be the third iterations of the commissions since their establishment in 2015. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Political parties, civil organizations urge stronger stance against Israel's actions in Palestine, Lebanon

(lm) Political parties and civil organizations in Nepal have submitted a memorandum to Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli, demanding the government take a firm position against Israel's actions in Palestine and Lebanon. The delegation, led by a senior opposition Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre) leader, called for Nepal to denounce Israel's attacks on international platforms, including the United Nations, and revise its non-aligned foreign policy to explicitly support victims of injustice.

The memorandum also highlighted the situation of Nepali citizens caught in the conflict. It urged the government to ensure the safe repatriation of Nepalis in Israel, particularly Bipin Joshi, a student reportedly held captive by Hamas after an attack on Kibbutz Alumim killed ten Nepali students last year. The status of Joshi remains uncertain.

Prime Minister Oli reaffirmed Nepal's commitment to justice and human rights, emphasizing that non-alignment does not imply passivity in the face of injustice. He assured that Nepal would continue to uphold global peace while refraining from military alliances. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Medical students' stipend dispute remains unresolved despite prime minister's intervention

(lm) The ongoing dispute over postgraduate medical students' stipends persists, with no resolution in sight even after Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli's involvement. The conflict arises between the Medical Education Commission and private medical colleges regarding the sustenance allowance for resident doctors pursuing postgraduate studies.

Private medical colleges currently offer a monthly allowance ranging from NPR 19,000 to NPR 24,000 (USD 140 to USD 178). However, the commission recently raised the stipend to match the NPR 48,737 (USD 361) received by medical officers. This increase, following student protests, has been met with resistance from private colleges, which have refused to participate in the commission's seat allocation process. State-funded medical institutions have agreed to the stipend increase, but private colleges argue the decision was made without consulting them. Representatives from private colleges claim they are financially incapable of implementing the new allowance and allege unilateral actions by the commission.

The private colleges have also expressed concerns about student demands to make postgraduate courses free. Resident doctors argue that since their work involves significant patient care, charging tuition fees alongside demanding services is unjustifiable. They have formed a struggle committee and are demanding both a fee waiver and the increased allowance.

The commission, responsible for regulating medical education, relies on college appraisal forms to allocate seats. Of the 1,100 annual quotas for MD, MS, and MDS programs, 700 are designated for private colleges, while government institutions manage the remaining seats. The refusal to submit these forms has delayed the admission process, jeopardizing the academic calendar.

The academic calendar stipulates that postgraduate classes should begin by late November, but delays in seat allocation and entrance examinations make adherence unlikely. The process, even if resolved promptly, will require over a month to complete. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Maternal health at risk amid funding crisis and unsafe practices

(rs) Nepal faces significant maternal health challenges as the Safe Motherhood Programme struggles with funding shortages and unsafe abortion practices jeopardize women's lives in rural areas.

The Safe Motherhood Programme, crucial in reducing maternal mortality, needs an additional USD 3 million annually to sustain operations. The program, costing USD 18.8 million yearly, provides free delivery services, transportation allowances, and cash incentives for antenatal checkups. Institutional delivery rates have increased from 18 percent in 2009 to 80 percent today.

Despite progress, maternal mortality remains high, with 151 deaths per 100,000 births in 2021, down from 239 in 2016. Nepal aims to reduce this to 75 by 2030. However, incomplete surveillance, covering only 51 of 77 districts, limits accurate reporting, with 190 maternal deaths recorded in 2023-24, likely underestimating the true figure.

To address the crisis, the Ministry of Health plans to secure USD 1.5 million through internal loans and seek further funding from the Ministry of Finance. Experts stress the need for expanded death surveillance and better healthcare infrastructure to support the 600,000 annual births. [The Kathmandu Post 1]

Meanwhile, unregulated abortion practices in rural areas, particularly in Madhesh, present severe risks. Despite abortion legalization in 2002, societal stigma, limited healthcare access, and patriarchal pressures push women toward unsafe options.

Unauthorized abortion pills, often sold by unregulated pharmacies, cause life-threatening complications like uterine ruptures and severe bleeding. Hospitals report dozens of critical cases monthly, with the preference for male children further exacerbating the issue.

Weak oversight of pharmacies enables the widespread sale of unsafe pills. Experts call for stricter regulations, enhanced collaboration between agencies, and awareness campaigns to educate women on safe practices and reproductive rights. [The Kathmandu Post 2]

Nepal: Municipal-level girls' conference held to combat child marriage

(rs) Chhedagad Municipality held a girls' conference to combat child marriage, supported by Save the Children and Panchtara Youth Protection Forum. Participants signed 13 commitments, including promoting education, enforcing laws against child marriage, and allocating local budgets for girls' empowerment.

Campaigners urged authorities to support equal opportunities for boys and girls, emphasizing the dangers of early marriage. Traditional Deuda songs conveyed messages against child marriage, and girls resisting early marriages were honored. Mayor Ratna Bahadur Khadka pledged to integrate the campaign with education, health, and employment initiatives. [The Rising Nepal]

Nepal: Regional power grid integration and energy efficiency initiatives transform energy sector

(dg) Kulman Ghising, Managing Director of the Nepal Electricity Authority, has emphasized the transformative potential of regional power grid integration. Nepal's abundant hydropower resources offer a stabilizing solution for balancing the intermittent nature of renewable energy, particularly solar, as the region transitions away from fossil fuels. Hydropower is positioned as a critical base-load provider, especially during peak evening hours when solar output declines.

Collaborative efforts with India have been instrumental in this integration. Projects such as the Dhalkebar-Muzaffarpur transmission line enable Nepal to export surplus energy and import power during deficits. Indian developers have also played a significant role in hydropower investments, exemplified by projects like Arun III. These developments, combined with cross-border power-sharing frameworks and real-time data exchange, enhance energy security and establish Nepal as a regional energy exporter.

The synergy between Nepal's hydropower and India's solar energy initiatives supports the region's net-zero ambitions and energy security goals. Additionally, Nepal plans to increase its solar energy output significantly by 2030, further complementing its hydropower resources. [The Himalayan Times]

Complementing these regional efforts, Nepal has launched the Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Programme–Green Recovery and Empowerment with Energy in Nepal (REEEP-GREEN) to enhance energy efficiency in industries and enterprises. Managed by

Rastriya Banijya Bank Limited, the scheme offers grants to cover investments in energy-efficient technologies identified through certified audits.

The initiative aims to reduce energy costs, improve productivity, and minimize carbon emissions while integrating circular economy principles and optimizing production processes. It also emphasizes environmental compliance and decent work standards to enhance competitiveness.

REEEP-GREEN is a collaborative effort involving Nepal's Ministry of Energy, Water Resources, and Irrigation, Germany's Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, and the European Union, with technical support from GIZ. By demonstrating the economic viability of sustainable practices, the program encourages industries to adopt energy-efficient measures, supporting Nepal's broader development goals. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Santosh Narayan Shrestha appointed as Securities Board chairman

(lm) The Nepal government has appointed Santosh Narayan Shrestha as the chairman of the Nepal Securities Board (Sebon) after an 11-month leadership vacancy. The Cabinet meeting on November 25 made the decision following prolonged delays caused by political disputes and procedural challenges.

Shrestha was selected from a shortlist recommended by a committee led by National Planning Commission Vice-Chairman Shivaraj Adhikari. Earlier efforts to finalize the selection faced legal and procedural hurdles, including Supreme Court intervention. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: No firms pay electricity dues as NEA's 15-day deadline nears expiration

(lm) The Nepal Electricity Authority (NEA) is approaching the end of its 15-day deadline for industries to pay outstanding electricity bills, but none of the defaulting firms have cleared their dues. The NEA had restored power to these industries on November 12 after their connections were cut on October 24, following a government directive to resume supply while collecting dues within 15 days.

The defaulter list includes at least two dozen industries, with unpaid bills totaling NPR 8.25 billion

(USD 60.9 million), including fines. Despite this, no payments have been made. The NEA has warned of disconnection if payments are not received on time, but the Cabinet may consider extending the deadline.

To address disputes over electricity tariffs for dedicated and trunk line users, the government formed a technical committee to verify energy consumption data using Time of Day (ToD) meters. The committee, led by Professor Arbinda Mishra, has begun its work.

The issue stems from tariffs applied during the 2015-2020 period when industries received uninterrupted power despite widespread shortages. Industrialists argue that NEA's claims are based on unclear data. NEA Managing Director Kul Man Ghising has faced criticism from both the Prime Minister and Energy Minister for his stringent measures, with some accusing him of discouraging industrial growth.

The NEA, however, maintains its stance, citing detailed ToD meter records presented to the Parliamentary Public Accounts Committee in August to justify its claims. The authority insists that it will take further action if payments are not made, with potential legal recourse on the horizon. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Thousands of Karnali youths migrate to India for livelihoods amid systemic failures

(lm) Every year after the festive season, villages in Karnali Province experience a mass exodus of young men migrating to India for work. Chronic poverty and the lack of local employment opportunities leave these youths with no choice but to seek livelihoods as laborers, security guards, or porters in Indian cities. This seasonal migration has turned many villages into ghost towns, inhabited mainly by women, children, and the elderly.

According to the 2021 National Census, out of Karnali's population of 1.69 million, over 442,000 individuals—around 26 percent—work in India. Despite government programs like the Chief Minister's Employment Programme, systemic inefficiencies and poor implementation have failed to create sustainable jobs. Infrastructure projects in the region are also stalled due to labor shortages, compounding the challenges.

This cycle of migration exacerbates social and economic struggles. Families face additional hardships due to frequent crop destruction by wild animals and a

lack of basic infrastructure, such as electricity and drinking water. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Five-year analysis highlights economic recovery, challenges, and future opportunities

(dg) Over the past five years, Nepal's economy has shown mixed performance. Following a negative 2.4 percent contraction in 2019/20 due to COVID-19, GDP growth rebounded to 5.3 percent in 2021/22 but slowed to 2.3 percent in 2022/23, with a 3.5 percent projection for 2023/24. Nominal GDP grew from USD 29.22 billion in 2019/20 to an estimated USD 42.9 billion in 2023/24, though the pace of growth has recently decelerated.

Savings have improved, with Gross National Savings rising to 36.2 percent of GDP, driven by remittances. However, Gross Fixed Capital Formation fell from 30.5 percent to 24.5 percent, reflecting reduced investments. [NEPSE Trading]

Nepal: Export trade improves since mid-October

(rs) Nepal's export trade grew by 4.16 percent in the first four months of fiscal year 2024/25, supported by higher exports of soybean oil, sunflower oil, tea, and coffee. However, the export-to-import ratio remains stark at 1:9.75, underscoring heavy reliance on imports.

Imports saw marginal growth of 0.17 percent, totaling USD 3.83 billion, with petroleum products like diesel (USD 218 million), petrol, and liquefied petroleum gas leading the list. Other major imports included crude oils, electric vehicles, and cereals. The trade deficit declined slightly by 0.26 percent, reaching USD 3.44 billion, signaling modest progress but highlighting the need for structural reforms to balance trade. [The Rising Nepal]

Nepal: Only 8 percent of Bagmati Province budget spent in first four months of FY

(rs) Bagmati Province has utilized only USD 38.3 million, equivalent to 7.93 percent of its USD 466.4 million budget for fiscal year 2024/25 in the first four

months, a decline from 9.2 percent during the same period last year.

The province traditionally spends over half of its budget in the final quarter of the fiscal year, reflecting a pattern of delayed expenditure. This year's budget allocates USD 201.9 million for recurrent expenses, USD 285.2 million for capital projects, and USD 11.6 million for financing. [The Rising Nepal]

Nepal: Immigration Office at border shut down

(rs) Nepal's Immigration Office at Korala, Mustang's border with China, has been temporarily closed due to extreme weather, lack of infrastructure, and staff deployment delays. Opened in late October by Home Minister Ramesh Lekhak, the office operated for only a week before facing issues like inadequate facilities for staff, forcing them to return to Kathmandu.

The Department of Immigration is preparing to address these challenges by deploying additional personnel and enabling local recruitment. The Korala border, located at 4,650 meters, currently permits Mustang residents to cross with passes. While China has modern infrastructure at its side, Nepal's facilities remain limited to a basic dirt road.

Locals reliant on the border for importing essentials at lower costs face difficulties due to the office's closure. Efforts are underway to resume operations soon, with eight staff positions allocated for the immigration office. [The Rising Nepal]

Nepal: President Paudel approves army deployment for December 1 by-elections

(rs) President Ramchandra Paudel has approved the deployment of the Nepali Army to ensure security during the by-elections which will fill 41 vacant positions, scheduled for December 1. Acting on a recommendation from the Council of Ministers on November 21, the decision aims to facilitate safe, impartial, and peaceful voting. [The Kathmandu Post]

Pakistan: Violent clashes escalate as Imran Khan supporters force their way into Islamabad

(ja/mra/sn/lm) The political unrest in Pakistan deepened on November 26 as thousands of supporters of jailed former Prime Minister Imran Khan forced their way into Islamabad, defying a police lockdown. The protests, organized by Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party, demand his release ahead of a court hearing on terrorism charges. The demonstrations have spiraled into violent clashes, resulting in significant casualties and disruptions.

Four members of Pakistan's security forces were killed during the protests, reportedly rammed by a vehicle amid the chaos. Unconfirmed reports indicate that a civilian and a policeman were also killed in separate incidents. The government blames protesters for the deaths, claiming they deliberately targeted security personnel, but witnesses allege that a security forces vehicle caused the fatalities while speeding away from advancing demonstrators. [Al Jazeera]

The protests followed two days of escalating tensions as demonstrators dismantled roadblocks and pushed past shipping containers used to seal off access to Islamabad. Tear gas and rubber bullets deployed by security forces failed to deter the marchers, who have vowed to continue their demonstrations with an indefinite sit-in at D-Chowk near government institutions until Khan is released.

The authorities have imposed a two-month ban on public gatherings in Islamabad, arrested over 4,000 PTI supporters, and suspended mobile and internet services. Educational institutions remain closed, and travel between Islamabad and other cities has been heavily restricted. Despite these measures, PTI claims the number of protesters exceeds official estimates, with some reports suggesting over 70,000 participants.

PTI leaders, including Khan's wife, Bushra Bibi, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Chief Minister Ali Amin Gandapur, have led the demonstrations. The protests coincide with the state visit of Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, further heightening security in the capital. [Associated Press]

The backdrop to the protests lies in the political instability in Pakistan following Khan's ousting in 2022. Khan, who has been jailed on multiple charges of corruption and terrorism, remains popular, particularly in his home province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. His supporters argue that the charges against him are politically motivated and part of a broader effort by the military and ruling political parties to prevent him from regaining power. Khan's party has called for free and fair elections, the release of political prisoners, and the

restoration of what they call “the stolen mandate” following the 2022 elections.

Adding to Khan’s legal troubles, he was remanded to Rawalpindi police custody for five days on charges of terrorism, vandalism, and property destruction during a September 28 rally. The PTI dismissed the charges as politically motivated, noting Khan was already in jail at the time of the alleged incident. This came just hours after Khan was granted bail in a separate state gifts case, where he and his wife, Bushra Bibi, were accused of illegally acquiring and selling state gifts worth PKR 469 million (USD 1.6 million). Although Bushra Bibi was released last month, Khan remains incarcerated, with at least 62 cases registered against him in Islamabad and 54 more in Punjab province. [The Indian Express] [ABC NEWS]

Meanwhile, Bushra Bibi, in a public address, assured state institutions that Khan would not seek revenge if released, emphasizing his spiritual growth during incarceration. She reiterated claims of electoral rigging and called for unity among PTI supporters. However, her comments about Saudi Arabia’s alleged opposition to Khan’s administration sparked criticism from the government. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif condemned her remarks, accusing PTI of jeopardizing Pakistan’s foreign relations. [Arab News 2] [Arab News 3]

The protests, while a challenge to Pakistan’s political stability, are also having a significant economic impact. The Ministry of Finance estimates daily losses of PKR 190 billion (USD 684 million) due to disruptions in business activities, exports, and foreign investment. Economists warn that the ongoing unrest could further destabilize Pakistan’s fragile economic recovery. [Arab News 4] [Arab News 5]

Meanwhile, Pakistan’s National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA) has issued an alert warning of potential militant threats. Intelligence reports suggest that Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) militants might exploit the protests to launch attacks, adding to the already volatile situation. [Arab News 6]

Pakistan: COAS Munir emphasizes over politics and personal interests

(tf) Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Asim Munir emphasized the importance of prioritizing Pakistan over politics and personal interests during his visit to Karachi for a defense exhibition and meetings with business leaders. He stressed that the country must

come first, urging unity and a focus on national prosperity.

General Munir highlighted Pakistan's improving economic situation, expressing confidence in a brighter future. He pointed out that the pessimism surrounding the economy a year ago had dissipated and dismissed earlier fears of economic default as baseless. He also urged overseas Pakistanis to invest in the country, contributing to economic stability and national prosperity.

On the issue of terrorism, the COAS linked it to illegal businesses and external support, reaffirming the army's commitment to countering such threats. He also underscored the importance of protecting Pakistan's digital borders, warning against "digital terrorism" aimed at spreading misinformation and undermining national unity.

General Munir reiterated that unrestricted freedom of speech on social media could harm societal values and called for a balanced approach to ensure digital security and the protection of national interests. [DAWN]

Pakistan: Prime Minister forms committee to ease tensions with key coalition ally

(lm) Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has established a high-level committee to address growing tensions between the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and its key coalition partner, the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP). The move follows public criticism by PPP Chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari over federal government decisions, including blocking virtual private networks (VPNs) and approving canal projects on the Indus River without PPP consultation.

The committee, which includes Deputy Prime Minister Ishaq Dar, Defense Minister Khawaja Asif, and Law Minister Azam Nazeer Tarar, aims to foster political cooperation and resolve disputes. It will hold discussions with PPP representatives to chart a collaborative path forward.

The PPP, a major coalition ally with significant influence in Sindh province, has provided critical parliamentary support for key legislative measures, including the national budget and constitutional amendments. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Wheel-jam strike paralyzes Balochistan highways over kidnapped schoolboy

(ja/lm) Highways across Balochistan were paralyzed on November 25 as protests over the abduction of 11-year-old Muhammad Musawir Khan entered their 11th day in Quetta. The boy, from a prominent tribal family, was kidnapped by armed men on November 15 while en route to school. His family, who have received no ransom call, vowed not to pay for his release and urged Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Army Chief General Asim Munir to intervene.

The demonstrations, supported by political and civil society groups, led to the closure of major highways in Quetta, Mastung, Khuzdar, and other districts. Chief Minister Mir Sarfraz Bugti assured the public that law enforcement agencies were making serious efforts to recover the child, while Quetta Commissioner Hamza Shafqaat reported progress but withheld details.

The incident highlights the fragile security in Balochistan, a region plagued by separatist insurgencies and militant groups like the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). It coincides with the federal government's approval of a military operation targeting separatists and extremists threatening the region's security and Chinese investments under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). [Arab News]

Pakistan: Punjab chief minister suspends hospital officials over AIDS outbreak during dialysis

(lm) Punjab Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz has suspended six officials from Nishtar Hospital Multan, including the medical superintendent and nephrology department head, following an AIDS outbreak linked to severe medical negligence. The incident involved the reuse of disposable dialysis kits and failure to conduct mandatory HIV and hepatitis tests every three months, resulting in 25 patients contracting AIDS.

During her visit to the hospital, Nawaz condemned the lapse as "criminal negligence" and criticized the poor adherence to standard medical protocols despite government funding for the health sector. She emphasized the need for stricter compliance and accountability to restore public trust in government healthcare.

Public health facilities in Pakistan suffer from a trust deficit due to poor management and oversight, prompting many to seek costly private care. Nawaz also inspected other hospital wards and pledged reforms to prevent such incidents in the future. According to UNAIDS, approximately 290,000 people were living with HIV in Pakistan as of 2023, with social stigma contributing to significant underreporting. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Polio cases surge as global partners collaborate with Prime Minister Sharif to combat resurgence

(lm) Pakistan has reported 55 cases of wild poliovirus type 1 (WPV1) in 2024, a sharp rise from six in 2023 and just one in 2021, signaling a major setback in the country's decades-long polio eradication campaign. The latest cases were identified in Balochistan's Zhob and Jaffarabad districts and Dera Ismail Khan in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). Polio, an incurable yet preventable disease primarily affecting young children, has concentrated outbreaks in Balochistan (26 cases), KP (14), Sindh (13), and one case each in Punjab and Islamabad.

Pakistan remains one of only two polio-endemic countries globally, alongside Afghanistan, despite launching a nationwide eradication program in 1994. Persistent challenges include misinformation about vaccines, resistance from religious hard-liners, and militant attacks on polio workers. Recent immunization campaigns faced refusals, leaving approximately 500,000 children unvaccinated. [Arab News 1]

To address the alarming surge, a high-level delegation from the Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI)—including officials from Saudi Arabia's King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center (KSrelief), WHO, UNICEF, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation—visited Pakistan from November 20-22. The delegation collaborated with Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif to strengthen vaccination campaigns and tackle logistical and security hurdles.

Prime Minister Sharif reaffirmed his government's commitment to polio eradication, describing it as a "top priority." He announced the implementation of a National Emergency Action Plan, focusing on provincial coordination and direct oversight to reverse the outbreak. He pledged that the government would not rest until Pakistan is polio-free.

During their visit, the GPEI delegation met with female frontline health workers in Karachi to discuss operational challenges and propose solutions. Sharif expressed gratitude for international support, particularly from Saudi Arabia, for aiding Pakistan's polio eradication efforts. [Arab News 2]

Pakistan: Stock market crosses 99,000 barrier amid optimism over rates and reserves

(lm) The Pakistan Stock Exchange (PSX) surged past 99,000 points during intra-day trading on November 22, 2024, before closing at 97,798.23, gaining 469.84 points (0.48 percent). The rally was driven by falling lending rates, PKR stability, and rising foreign exchange reserves.

Pakistan's external current account recorded a surplus of USD 349 million in October 2024, marking three consecutive months of surplus, strengthening forex reserves. The State Bank of Pakistan's recent rate cut to 15 percent and a USD 7 billion IMF bailout in September have further boosted investor confidence. [Arab News]

Pakistan: USD 625 million approved for infrastructure projects in Balochistan, Sindh, and KP

(lm) Pakistan's Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (ECNEC) has approved ten infrastructure projects worth PKR 172.7 billion (USD 625 million), focusing on improving connectivity in Balochistan, Sindh, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). Deputy Prime Minister Ishaq Dar chaired the meeting in Islamabad on November 25, where six of the projects were allocated to the remote Balochistan region.

Among the approved initiatives is a World Bank-funded project costing PKR 29.2 billion (USD 106 million) to develop solid waste infrastructure in Karachi, Sindh's capital and economic hub.

Balochistan, which makes up 44 percent of Pakistan's landmass, suffers from poor economic and social indicators despite being rich in mineral resources, including Reko Diq, one of the world's largest undeveloped copper and gold deposits. With inadequate road density and limited access to basic

services like health, education, and internet, the province's poor rural communities face significant challenges.

In KP, increasingly severe weather patterns and insufficient infrastructure have amplified the impact of natural disasters, including devastating floods since 2010 that have damaged road networks and hindered connectivity.

Sindh, Pakistan's second-largest province, generates one-third of the national GDP, with Karachi contributing three-quarters of the country's trade activity. However, rural areas in Sindh remain poorly connected, with nearly half of the province's 2,830 kilometers of highways in substandard condition due to heavy truck traffic and seasonal flooding. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Ceasefire agreed after deadly sectarian violence in Kurram leaves over 80 dead

(lm) A seven-day ceasefire has been brokered between Sunni and Shia groups in Kurram district, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, following three days of intense sectarian violence that left 82 people dead and 156 injured. The clashes erupted on November 21 when convoys of Shia Muslims traveling under police escort were ambushed, resulting in over 40 fatalities, including women and children. The attack triggered retaliatory violence, further deepening long-standing tensions in the region.

The violence displaced hundreds of residents, forcing many to flee to the mountains in freezing conditions. Kurram, a district with a history of sectarian and land disputes, has witnessed escalating violence in recent months, with 79 deaths recorded between July and October.

Negotiations began on November 23, with provincial officials meeting Sunni and Shia leaders in Parachinar, Kurram's main city. The ceasefire was announced on November 24, with both sides agreeing to halt violence, exchange prisoners, and return bodies. However, the fragile truce underscores the urgent need for sustainable peace in the region. Authorities have pledged to address root causes, including land disputes and security issues. Mediation efforts faced challenges, including reports of a negotiators' helicopter coming under fire upon arrival in the district.

Pakistan People's Party (PPP) Chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari criticized the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) government for its handling of the crisis, accusing it of "criminal negligence." Bilawal stated that the provincial administration, led by the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), failed to protect Kurram's residents during the turmoil. “The KP government’s inaction during this turmoil is akin to becoming an ally of the terrorists,” he said. He called on KP Governor Faisal Karim Kundi to provide a detailed report and vowed that the PPP would work to ensure peace in the province. [tribune.com.pk]

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan has highlighted the alarming death toll and urged authorities to take decisive action to prevent further violence. While the ceasefire is a step toward de-escalation, the situation remains volatile, with ongoing demands for justice and accountability from victims' families and community leaders. [Al Jazeera] [BBC]

Pakistan: Government announces intensified strategy to tackle militancy amid escalating violence

(tf/mra/lm) Amid a surge in militant attacks, Pakistan's government has launched a comprehensive strategy to address rising instability in the northwestern and southwestern regions. On November 19, the National Action Plan (NAP) apex committee approved a full-fledged military operation in Balochistan targeting separatist movements, including the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), Balochistan Liberation Front (BLF), and Baloch Raaji Aajoi Sangar (BRAS). [DAWN]

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, presiding over the meeting with civil and military leaders, emphasized revitalizing the National Counter-Terrorism Authority (NACTA) under the so-called Azm-i-Istehkam framework. The military operations are intended to counter a resurgence of separatist insurgencies and militant activities in the province.

The northwest has also seen a sharp rise in militant violence. On November 20, a suicide attack on a military checkpost in Bannu district killed 12 security personnel, including 10 soldiers. The following day, a senior Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) leader, Mashaal Azad, was assassinated in Lakki Marwat, highlighting the deteriorating security situation in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). [The Express Tribune] [Arab News 1]

In response, Army Chief General Asim Munir pledged decisive action during a security meeting in Peshawar. He vowed to dismantle militant networks and enhance coordinated operations with law enforcement agencies. The military reported killing several militants in operations conducted in Balochistan and KP from November 20–22. These efforts align with a broader government strategy to address militancy in border regions and governance gaps in remote areas. [Arab News 2]

However, the escalation continued with two Improvised Explosive Device (IED) blasts on November 23 in Bajaur district, KP, which killed a police officer and a civilian. No group has claimed responsibility for the attacks, though authorities suspect the Pakistani Taliban. The region has witnessed the deaths of 75 police personnel in militant incidents this year, underscoring the urgent need for enhanced counterterrorism measures. [Arab News 3]

On November 25, then, militants ambushed a military convoy near the Afghan border in Khyber district, killing eight soldiers and injuring three others. Separately, heavily armed assailants stormed a security outpost in Bannu district, taking seven police officers hostage. Operations to track and rescue the abducted personnel are ongoing. [Voice of America]

Pakistan: Naval chief highlights economic reliance on maritime security

(lm) Pakistan's Chief of Naval Staff Admiral Naveed Ashraf has underscored the critical importance of maritime security for the country's economic future, emphasizing the need for vigilance and innovation to address the challenges of the Indian Ocean Region. Speaking ahead of the Seventh Maritime Security Workshop, currently held from November 26 to December 5 at the Pakistan Navy War College in Lahore, Ashraf stressed that Pakistan's socio-economic prosperity is closely tied to its ability to harness the blue economy.

Ashraf noted that the Indian Ocean Region faces geopolitical competition, nuclearization, transnational threats, and the rapid pace of technological advancements, all of which demand greater vigilance and cooperation. He described the maritime domain as "mankind's last reservoir for sustenance" and highlighted its role in ensuring trade and economic growth.

The admiral pointed to Pakistan's recent strategic initiative offering landlocked Central Asian nations access to its ports as an example of leveraging its maritime assets to become a regional economic hub. He reiterated the country's ambition to exploit its rich maritime resources to drive socio-economic prosperity while maintaining a secure maritime environment for national and global benefit.

Ashraf called for collective efforts to establish a secure and stable maritime domain, emphasizing that the security of Pakistan's maritime borders is not only a national priority but also a necessity for regional and international trade. [Arab News]

Seychelles: Three years since Valabhji couple's arrest in money laundering and arms cases

(lm) This week marks three years since the arrest of businessman Mukesh Valabhji and his wife, lawyer Laura Valabhji, in connection with a USD 50 million money laundering case and the discovery of an illegal arms cache. Arrested on November 18, 2021, the couple remains in custody.

The money laundering charges stem from USD 50 million granted to Seychelles by the UAE in 2002, allegedly diverted during Mukesh Valabhji's tenure as managing director of the Seychelles Marketing Board. The arms case, involving high-level officials and former military officers, includes charges under the Prevention of Terrorism Act.

Several co-accused, including former First Lady Sarah Zarqhani Rene, were initially charged but later released on bail or had charges dropped. However, Zarqhani Rene and Mukesh Valabhji face amended money laundering charges, while Laura Valabhji remains in custody on charges related to the arms cache.

Trials for the arms and corruption cases are ongoing, with the Anti-Corruption Commission of Seychelles (ACCS) prioritizing the arms case before resuming the corruption trial. [Seychelles News Agency]

Sri Lanka: Jaffna MP Archuuna Ramanathan under scrutiny after controversial actions

(lm) Archuuna Ramanathan, an Independent MP for Jaffna District—historically a Tamil-majority region and cultural center—has recently become the focus of controversy following a series of incidents in Parliament. Speaker Ashoka Ranwala announced an investigation into Ramanathan's conduct during a parliamentary session last week. The investigation will determine whether Ramanathan engaged in indisciplined or unethical behavior after reports surfaced that he occupied the Opposition Leader's seat before official proceedings began and refused to vacate it despite requests from staff.

While Ranwala clarified that no constitutional violations or statements linked to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)—the separatist militant group that fought for an independent Tamil state—were made in the House, he stressed that the issue would be addressed with Ramanathan and other MPs during the next session. [Daily Mirror 1]

Ramanathan has also expressed concerns about his safety following the incident, requesting personal security from Parliament authorities. He made this request during the first day of the Parliament orientation program. However, Deputy Secretary General of Parliament Chaminda Kularatne clarified that, according to the Parliament (Powers and Privileges) Act, security provisions are not fully covered, and Ramanathan must submit a written request to the Public Security Ministry, which will assess the need for police protection. [Daily Mirror 2]

In a separate development, Ramanathan stirred further controversy by paying tribute to slain LTTE leader Velupillai Prabhakaran, referring to him as his "god" in a live video. Ramanathan shared personal reflections, explaining that his father, a former Sri Lankan police officer, joined the LTTE police after the 1983 riots—also known as "Black July," during which Sinhalese mobs attacked the Tamil ethnic minority—and became involved in the liberation movement. He emphasized that the Tamil community remembers the lives lost during the war and reiterated Prabhakaran's stance that his actions were directed not against the Sinhala people, but against the Sinhala government. This statement has raised concerns, further fueling scrutiny surrounding Ramanathan's actions. [Daily Mirror 3]

Sri Lanka: People in North free to remember war dead, but must follow laws

(lm) Minister of Public Security Ananda Wijepala stated that while people in the Northern region of Sri Lanka are permitted to observe Maaveerar Naal (Heroes Day) to honor their deceased relatives, they must do so in accordance with the law. He emphasized that any displays of logos, uniforms, or images related to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a separatist militant group that fought for an independent Tamil state and was designated a terrorist organization by Sri Lanka, are strictly prohibited.

Maaveerar Naal is an annual event observed primarily in the Tamil-majority Northern and Eastern provinces to honor the LTTE fighters (known as “heroes”) who died during the conflict. The Minister also noted that some groups had attempted to reinterpret past commemorations in ways that might suggest support for the LTTE. He called on the public to conduct memorials within the boundaries of the law, balancing their right to remembrance with respect for the country’s legal framework. Memorial events began on November 21, marking the first day of the Maaveerar remembrance week, which culminates on November 27. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: President Dissanayake urges government to build a nation that fulfills people’s aspirations

(sl) President Anura Kumara Dissanayake stated that the government must meet the expectations of the people; otherwise, citizens may lose faith in a prosperous future. He urged government officials to strive to build a state that aligns with society's aspirations.

Speaking to the staff of the Ministry of Finance after assuming office, the President thanked them for their contributions to overcoming the economic crisis. He emphasized the importance of collective efforts for achieving future success.

The President highlighted that, in the future, the evaluation of officials will be based on their contributions rather than prejudice, and he promised to protect them from unfair treatment. He also acknowledged the low level of trust in revenue agencies and urged officials to restore a positive image of these institutions.

The President further stressed that the new government does not condone threatening or disregarding the opinions of officials. He called for self-

discipline, responsibility, and unity in efforts to create positive change. [President of Sri Lanka]

Sri Lanka: Local government polls to be held early next year, confirms Vijitha

(lm) Minister of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Employment, and Tourism, Vijitha Herath, confirmed that the Local Government elections will be held at the beginning of next year. Speaking in Kandy on November 23, 2024, Herath explained that the Supreme Court had directed the elections to be held promptly, but the necessary provisions were not available to conduct them this year. Therefore, the elections are now scheduled for early next year. [Daily Mirror]

In August 2024, Sri Lanka's Supreme Court ruled that the postponement of the 2023 Local Government elections violated voters' fundamental rights. The court ordered the Election Commission to conduct the elections immediately, citing that the delay infringed upon citizens' constitutional rights. The court also held that President Ranil Wickremesinghe, in his capacity as Minister of Finance, and members of the Election Commission were responsible for this violation.

Sri Lanka: Ministers to be monitored under new mechanism

(lm) Sri Lanka’s government is set to establish a new system to monitor and guide the implementation of policies across ministries. This mechanism will consist of MPs and experts who were involved in drafting the policies of the National People’s Power (NPP) prior to elections. Each ministry will be overseen by this body, which will also provide guidance to Cabinet Ministers in the execution of their duties.

The government has appointed 22 Cabinet ministers and 29 deputy ministers, with the first Cabinet meeting already held. This monitoring system is modeled after a previous practice under former President Mahinda Rajapaksa, where monitoring MPs were appointed to oversee Cabinet activities, though it was not a formal mechanism at the time. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Tensions escalate at UNP headquarters

(lm) On November 22, tensions flared at the United National Party (UNP) headquarters in Sirikotha when a group of supporters visited to submit a document proposing measures to revitalize the party. As they were leaving, the group alleged that MP Ravi Karunanayake, Secretary of the New Democratic Front (NDF), confronted and assaulted them, accusing them of attempting to undermine his appointment to Parliament via the NDF national list. [Daily Mirror]

This incident follows the UNP's dismal performance in the 2024 Sri Lankan parliamentary elections, where the party garnered only 0.59 percent of the popular vote, securing a single parliamentary seat, which has led to mounting internal tensions and criticism of party leadership.

Sri Lanka: Cabinet appointments not based on race or religion

(sl) The government has clarified that recent Cabinet appointments were not made based on race, religion, or caste, responding to concerns about the lack of Muslim representation. It emphasized that the Cabinet was formed to represent a unified Sri Lankan nation, transcending ethnic or religious lines.

Highlighting inclusivity, the government pointed out that a Member of Parliament from the Gampaha District was appointed through the national list to represent the Muslim community. Additionally, a Muslim businessman now serves as Governor of the Western Province, while members of the Muslim community hold roles such as Deputy Speaker and Deputy Minister.

The government urged the public to view appointments in the broader context of national unity rather than through identity-based perspectives. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Human trafficking cases rise 60 percent in 2024

(axc) The 2024 ‘Trafficking in Persons Report’ recently published by the US Department of State revealed a significant increase in the number of human trafficking cases detected in Sri Lanka over the course of 2024. The figure has increased from 59 to 95 over the year and marks an alarming trend in the development of human rights in Sri Lanka.

Over 80 percent of the 95 survivors identified in Sri Lanka were trafficked for labor reasons. However just under 10 percent were victims of sex trafficking.

The report recognizes efforts made my Sri Lankan authorities to combat this situation, however Sri Lanka remains classified as a Tier 2 nation on the TIP report. This means that the country not yet does not comply with the requirements of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000. [DailyMirror]

Sri Lanka: Adani's Colombo Port Project faces uncertainty amid US bribery allegations

The Adani Group's involvement in Sri Lanka's Colombo Port project is under intense scrutiny following bribery allegations against its founder, Gautam Adani. The U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC), which pledged USD 553 million for the port development, is reassessing its commitment in light of the accusations.

Federal prosecutors in New York have charged Adani and seven others with paying USD 250 million in bribes to Indian officials to secure contracts, including India's largest solar power plant. The DOJ claims these deals were expected to generate USD 2 billion in profits over two decades. The DFC confirmed it is conducting due diligence to ensure compliance with its integrity standards and has not disbursed any funds under the loan agreement.

The Colombo Port project, a joint venture between the Adani Group, Sri Lanka's John Keells Holdings, and the Sri Lanka Ports Authority, was signed in 2021 with an estimated cost of USD 700 million. It is seen as a strategic move to counter China's influence in the region, particularly its development of the Colombo International Container Terminal and Hambantota Port. The Adani Group holds a majority stake in the venture.

Domestically, the project has faced criticism, with newly elected President Anura Kumara Dissanayake signaling a review of the Adani Group's investments in Sri Lanka, including a wind power project approved by the previous administration. Additionally, concerns have been raised in Sri Lanka's Supreme Court regarding the conglomerate's involvement.

The fallout has not been limited to Sri Lanka. In Kenya, the government recently canceled a USD 2.5 billion deal with the Adani Group for electricity transmission

upgrades. Despite these challenges, the Adani Group has denied the allegations, calling them "baseless" and pledging to contest the charges in court. [Reuters] [Outlook Business]

Sri Lanka: Army marks Remembrance Day

(axc) Sri Lanka observed Armed Forces Remembrance Day on November 24, with President Anura Kumara Dissanayake, also the Commander-in-Chief, leading the commemorations. The event, held at the Colombo Cenotaph War Memorial, honored the sacrifices of Sri Lankan servicemen and women across various conflicts. [Daily Mirror] [President's Media Division]

Sri Lanka: Army begins returning Tamil land under President Dissanayake's directive

(axc) The Sri Lankan Army has begun vacating its camp in Paruthithurai, located in the Northern Tamil region, following President Anura Kumara Dissanayake's election promise to return lands occupied by the government and military to their rightful owners. The camp, established in 1995 during the civil war to disrupt LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) supply chains, remained operational post-conflict for security monitoring.

The closure order, issued by Army headquarters, mandates the camp's dismantling and the return of the land within two weeks. This move aligns with President Dissanayake's pledge to address longstanding Tamil grievances, including releasing political prisoners. [MSN]

Sri Lanka: Over 15,000 people affected by rain-related disasters

(lm) Sri Lanka's Disaster Management Center (DMC) reported on November 25 that over 15,000 people have been affected by rain-related disasters, including floods, strong winds, and tree falls. A total of 15,954 individuals from 4,307 families across seven districts in the Northern, North Western, Sabaragamuwa, and Southern provinces have been impacted.

The highest number of affected individuals, 7,010, are from Jaffna District in the Northern Province. The

country's Department of Irrigation issued a warning on November 24 for possible floods between November 25 and 28, particularly in 12 flood-prone river basin areas.

Sri Lanka typically receives around 30 percent of its annual rainfall during October and November, according to the Department of Meteorology. [CGTN]

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

Brunei: Government unveils Strategic Plan 2024-2029 for sustainable development

(ga) The Ministry of Development has launched its Strategic Plan 2024-2029 to advance Brunei Darussalam's national development, focusing on three core priorities: enhancing quality of life, ensuring sustainable development, and fostering a prosperous nation.

The Strategic Plan will act as a framework for driving socio-economic progress, innovating public services, and implementing sustainable practices to achieve the nation’s goals over the next five years. [Borneo Bulletin]

Cambodia: Prak Sokhonn appointed deputy PM and foreign minister

(mfr) The National Assembly of Cambodia unanimously approved Prak Sokhonn as Deputy Prime Minister and

Minister of Foreign Affairs on November 20. Sokhonn, who previously held the role from 2016 to 2023, succeeds Sok Chenda Sophea, who will remain a Deputy Prime Minister.

Prime Minister Hun Manet outlined the rationale for the reshuffle during the National Assembly session, emphasizing the need for more decisive leadership in foreign affairs to address rapidly evolving external challenges. He cited rising geopolitical tensions, economic fragmentation, and increasing unilateralism as risks to Cambodia's growth and stability. Manet also noted Sok Chenda Sophea's limited effectiveness in advancing Cambodia's economic diplomacy, implementing internal reforms, and overcoming challenges tied to the country's reputation, including controversies over human trafficking and corruption, which hindered efforts to attract investment and strengthen global ties.

The reshuffle, the third since Manet assumed office in August 2023, also reflects efforts to improve efficiency in policy implementation. Manet expressed confidence that the combined expertise of Prak Sokhonn in foreign affairs and Sok Chenda Sophea in commerce and investment would enhance Cambodia's capabilities on the global stage. [Khmer Times] [The Phnom Penh Post]

Cambodia: Government launches four new digital products

(mfr) The Cambodian government has officially recognized four new Digital Government Products (DGPs) developed by the Ministry of Post and Telecommunications.

The first DGP is GO.GOV.KH, a government repository for public documents that helps combat fake news, fraud, and phishing by providing verified information from ministries and institutions. The second, FORM.GOV.KH, is a secure platform for creating online forms for data collection, surveys, and registrations, with encrypted data access only available to form creators. The third, NOMSA.GOV.KH, is a messaging system designed to ensure messages from official entities are clearly identified, reducing fraud and enhancing public trust. The fourth product, SARIKA, is an AI-powered text-to-speech tool integrated with Telegram, converting text into Khmer audio for content creation and information dissemination. [The Phnom Penh Post]

Cambodia: Prime Minister Hun Manet defends silence on Koh Kut dispute

(mfr) Prime Minister Hun Manet has defended Cambodia's silence on the Koh Kut sovereignty dispute, citing ongoing maritime border negotiations with Thailand. Both countries claim the island, but no formal agreement has been reached. Manet clarified that the claims in question came from Thailand's opposition party, not its government.

Speaking at a graduation ceremony on November 21, Manet emphasized the need for "political maturity and national responsibility" in addressing sovereignty issues. He stated that border matters should be resolved through formal mechanisms, including the Joint Border Commission for land borders and the Joint Technical Committee for maritime boundaries. Cambodia and Thailand have so far finalized agreements on 42 of 73 land border markers, while maritime boundaries remain unresolved.

Manet dismissed accusations of treason or territorial loss, arguing that without a maritime agreement, there is no basis for filing a case with the International Court of Justice. He reaffirmed Cambodia's commitment to protecting its sovereignty through peaceful, technical negotiations. [The Phnom Penh Post 1]

Meanwhile, Manet's father and Senate President Hun Sen, speaking at a separate event on the same day, urged for calm and diplomacy in resolving the dispute. He warned against inciting public anger or mobilizing military forces near Koh Kut, emphasizing the importance of maintaining peaceful relations with neighboring countries. Hun Sen also suggested the need for legal measures to address extremism, citing recent provocations by opposition groups related to the dispute.

Both leaders underscored that Cambodia's approach to border issues prioritizes diplomacy and cooperation, with mechanisms in place to handle ongoing negotiations with Thailand. [The Phnom Penh Post 2]

Cambodia: National Committee for Counter Trafficking to address human trafficking by foreign offenders

(mfr) Cambodia is addressing the growing problem of human trafficking carried out by foreign nationals, using complex and deceptive tactics, according to Chou Bun Eng, secretary of state at the Ministry of

Interior and vice-chair of the National Committee for Counter Trafficking (NCCT). Bun Eng stressed the importance of intensifying efforts to combat human trafficking, particularly as online platforms are increasingly used for trafficking activities.

Her remarks came as Cambodia reported 164 cases of human trafficking and sexual exploitation in 2023, resulting in 194 arrests. Among these, 24 cases were related to trafficking, while 140 involved sexual exploitation. Additionally, 342 Cambodian victims were repatriated, most of whom came from China. During the first half of 2024, authorities handled 104 trafficking cases, arrested 134 suspects, and rescued 290 victims.

The NCCT report also revealed that Cambodia detained and deported over 2,100 foreign offenders in 2023. Despite these efforts, the U.S. Department of State's 2023 Trafficking in Persons Report ranked Cambodia in Tier 3, the lowest tier, placing the country alongside Myanmar and below neighboring countries like Thailand and Vietnam. [The Phnom Penh Post]

Cambodia: 2,327 electric vehicles registered

(mfr) As of November 22, Cambodia has registered a total of 2,327 electric vehicles (EVs), according to a release from the Ministry of Public Works and Transport.

The country aims to have 40 percent of cars and urban buses, and 70 percent of motorcycles, be electric by 2050, as part of its efforts to reduce carbon emissions.

To support this transition, the government has reduced import duties on EVs by about 50 percent compared to traditional vehicles since 2021. The use of EVs in Cambodia is increasing rapidly, which is in line with global trends, and there are now 18 EV charging stations across the country. [Khmer Times]

Cambodia: Electricity consumption increases

(mfr) Prime Minister Hun Manet said Cambodia's electricity consumption increased by 15.56 percent in 2024 compared to the previous year. At the Ministry of Mines and Energy's annual meeting on November 21, the prime minister noted that 86.67 percent of the electricity consumed was sourced from domestic

production, while 13.3 percent was imported from neighboring countries.

By the end of 2024, Cambodia's national grid is expected to reach 99.15 percent of the country's villages. The number of households connected to the grid has also risen to 3.6 million, representing 95.25 percent of all households in the country. [Khmer Times]

Cambodia: Foreigners detained over Sihanoukville shooting

(mfr) Three Chinese nationals were arrested following a shooting in Sihanoukville on November 20 that left a compatriot seriously injured.

The suspects were apprehended by Sihanoukville and Phnom Penh police later that day. Authorities seized a handgun, ten bullets, a bullet casing, two handcuffs, three cars, two license plates, and two mobile phones. [Khmer Times]

Indonesia: Setyo Budiyanto named as new anti-corruption body head

(gk) The Parliament of Indonesia has named Setyo Budiyanto to lead the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) for the term 2024-2029. Following a vote, the Parliament has also approved the names of four KPK deputy heads, namely Fitroh Rohcahyanto, Ibnu Basuki Widodo, Johanis Tanak and Agus Joko Pramono.

Setyo Budiyanto, the incumbent Inspector General at the Agriculture Ministry, is a seasoned law enforcement official, and has held various significant roles within the Indonesia National Police, and the KPK. [Jakarta Globe] [Antara]

Indonesia: President Prabowo endorses Banten gubernatorial candidate

(mu) President Prabowo Subianto has publicly endorsed Andra Soni and Ahmad Dimyati Natakusumah as candidates for Governor and Deputy Governor of Banten. The endorsement was conveyed in a video message. [Tempo, in Indonesian]

Andra Soni and Ahmad Dimyati are supported by the ruling coalition, which includes nine political parties, among them Gerindra, chaired by President Prabowo. In the lead-up to the simultaneous regional head elections on November 27, the president has expressed support for several candidates from his coalition.

Political analysts have criticized these endorsements as unethical, arguing that, despite his role as party leader, the president should maintain neutrality to uphold the integrity of his office. [Benar News]

Indonesia: Government drafting regulation on methane use from palm oil waste

(ft) The Environment Ministry is drafting regulations to support methane utilization from palm oil industry waste, aiming to enhance carbon trading efforts. These regulations will include incentives, disincentives, and a roadmap for managing Palm Oil Mill Effluent (POME) into methane capture.

Minister Hanif Faisol emphasized the significant impact of methane utilization on waste reduction and acknowledged industry disparities in adoption. The Ministry plans to study successful practices from other companies to inform the regulation and monitor its implementation. This initiative aligns with Indonesia's broader climate change and carbon trading goals. [Antara]

Indonesia: Food self-sufficiency goal to be achieved 2027

(gk) Indonesia’s Coordinating Minister for Food Affairs Zulkifli Hasan announced that the target for national food self-sufficiency is now advanced to 2027, from 2028 previously.

While speaking at a press conference in Jakarta, the minister emphasized that the compressed two-year timeframe demands heightened efforts from relevant ministries to address and overcome obstacles impeding achievement of food self-sufficiency.

Pointing out one of the problems-slow distribution of subsidized fertilizers for farmers- Minister Hasan explained that for subsidized fertilizer distribution, the agriculture minister must issue a decree, which is then

sent to Pupuk Indonesia, the state-owned fertilizer producer. Pupuk Indonesia is responsible for delivering the fertilizers to farmer groups, ensuring they are distributed accurately and on time.

On a separate occasion, Agriculture Minister Andi Amran Sulaiman highlighted that the government would soon simplify more than 147 regulations regarding the distribution of subsidized fertilizers to farmers, that were essentially causing a barrier to farmers receiving their supplies.

In addition, Hasan suggested that the Ministry of Agriculture become involved in determining the list of food-related businesses in supporting the food self-sufficiency target. [Antara]

Indonesia: President Prabowo secures foreign investments of USD 18.5 billion during overseas tour

(gk) From his various state visits to several countries on November 8-21, Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto bagged a total of USD 18.5 billion in investments.

Stating that this was beyond the target, President Subianto said that this achievement is an indication of the global trust in the economic stability of Indonesia. He added that this entails him in committing to create a corruption-free investment ecosystem in Indonesia.

Of the many investments bagged, British Petroleum commitment worth USD 7 billion is noteworthy, since it involves a gas field development project in West Papua, called the Tangguh Ubadari, CCUS (carbon capture, utilization, and storage), and Compression (UCC) project. The project is essentially the development of the Ubadari gas field in Fakfak District, West Papua, and the application of CCUS technology to increase gas production at the Tangguh LNG facility in the local area. [Antara]

Indonesia: Minister seeks to boost defense in Papua

(mu) Defense Minister Sjafrie Sjamsoeddin has underscored the importance of bolstering defense capabilities in Papua to ensure stability in the conflict-prone region. He stated that this effort is in line with

development initiatives aimed at enhancing the welfare of the Papuan people.

During a visit to the Yohanis Kapiyau Air Base in Timika, Papua, on November 22, Sjamsoeddin assessed defense facilities and addressed personnel of the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI). He emphasized Papua's strategic significance as an integral part of Indonesia's sovereignty, calling for a robust defense system to mitigate potential threats.

The minister urged the TNI to strengthen coordination between central and regional commands to safeguard security and sovereignty. His visit also included an inspection of ongoing infrastructure upgrades at the air base, such as improved surveillance sensors and intrusion detection systems. [Antara]

Papua has long been affected by conflict involving the separatist West Papua National Liberation Army (KKB/OPM), which seeks independence from Indonesia through armed resistance and guerrilla warfare. In recent years, escalating violence has led to human rights violations and widespread displacement in the region. [Tempo, in Indonesia]

Indonesia: Police officer with links to illegal mining faces death penalty for killing fellow officer

(mu) Adjunct Commissioner Dadang Iskandar has been charged with premeditated murder following the fatal shooting of a fellow mid-ranking police officer in West Sumatra. The charge carries a maximum penalty of death.

The incident reportedly stemmed from a dispute over an ongoing investigation into illegal mining activities in the region. Dadang allegedly shot his colleague after his demand for the release of a truck driver, arrested during a raid at an illegal mining site, was denied.

Witness testimony suggests that Dadang had a history of involvement in protecting illegal gold mining operations in South Solok. [Jakarta Globe] [Rmol, in Indonesian]

Laos: Government prioritizes economic growth and social development in November meeting

(cc) The Laotian government convened its monthly meeting on November 21-22. The gathering aimed to assess progress on key priorities for November and outline the strategic direction for December.

The government emphasized the importance of rigorous oversight of mining operations, ensuring strict adherence to technical and environmental regulations. Mining companies were urged to contribute to infrastructure repair, particularly for roads damaged by mineral transportation.

To bolster agricultural productivity, the government highlighted the need to support dry-season farming through reliable water supply and increased fertilizer production.

The meeting, furthermore, underscored the significance of enhancing tourist attractions, elevating service quality, and improving accessibility to popular destinations through upgraded road infrastructure.

Addressing the critical issue of teacher shortages, the government directed the Ministry of Education and Sports to collaborate with the Ministry of National Defence to deploy conscripts as interim teachers in areas facing educator deficits. Additionally, the meeting emphasized the importance of modernizing labor management systems in the education sector and increasing stipends for pedagogical students. [Lao News Agency]

Laos: MPs voice concerns over government's socio-economic development plan and budget

(mt) During the 8th Ordinary Session of the National Assembly, lawmakers discussed various concerns related to the government's socio-economic development plan and state budget allocation.

Key issues raised included the need to enhance productivity in both the industrial and agricultural sectors to reduce imports and boost exports, particularly through the expansion of crop cultivation. Representatives urged the government to attract businesses with relevant expertise to invest in these areas. Additionally, concerns were expressed about improving civil service management, specifically regarding punctuality, work discipline, and increasing salaries to address the rising cost of living.

Inflation, inefficiencies in transitioning to improved financial and production systems, and a lack of

transparency regarding mining revenue figures were also highlighted. Further, representatives emphasized the need to address challenges in education, tourism, healthcare, and transportation.

In response, Prime Minister Sonexay Siphandone provided updates on the government's measures to control inflation. These included tighter monetary policies, enhanced exchange rate management, and efforts to regulate luxury imports and combat illegal trade.

He reported that inflation had been stabilized, with the 10-month average for 2024 at 24.4 percent, and projected to fall below 20 percent by the end of the year. The government also succeeded in stabilizing the KIP exchange rate, significantly reducing its depreciation and narrowing the exchange rate gap between commercial banks and the informal market.

The Prime Minister highlighted efforts to increase foreign exchange reserves and improve banking sector liquidity. Targeted credit policies have been implemented to support key projects across sectors such as agriculture, tourism, and industry. [Lao News Agency][Vientiane Times]

Laos: Vientiane Walk tackles global threat of antimicrobial resistance

(cc) A recent public walk in Vientiane drew attention to the critical issue of antimicrobial resistance (AMR), marking a significant step toward collective action against this growing public health threat.

AMR occurs when microbes develop resistance to medications designed to eliminate them, rendering treatments ineffective against common infections. Organized by Laotian ministries in collaboration with various partners, the Vientiane Walk gathered over 500 participants to raise awareness about this pressing issue.

According to the World Health Organization, drug-resistant infections cause approximately 700,000 deaths annually, a figure projected to rise to ten million by 2050 if current trends persist. [Lao News Agency] [World Health Organization]

Laos: Minister of Public Security raises drug control efforts at National Assembly

(mt) At the ongoing National Assembly session (see article in this edition), Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Public Security General Vilay Lakhamfong reported the government's efforts in fighting drug trafficking and addiction.

This year, authorities have processed 3,395 drug-related cases, leading to the arrest of 5,168 individuals, including 199 foreigners. In addition to large seizures of heroin, methamphetamines, and other drugs, authorities have destroyed over 5,800 hectares of opium poppy plantations and seized substantial amounts of illicit materials.

The government has also been focusing on rehabilitation, with 14 treatment centers across the country serving over 5,000 people this year. Plans for a new drug treatment center in Vientiane, supported by Vietnam, are underway, expected to be completed by 2025. With continued efforts in public awareness campaigns, the establishment of drug-free villages, and enhanced border coordination, Laos is prioritizing drug control as part of its broader national strategy. Looking ahead, the government plans to focus on improving public awareness, legislation, and international cooperation to combat drug-related issues effectively. [Vientiane Times]

Malaysia: UMNO granted one-week extension in SRC suit

(ga) The High Court has granted UMNO and Selangor UMNO a one-week extension to update the court on the resolution of a lawsuit filed by SRC International and its subsidiaries. The suit alleges that UMNO and Selangor UMNO received MYR 19.5 million (USD 4.1 million) from these companies in 2015.

SRC International, along with its two subsidiaries, Gandingan Mentari Sdn Bhd and Jendela Pinggiran Sdn Bhd, filed the lawsuit to recover MYR 16 million and MYR 3.5 million from UMNO and its Selangor chapter, respectively. The companies claim that the entities received these sums despite being aware they were not entitled to them. [Bernama]

Malaysia: Court to decide competition oversight body's appeal on fine against Grab in February 2025

(ga) The Court of Appeal will deliver its decision on February 28, 2025, regarding the Malaysian Competition Commission's (MyCC) appeal against a High Court ruling that subdued a proposed MYR 86.77 million (USD 18.22 million) fine against Grab Inc. and its subsidiaries for alleged anti-competitive practices. MyCC had accused the companies of abusing their dominant market position by imposing restrictive clauses on their drivers.

In 2019, Grab sought a judicial review after MyCC proposed the fine, claiming violations of the Competition Act 2020. The High Court initially ruled in Grab's favor, but MyCC appealed the decision. The case has gone through multiple legal stages, with the Federal Court dismissing MyCC's leave to appeal in 2022. During the recent appeal, MyCC's counsel argued the judicial review was premature, while Grab's defense emphasized that the proposed decision was final and based on a completed investigation. [Bernama]

Malaysia: 45 Malaysian police officers arrested for bribery and abuse of power this year

(ga) From January to September, the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) arrested 45 members and officers of the Royal Malaysian Police (PDRM) on suspicion of receiving bribes and abusing their power, according to Deputy Inspector-General of Police Ayob Khan, speaking a PDRM ceremony. During this period, 27 police officers were charged in court, and 13 were convicted.

Additionally, the Integrity and Standard Compliance Department (JIPS) opened 1,557 disciplinary investigation papers and 1,118 disciplinary inquiry papers against officers suspected of misconduct. [Bernama]

Malaysia: Ministry of Health develops app to enhance healthcare services nationwide

(ga) The Ministry of Health (MOH) is developing a "super app" to enhance healthcare services through digitalization, including features for ambulance requests. MOH Deputy Minister stated the app would cater to urban areas like Kuala Lumpur, Johor Bahru,

and Kuching while maintaining the “999” emergency line for rural regions.

The app aims to improve ambulance services across public and private sectors without imposing fees for users requesting transport to government hospitals. Discussions with stakeholders and industry players are ongoing to refine the app before full implementation.

Additionally, MOH has partnered with the National Heart Institute (IJN) for the Cardiovascular Prevention Continuing Medical Education (CME) program, targeting healthcare professionals to address rising non-communicable diseases such as diabetes and hypertension. [Bernama]

Malaysia: Government targets 31 percent non-revenue water by 2025

(ga) The Malaysian government aims to reduce non-revenue water (NRW) from 37.1 percent to 31 percent by 2025, addressing a daily loss of 7,195 million liters of treated water valued at over MYR 2 billion (USD 448 million). Deputy Prime Minister Fadillah Yusof announced that initiatives include replacing 1,844 km of aging pipes and introducing a Proportional Reimbursement Rate to encourage water operators' participation in states like Selangor, Johor, and Penang.

The plans also involve comprehensive NRW reduction in Pahang, Kelantan, Sabah, and Sarawak, with the goal of achieving 98 percent clean water coverage in rural areas by 2025. As of 2023, water supply access is at 97.1 percent, with sewerage services covering 86.9 percent of major cities. [Bernama] [Business Today]

Malaysia: Ministry of Energy explores advanced technologies for net zero carbon by 2050

(ga) The Ministry of Energy Transition and Water Transformation (PETRA) announced its readiness to explore new technologies for electricity generation to achieve net zero carbon emissions by 2050. Deputy Minister Akmal Nasir stated that technologies under consideration include battery energy storage systems (BESS), pump hydro storage, carbon capture and storage (CCS), and nuclear options such as small modular reactors (SMR) and large-scale reactors.

Following a recent meeting, BESS and pump hydro storage have been added to Peninsular Malaysia's electricity generation sources. Additionally, PETRA is intensifying renewable energy (RE) initiatives like the Feed-in Tariff (FiT), Net Energy Metering (NEM), Self-Consumption (SELCO), Corporate Green Power Programme (CGPP), and Clean Renewable Energy Supply (CRES) to achieve a 70 percent RE capacity target.

The government continues to monitor electricity generation costs through the imbalance cost pass-through (ICPT) mechanism, adjusting surcharges semi-annually. Subsidies are provided for domestic users consuming under 600 kWh, while higher consumption levels incur surcharges. [Bernama]

Malaysia: LPT3 project cost estimate increases to MYR 9.8 billion

(ga) The estimated cost of the East Coast Expressway 3 (LPT3) project, spanning from Kuala Terengganu City to Kota Bharu City, is expected to rise to MYR 9.8 billion (USD 2.06 billion), a significant increase from the MYR 2.867 billion (USD 643 million) estimated in 2009. Deputy Works Minister Ahmad Maslan attributed this increase to the project's financing model, which is based on toll revenue rather than total government funding. LPT3 tolls are estimated at 60 cents per kilometer, amounting to MYR 70 for an end-to-end journey.

Unlike LPT1 and LPT2, which were fully funded by the Federal Government and charged tolls for maintenance, LPT3 will rely on a public-private partnership (PPP) model. The project’s request for proposal (RFP) is currently being reviewed by the Public-Private Partnership Unit (UKAS) under the Prime Minister’s Department. Approval from UKAS and subsequent Cabinet consideration are required before proceeding. [Bernama] [Business Today]

Malaysia: Sabah to establish AI center for digital transformation and innovation

(ga) The Sabah government plans to establish an Artificial Intelligence (AI) center to support the state’s digital transformation and innovation ecosystem. State Science, Technology, and Innovation Ministry announced the initiative, aiming to attract investments, nurture local talent, and promote innovation across

various sectors. The center will also leverage Fourth Industrial Revolution (IR 4.0) technologies to improve administrative efficiency by automating routine tasks. [Bernama]

Malaysia: General Operations Force issues warning signs against using illegal crossings to Golok River

(ga) The General Operations Force (GOF), the light infantry arm of the Royal Malaysia Police, has placed warning signs along several illegal crossings of the Golok River, a key point on the Malaysia-Thailand border. The signs remind the public that using ungazetted routes to cross the border is an offence under Section 5(2) of the Immigration Act 1959/63, which could result in a fine of up to MYR 10,000 (USD 2200), imprisonment for up to five years, or both.

These signs have been installed near the river in Jitong and Kuala Tanjong villages. GOF Southeast Brigade Commander emphasized that such crossings allow criminals to cross the border unchecked, potentially leading to crimes. The public is advised to use the official route at the Rantau Panjang Immigration, Customs, Quarantine and Security (ICQS) center instead.

The illegal crossings, which save time compared to the official route, are commonly used for various purposes, including travel to Thailand. Starting December 1, Kelantan state police will begin detaining Malaysians using these ungazetted routes. [Bernama 1]

Nearby residents urge exemption for schoolchildren using illegal crossings

The decision of the new immigration act has caused concern among residents, particularly regarding its impact on children's education, fearing the enforcement will disrupt access to schools. Many students from both sides of the border rely on these crossings to attend school in Rantau Panjang.

Currently, schoolchildren pay MYR 1 for a daily boat service across Sungai Golok to attend classes, a long-standing practice in the area. This routine is integral to the community, where many Thai children also attend school in Malaysia. The residents have appealed to both the Malaysian and Thai governments to find a solution that allows students to continue their education without interruptions. [Bernama 2]

Malaysia: MMEA to procure AI-integrated radars for enhanced maritime security

(ga) The Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA) plans to acquire new radars equipped with artificial intelligence (AI) under the Malaysia Coast Guard Maritime Domain Awareness (MCGMDA) system to enhance maritime security and enforcement. These radars will be strategically placed in areas such as Sarawak's waters and the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia, expanding surveillance coverage and boosting operational efficiency.

MMEA director-general RADM Rosli Abdullah stated that the integration of AI would enable advanced data analysis and real-time responsiveness, strengthening national maritime security. He emphasized that AI-driven technologies like drones and autonomous boats could optimize resources, conduct large-scale automatic patrols, and detect suspicious activities more effectively. [New Straits Times] [Bernama]

Myanmar: Strikers face threats after assault allegations at Chinese-owned factory

(sc) Workers at Charis Co Ltd in Hlaing Tharyar Township, Yangon, launched a strike on November 6 after the alleged assault and dismissal of two female employees by the factory's Chinese director, Wang Xiao Jun. The dispute arose from unpaid bonuses, with strikers demanding the reinstatement of dismissed staff, healthcare services, and Wang's removal. Police and military officials have reportedly threatened workers with legal action under assembly laws, while around 50 strikers have already been dismissed amid worsening conditions. [The Irrawaddy] [Myanmar Now]

The Federation of General Workers Myanmar (FGWM) filed complaints with the International Labour Organization and business associations, as strikers face harassment and exposure to harsh conditions during their sit-in.

Charis, a sculpture export factory, defended its actions as contract enforcement but has refused further comments. [The Irrawaddy]

Myanmar: UNICEF urges increase protection for children amid humanitarian crisis

(tl) UNICEF has called for increased protection for children in Myanmar amid the country's ongoing humanitarian crisis. In 2021 alone, at least 650 children were killed or injured in the conflict, with the growing use of lethal weapons in civilian areas – such as airstrikes and landmines – significantly reducing safe spaces for children.

UNICEF emphasized the urgent need to uphold international humanitarian law to protect civilians from such atrocities. Children in conflict zones are deprived of healthcare and education and are suffering from the impacts of violence and displacement.

Landmines and unexploded ordnance disproportionately affect children, with 32 percent of the 1,000 people injured by these devices being minors.

The international community was called on to enhance support through funding, advocacy, and solidarity to safeguard children in the region. [UN News][UNICEF]

Myanmar: Rice storage limits imposed

(tl) The Myanmar Military Council has imposed stricter limits on rice storage to stabilize prices and ensure domestic self-sufficiency amid a projected decline in rice yields due to floods. The new restriction, announced on November 21, caps storage at 25 tons (2,500 baskets) per facility, down from last year's limit. This reduction is driven by concerns over lower agricultural output caused by widespread flooding in key rice-growing regions, including Bago and Irrawaddy, which have left many fields damaged or unplanted.

A rice miller noted that reduced yields would limit the domestic rice supply, affecting market stability. Farmers in the Irrawaddy region expect a 35 percent drop in yields, although some believe the current rice prices – averaging MMK 2.1 million (USD 100) per 100 baskets – may help offset their losses.

The Department of Commerce has set a deadline of December 23 for compliance with the storage limit and warned violators of potential temporary business shutdowns. However, some rice millers are reportedly

circumventing the rules by distributing stock across multiple warehouses. [VOA in Burmese]

Myanmar tops 2023 landmine casualties

(anl) According to the latest Landmine Monitor report by the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL), a coalition of non-governmental organizations, Myanmar recorded the highest number of deaths and injuries from landmines and unexploded munitions in 2023, with over 1,000 casualties.

Globally, the ICBL documented a total of 5,757 casualties from landmines and explosive remnants of war in 2023, with Myanmar contributing significantly to this figure. [ICBL]

The report highlighted a notable increase in the use of anti-personnel mines by Myanmar's military, particularly around critical infrastructure such as mobile phone towers and energy pipelines. Adding to the problem, Myanmar is not a signatory to the United Nations Convention prohibiting the use, stockpiling, or production of anti-personnel mines. [The Irrawaddy]

Myanmar: KIA, allied forces seize key border town as conflict rages on in Myanmar

(nf) The Kachin Independence Army, commanding a coalition of resistance groups, captured Kan Paik Ti, an important border trading town in Kachin State on November 20. Kan Paik Ti, previously defended by some 800 junta troops and pro-junta Kachin Border Guard Force-BGF soldiers, fell to forces of the KIA after hours of heavy fighting that included junta airstrikes. By evening, it was completely under the control of the KIA, which forced regime troops and their families to flee into China.

The seizure of Kan Paik Ti, the nation's third-biggest border trading post, was a strategic blow to the junta, further scuttling its control and trade in the region. The victory consolidates KIA control over Kachin Special Region 1, which includes strategic towns like Chipwi, Hsawlaw, and Pangwa, as well as major BGF strongholds. Now totally in the hands of the coalition led by the KIA, coordination among other resistance forces in cooperation with civilian National Unity Government People's Defense Forces has resulted in increased offensives throughout Kachin State,

northern Sagaing, and Shan State. [Burmese News International] [Irrawaddy 1]

China reportedly called on the KIA to stop hostilities and blocked border crossings into Kachin State, ratcheting up pressure on both sides to scale back. The KIA nonetheless reiterated that it would fight without cease until the military dictatorship was defeated.

Meanwhile, its northern Shan State counterpart, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), strengthened its grip on Lashio, the region's capital, also in spite of China's pressure for it to retreat. The junta has moved reinforcements and cut off food and fuel supplies to Lashio in an attempt to recapture the city, raising the intensity of clashes around key roads in the area. Residents have been warned to prepare for airstrikes amid rising tensions. [Irrawaddy 2]

Philippines: Ex-President Duterte hints at military action amid escalating tensions with Marcos Jr. administration

(lm/rv) Former President Rodrigo Duterte has sparked alarm by urging the military to intervene in what he described as "fractured governance" under President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., whom he accused of drug addiction. While Duterte refrained from explicitly calling for a coup d'état, his remarks highlighted growing instability within the administration.

Speaking in a livestreamed press conference, Duterte questioned the loyalty of the military, asking, "How long will you support a drug addict of a President?" He claimed the Armed Forces were the only institution capable of resolving the perceived crisis, though he provided no evidence to substantiate his accusations against Marcos or his special assistant, Antonio Lagdameo Jr. [Rappler 1]

Duterte's comments come amid intensifying divisions between the Marcos and Duterte families. Vice-president Sara Duterte, embroiled in controversies over alleged misuse of confidential funds, recently accused Marcos, First Lady Liza Araneta Marcos, and Speaker Martin Romualdez of plotting against her. In a controversial outburst, she admitted instructing an assassin to target them if she were killed, claiming there was a plot to assassinate her. [The Guardian] [Manila Times]

The statement has triggered a formal investigation, with the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) serving her a subpoena to appear and explain her remarks.

NBI Chief Jaime Santiago confirmed the subpoena, directing Duterte to appear on November 29. The subpoena aims to allow Duterte to explain her statement and formally relay her own claims of threats to her safety. [Rappler 2]

Duterte has argued that her remarks were taken out of context, asserting they were intended to highlight her security concerns. However, the government is treating her statements as a serious "active threat," with potential charges including sedition.

Justice officials, including DOJ Undersecretary Jesse Andres, emphasized that Duterte's statements, including her past inflammatory remarks about Marcos, are incompatible with her responsibilities as a public official and undermine governance. The NBI has begun investigating the alleged assassin and has submitted evidence, including video recordings of Duterte's statements, to the DOJ. [Inquirer.net 1] [Inquirer.net 2]

This incident exacerbates the months-long public discord between Duterte and Marcos, reflecting deeper policy divisions on issues such as foreign relations and Rodrigo Duterte's controversial war on drugs. It also highlights tensions between Duterte and Romualdez, who has imposed significant budget cuts on her office.

These tensions are further compounded by ongoing congressional scrutiny into Duterte's use of PHP 125 million (USD 2.13 million) in confidential funds in 2022. Critics argue the funds lacked transparency and oversight, raising concerns about their potential misuse. The House good government committee recently detained Zuleika Lopez, Duterte's chief of staff, for contempt after she allegedly interfered with the investigation by instructing the Commission on Audit (COA) not to comply with subpoenas. Lopez defended her actions as procedural, but lawmakers accused her of obstruction and evasiveness. [Rappler 3] [Rappler 4]

The investigation also revealed allegations of cash distributions within the Department of Education (DepEd) during Duterte's tenure as its chief. Former DepEd disbursing officer Edward Fajarda testified that Duterte instructed him to collect bank account details of school superintendents and distribute funds to them. While Fajarda claimed the funds reimbursed fieldwork expenses, lawmakers questioned the process and its compliance with Duterte's "no-gift policy." [Rappler]

Philippines: Working children decline to 1.09 million in 2023, PSA reports

(rv) The Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) reported a decline in the number of working children in the Philippines to 1.09 million in 2023, a 26 percent decrease from 1.48 million in 2022. This represents 3.5 percent of the child population, down from 4.7 percent the previous year. "Working children" refers to those aged 5 to 17 engaged in any economic activity.

Boys accounted for 59.1 percent of working children, while girls made up 40.9 percent. The service sector employed half of these children, followed by agriculture at 43.7 percent and industry at 6.3 percent. Most working children, 73.7 percent, worked 20 hours or less weekly.

The number of children involved in hazardous child labor also fell to 678,000 in 2023 from 828,000 in 2022. Child labor is defined as hazardous work or exceeding 40 hours weekly. Boys made up 62.1 percent of child laborers, with agriculture being the dominant sector at 65.3 percent. [BusinessWorld]

Philippines: Groundbreaking for world's largest solar battery storage facility

(rv) President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. led the groundbreaking for Meralco Terra (MTerra) Solar Project in Gapan City, Nueva Ecija, regarded as the largest solar and battery storage facility in the world. The PHP 200 million (USD 3.4 million) landmark project paves the way for the Philippines to be a leader in renewable energy and is expected to power two million households once it is operational in 2027.

4.3 million metric tons of carbon emissions are also expected to be reduced annually, the equivalent of removing 3 million gasoline-powered cars. The facility addresses the increasing demand for electricity and the urgency to transition to sustainable energy in the Philippines. [Manila Times]

Philippines: Geopolitical tensions triggering oil prices to go up

(rv) Oil companies such as Shell, Cleanfuel, Petrogazz, and Unioil are set to increase local pump prices by more than PHP 1 (USD 0.017) per liter, reflecting a five-day trading trend in the global market. The escalation

of geopolitical tensions around Russia is driving the increase.

Last week, oil companies lowered the cost of gasoline, diesel, and kerosene. [Manila Times] [Inquirer]

Philippines: NICA labels former mayor Alice Guo an 'agent of influence' amid spy allegations

(lm) The National Intelligence Coordinating Agency (NICA) has described former Bamban, Tarlac mayor Alice Guo as an "agent of influence," though it stops short of confirming she is a Chinese spy. During a Senate panel hearing on Philippine offshore gaming operators (POGOs), NICA Deputy Director General Ashely Acedillo stated that existing evidence suggests Guo fits the profile of an agent who exerts influence, a term historically linked to intelligence activities, particularly during the Cold War.

Acedillo emphasized that while the agency has no definitive proof of Guo's status as a foreign spy, intelligence findings indicate her activities align with such a role. Confirming Guo's espionage involvement, he said, would require acknowledgment from a foreign intelligence agency that trained or employed her.

Guo, who faces a non-bailable qualified human trafficking charge in the Pasig Regional Trial Court, is accused of facilitating illegal activities at an unlicensed Pogo hub in Bamban. Allegations include her involvement in human trafficking and other crimes.

Her citizenship has also come under scrutiny, with the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) confirming that Guo and Chinese national Guo Hua Ping are the same person. [Inquirer.net]

Singapore: PAP elects new central executive committee ahead of 2025 general election

(fi) The People's Action Party (PAP) has elected its 38th central executive committee (CEC), which will steer the ruling party into Singapore's next general election, due by November 2025. The elections took place during the biennial PAP Awards and Conference held on November 24, 2024, attended by approximately 3,000 party cadres, activists, and guests.

The new CEC comprises 12 elected members, including Prime Minister Lawrence Wong, Senior Minister Lee Hsien Loong, and Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat. Other members include Chan Chun Sing, K Shanmugam, Masagos Zulkifli, Desmond Lee, Grace Fu, Edwin Tong, Indranee Rajah, Ong Ye Kung, and Vivian Balakrishnan. Transport Minister Chee Hong Tat and Minister for Manpower Tan See Leng were later co-opted into the CEC, bringing the total to 14 members.

Seven of the elected members—Prime Minister Wong, Senior Minister Lee, Heng, Chan, Masagos, Fu, and Shanmugam—were identified by the outgoing leadership as the party's core leaders. Their leadership will play a critical role in candidate selection, policy formation, and navigating the party through the high-stakes general election.

Leadership transition

Senior Minister Lee announced during the conference that he would step down as secretary-general, a role he has held since 2004. He proposed that PM Wong be appointed as the new secretary-general in the coming weeks, completing the transition to the party's fourth-generation leadership. The list of specific office-bearers within the CEC, such as the first and second assistant secretaries-general, will be finalized at the committee's first meeting.

This leadership transition aligns with the PAP's broader strategy to ensure continuity and adaptability amidst a rapidly evolving political and global landscape. SM Lee's 20-year tenure as secretary-general was honored during the conference, where his contributions to the party and Singapore's development were lauded.

General election preparations

Prime Minister Wong emphasized the importance of the upcoming general election, warning party members against complacency. "Please don't think it is guaranteed that the PAP will win and form a stable government," he cautioned. He urged members to work hard to earn Singaporeans' trust and secure a mandate to govern effectively.

The conference also highlighted the PAP's commitment to addressing key issues such as cost-of-living pressures while countering opposition efforts to exploit these challenges. Prime Minister Wong reiterated the party's focus on unity and resilience as Singapore navigates a more volatile global environment. [ChannelNews Asia] [The Straits Times]

Singapore: Safeguards against abuse of court process in place and strengthened by recent legislation

(fi) The Ministry of Law (MinLaw) has affirmed that robust safeguards are in place to prevent abuse of court processes, strengthened by recent amendments to the Administration of Justice (Protection) Act (AOJPA). The law now explicitly states that abuse of court processes, including baseless claims filed with ulterior motives to vex or extort defendants, constitutes contempt of court.

The amendments, passed on November 13, aim to address "lawfare" by those seeking financial damages through unmeritorious claims. Minister of State for Law Murali Pillai highlighted that such practices undermine trust in the justice system. Courts now have enhanced powers to strike out frivolous claims, restrict further filings by the offending party, and investigate acts obstructing justice under the AOJPA.

MinLaw made these remarks in response to media queries regarding a defamation case involving National University of Singapore academic Ben Leong and Iris Koh, founder of the anti-vaccine group Healing the Divide, along with her husband, Raymond Ng. Koh and Ng have accused Leong of defamation for past remarks on social media and have also threatened legal action against other individuals for similar claims. [ChannelNews Asia]

Singapore: ECDA to launch home-based childminding service pilot in December

(fi) The Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA) will pilot home-based infant care starting December 1. Open to Singaporean infants aged 2 to 18 months, the program allows childminders to care for up to three infants at a time, with costs starting at SGD 16.50 (USD 12.30) for five-hour blocks. Subsidized care will operate weekdays from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., with full-time monthly rates at SGD 719.40 (USD 536).

Childminders must meet strict safety standards, undergo training, and pass medical checks. The pilot, initially targeting 500 infants, will expand to community centers in 2025. [ChannelNews Asia]

Singapore: Economic growth forecast upgraded to 3.5 percent

(fi) Singapore has revised its 2024 economic growth forecast upward to approximately 3.5 percent, citing better-than-expected performance in the first three quarters. The Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI) made the announcement on November 22, attributing the adjustment to robust growth in manufacturing, wholesale trade, and finance sectors, supported by a recovery in global electronics demand.

In the third quarter, Singapore's GDP grew by 5.4 percent year-on-year, surpassing initial estimates of 4.1 percent. The manufacturing sector led this growth, expanding by 11 percent, driven by strong demand for semiconductor chips used in smartphones and PCs.

Despite the positive outlook for manufacturing and outward-oriented services, challenges persist in consumer-facing sectors like retail and tourism, hampered by slower-than-expected international visitor recovery.

Looking ahead, MTI projects GDP growth for 2025 to moderate to a range of 1 to 3 percent, influenced by global economic uncertainties, including geopolitical tensions and potential U.S. trade policies. Nevertheless, strong domestic consumption and continued expansion in the electronics sector are expected to support steady growth in Southeast Asia. [ChannelNews Asia] [Reuters]

Thailand: Former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra calls for economic reforms and geopolitical preparedness

(lm) Former Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra has called for substantial economic reforms and a proactive approach to geopolitical changes during his keynote dialogue at the Forbes Global CEO Conference 2024 in Bangkok. The conference, which gathers leading global business and thought leaders, served as a platform for Thaksin to outline his vision for Thailand's economic and political future.

Thaksin criticized the Bank of Thailand, asserting that its overly cautious supervision of commercial banks has hindered economic development over the past decade. He argued that restrictive lending policies have limited cash flow, particularly for small enterprises, and called for a more balanced approach that prioritizes economic stimulation while maintaining financial stability. He stressed that the central bank should engage more actively with the business sector to implement practical solutions.

Thaksin also urged Thai businesses to modernize by leveraging technology to remain competitive in a rapidly evolving global economy, citing the success of platforms like China's Temu as examples. He emphasized the importance of protecting local businesses while simultaneously fostering foreign investment through policies such as taxing foreign investors operating in Thailand.

Regarding infrastructure, Thaksin voiced support for a land bridge connecting the Andaman Sea and the Gulf of Thailand over a canal project, highlighting the importance of private sector involvement to ensure commercial viability.

On global trade, Thaksin expressed concerns about potential tariff increases under U.S. President-elect Donald Trump, suggesting such policies would elevate consumer costs and further intensify the U.S.-China trade war. He viewed this as an opportunity for Thailand to attract manufacturers seeking alternative locations, provided the government offers competitive tax incentives.

Discussing global alliances, Thaksin highlighted the growing influence of Brics (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, and others) in rebalancing global finances. He encouraged stronger unity within Asean, advocating for the "One Asean" approach to achieve a cohesive economic strategy. Additionally, he proposed that the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) provide smaller economies greater access to larger markets to accelerate their growth. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Constitutional Court rejects petition seeking to bar Thaksin's political influence

(hrs) The Constitutional Court has rejected a petition accusing former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra of attempting to undermine the monarchy and influence the ruling Pheu Thai Party. Filed by lawyer Teerayut Suwankesorn under Section 49 of the Thai Constitution, the petition alleged that Thaksin was exerting undue control over Pheu Thai's policies and campaigning for the party despite legal restrictions. The court unanimously dismissed the claims, citing insufficient evidence. A related accusation regarding Thaksin's alleged involvement in a Thailand-Cambodia maritime resource-sharing plan was also dismissed in a 7-2 vote. [Bangkok Post 1] [Bangkok Post 2]

Thaksin Shinawatra, father of current Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra, returned to Thailand in 2023

after 15 years of self-imposed exile. Upon his return in August 2023, he was sentenced to eight years in prison, a term later reduced to one year under a royal pardon. On his first night of detention, Thaksin was transferred to Police General Hospital, where he remained for six months before being granted parole, never spending a night in prison.

Thaksin's six-month stay at Police General Hospital during his detention has drawn scrutiny amid allegations of preferential treatment. Justice Minister Tawee Sodsong confirmed that Thaksin paid THB 8,500 (USD 246.50) per night for his room, along with medical expenses. The National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC) has sought Thaksin's medical records to determine whether his transfer from Bangkok Remand Prison was justified. Minister Tawee defended the decision, citing the prison hospital's inability to manage Thaksin's complex medical condition, though he withheld specific details due to patient confidentiality.

The Department of Corrections stated that the House committee investigating the matter, chaired by opposition MP Rangsiman Rome, lacks authority to summon Thaksin or related officials. The department argued that the committee is duplicating work already conducted by other agencies, including the House committee on police affairs. Despite these limitations, Rangsiman has urged Thaksin to address public concerns about his hospital stay. [Bangkok Post 3] [Bangkok Post 4]

Thailand: Charter amendment before 2027 appears unlikely as double majority rule likely to persist

(msz) On November 20, a joint House-Senate committee 13-9 voted in favor of the Senate-endorsed double majority rule regarding the requirements of a referendum for the constitutional amendments.

Under the Referendum Act, a double majority rule is a requirement which specifies two conditions – the participation of more than 50 percent of eligible voters and at least 50 percent of their approval in amendments – for the result to be considered binding. The persistence of the double majority rule alongside a 180-day mandatory "cooling off" period and other political maneuvering mean that it is highly unlikely to realize charter amendment before the incumbent Pheu Thai-led government's term ends in 2027.

The voting result came despite the majority of House MPs endorsing a simple majority rule in which a

referendum is adopted with most of the voters' approval regardless of the percentage of the turnout. Some MPs also promoted "one and a half majority" - participation of more than half of eligible voters but less than 50 percent of "Yes" vote result to be adopted with the consideration of abstention votes– as a compromise. Meanwhile, spokesman of the joint committee Senator Krit Uawong said that another meeting will be held for the endorsement of the vote result on December 4. The bill on the Referendum Act will be submitted for consideration on December 6. [Bangkok Post 1] [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: The iCon Group fraud scandal widens with political and legal repercussions

(lm) The widening scandal surrounding The iCon Group, a direct sales company dealing in dietary supplements, has evolved into a high-profile legal and political controversy. The group faces allegations of public fraud, operating a pyramid scheme, and falsifying financial data, with reported victim losses totaling THB 2.95 billion (USD 85.6 million). The Department of Special Investigation (DSI) reports approximately 9,000 victims, and the case has ensnared several influential figures.

Among the accused is politician Samart Janechaijittawanich, a former deputy spokesman for the Palang Pracharath Party. The Criminal Court has issued an arrest warrant against Samart for alleged money laundering, with nearly THB 100 million (USD 2.9 million) traced through his mother's bank account. Samart claims that THB 3 million (USD 87,000) received from The iCon Group executives, including CEO Warathaphon Waratyaworrakul, were loans and donations. Arrested at a Chiang Rai temple on November 25, Samart denies the allegations and has pledged to provide a written defense. [Bangkok Post 1] [Bangkok Post 2]

Meanwhile, social media activist Ekkapop Luangprasert faces an arrest warrant for making false claims about a cryptocurrency transaction allegedly linked to the group. Ekkapop, a former advisor to Interior Minister Anutin Charnvirakul, claimed that THB 8 billion (USD 232 million) was transferred to purchase Ethereum shortly before Warathaphon's arrest, a statement police later deemed untrue. Ekkapop insists his actions were intended to support victims of the fraudulent scheme. [Bangkok Post 3]

Eighteen executives of The iCon Group, including Warathaphon, remain in custody as the DSI continues its investigation. Authorities have extended their detention to conclude questioning additional witnesses and examine financial evidence. With a December 3 deadline for submitting evidence to the state prosecutor, failure to press charges will result in the suspects' release. Investigators have also pressed further charges, including unauthorized borrowing and operating an illegal direct sales network.

The DSI reports approximately 9,000 victims of the group's fraudulent operations, with losses surpassing billions of baht. Assets seized during the investigation have been transferred to the Anti-Money Laundering Office (Amlo), and victims can now claim refunds and compensation through Amlo's website until February 17, 2025. [Bangkok Post 4] [Bangkok Post 5]

The Office of the Consumer Protection Board (OCPB) is considering revoking The iCon Group's business license. Allegations include the involvement of OCPB officers acting as "guidance angels" for the company, with an internal probe scheduled to conclude by December 16. Investigators also obtained a voice recording suggesting a potential THB 10 million (USD 290,000) bribe related to the case, which is under forensic analysis. [Bangkok Post 6]

Thailand: Pheu Thai and Bhumjaithai lead November PAO elections as People's Party gains ground

(lm/bk) In the local elections held on November 24 in Thailand, voters in Udon Thani, Phetchaburi, and Nakhon Si Thammarat provinces chose new chiefs for their Provincial Administrative Organizations (PAOs). These elections were called following the premature resignations of several PAO chiefs. A nationwide election for PAO chiefs and members is planned for February 1, with candidate applications to be accepted from December 23–27.

Udon Thani

In Udon Thani, the election was a tight race between the governing Pheu Thai Party (PTP) and the main opposition People's Party (PP), with over 1.2 million eligible voters. [see AiR No. 46, November/2024, 2] Sarawut Phetphanomporn, a candidate supported by the PTP, emerged victorious with 261,148 votes, defeating Kanisorn Khurirang from the PP, who garnered 208,032 votes.

Former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, the patriarch of the PTP, congratulated Sarawut on his win, emphasizing that Udon Thani remains a bastion for the red-shirt movement, which Thaksin has associated with the PTP. The former premier, who had campaigned for Sarawut, assured voters that Sarawut would not disappoint during his tenure as chief and pledged to personally act on it if the new chief failed to deliver on his promises. [Thai PBS World] [Bangkok Post]

On the opposing side, Pita Limchareonrat, former leader of the Move Forward Party (MFP -- the predecessor to the PP), extended his congratulations to Sarawut, Thaksin, and the PTP for their election victory while also offering encouragement to Kanisorn and the PP. He noted that, even though the election results were not in their favor, the disparity between the PP's vote share and the PTP's votes had diminished substantially, demonstrating tangible progress. Pita expressed deep appreciation for the people of Udon Thani, especially those who traveled back home to vote, calling them the "powerbank" that empowers the team to continue working toward their goals. [X (formerly, Twitter) 1, in Thai]

Back in 2019, the Future Forward Party (FFP -- the grand predecessor of the PP) received only 17.92 percent of the total votes, much lower than the PTP's 40.24 percent. In the 2020 PAO election, the vote share achieved by the Progressive Movement (an initiative launched by former FFP leader Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit and other ex-FFP members following the party's dissolution in 2020 to advocate for democratic reforms in Thailand) edged up to 26.74 percent, compared to the PTP's 46.92 percent. By the 2023 general election, the MFP began narrowing the margin, capturing 35.03 percent of the votes and securing one constituency seat, while the PTP earned 41.92 percent and won seven constituency seats in the province. Now, in this PAO election, the PP has amassed 41.53 percent, with the PTP at 50.63 percent. [X (formerly, Twitter) 2, in Thai]

Phetchaburi

In Phetchaburi, former PAO Chief Chaiya Angkinan was re-elected with 169,208 votes, defeating his challenger Kris Kaewyoo, a former MP, who received 57,574 votes. [Thairath 1, in Thai]

Nakhon Si Thammarat

In Nakhon Si Thammarat, Warin Chinwong, a member of the Nakhon Khemkheng group and aligned with the Bhumjaithai Party, won the race with 331,460 votes.

She defeated several other candidates, particularly former PAO Chief Kanokporn Dejdecho, who had 304,809 votes and is associated with the Democrat Party. Given that southern Thailand has long been a political stronghold for the Democrat Party, this de facto victory for the Bhumjaithai Party marks a historic shift in the local political landscape of Nakhon Si Thammarat. [Thairath 2, in Thai] [Thansettakij, in Thai]

Surin

Meanwhile, the PAO election in Surin took place on November 23. Thanaporn Mungcharoenphorn triumphed with 219,098 votes, while her brother-in-law, Phornchai Mungcharoenphorn, finished second with 209,386 votes. The contest featured a family rivalry, with both candidates hailing from the influential Mungcharoenphorn family. Thanaporn, married to Pakorn Mungcharoenphorn, a constituency MP for Surin from the Bhumjaithai Party, has previously played a pivotal role in securing local votes for her husband. Regardless of who wins, both candidates are closely tied to the Buriram-based political network led by Newin Chidchob, the patriarch of the Bhumjaithai Party. [Thairath 3, in Thai]

Thailand: Government defends Thai-Cambodian maritime MoU amid protests and development plans

(ac/lm) The Thai government has reiterated its confidence in the 2001 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Cambodia over joint resource development in the Gulf of Thailand, dismissing concerns that it could lead to widespread protests or compromise national interests. The MoU, signed during the tenure of Thaksin Shinawatra – father of incumbent Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra and the de facto leader of the ruling Pheu Thai Party – as premier, establishes a framework for resolving territorial disputes and exploring joint development opportunities.

Former People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) leader Sondhi Limthongkul, known for his pivotal role in Thai politics, has emerged as a prominent critic of the government. Sondhi co-founded the PAD, also known as the "Yellow Shirts," in 2005, leading mass protests against Thaksin that culminated in the 2006 coup. The PAD also played a significant role in protests that paralyzed Bangkok's airports in 2008, showcasing its ability to mobilize large-scale civil disobedience.

At a recent forum at Thammasat University, Sondhi criticized Prime Minister Paetongtarn for lacking expertise and suggested organizing monthly public discussions to "educate the public." While he denied immediate plans for protests, Sondhi stated he would lead demonstrations if political tensions escalated.

Against this backdrop, Deputy Prime Minister Phumtham Wechayachai – a Pheu Thai Party heavyweight – downplayed the possibility of mass protests, emphasizing that peaceful assemblies are constitutional rights but warning of the economic consequences of unrest. He cited previous PAD-led protests that disrupted the country, including the 2008 airport shutdowns. Interior Minister Anutin Charnvirakul echoed Phumtham's remarks, asserting coalition unity amid speculation of internal disagreements over unrelated issues, such as the Khao Kradong land dispute.

Former PAD leader Panthep Phuaphongphan indicated that the November 24 forum gauged public sentiment but stopped short of calling for protests. Panthep also voiced skepticism about the government's approach to maritime negotiations under the MoU, questioning its transparency and alignment with national interests. [Bangkok Post 1]

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs rejected a petition to annul the MoU, emphasizing that unilateral cancellation could damage Thailand's global reputation and economic interests. Vice-Minister Russ Jalichandra described the agreement as a necessary tool for resolving disputes and warned that canceling it would escalate sovereignty issues without offering resolutions. [Bangkok Post 2]

In parallel, to strengthen cross-border ties, Thailand has announced plans to construct a permanent "Chanthaburi-Pailin Friendship Bridge" connecting Chanthaburi province with Cambodia's Pailin province. Estimated at THB 15 million (USD 435,000), the bridge will replace a temporary steel structure, enhancing trade and tourism. In 2024, cross-border trade in Chanthaburi reached THB 26 billion (USD 754 million), with THB 6.12 billion (USD 177 million) attributed to the Ban Pakkad checkpoint. [Bangkok Post 3]

Thailand: Hospital tycoon accused of massive fraud flees to China as authorities escalate investigation

(lm) Dr. Boon Vanasin, founder of Thonburi Healthcare Group (THG), is at the center of a massive fraud

investigation involving over THB 16 billion (USD 464 million) in alleged fraudulent investments in medical projects. Dr. Boon fled Thailand on September 29, traveling to Hong Kong and then China, prompting Thai authorities to request an Interpol red notice for his arrest.

The fraud allegations involve multiple medical ventures, including hospitals in Laos and Vietnam, a cancer center, and a wellness facility in Thailand. Dr. Boon reportedly leveraged his reputation as a prominent hospital executive to attract investments, promising substantial returns. While initial payments were made, defaults soon followed, leading to financial losses for numerous victims. Authorities have received over 527 complaints related to failed payments and bad cheques, with damages exceeding THB 7.5 billion (USD 217.5 million) so far.

The case has expanded significantly, with the Central Investigation Bureau (CIB) urging the Department of Special Investigation (DSI) to classify the matter as a special case under guidelines requiring at least 300 victims or losses exceeding THB 100 million (USD 2.9 million). Metropolitan Police report 247 complainants in Bangkok alone, with further cases reported nationwide.

Dr. Boon's ex-wife, Jaruwan Vanasin, 79, and daughter, Nalin Vanasin, 51, surrendered to authorities on November 23. Both denied involvement, claiming their signatures were forged on approximately 200 documents tied to fraudulent healthcare investments. Despite their denials, police detained them for further questioning. Their lawyer reiterated their innocence, asserting that they had no role in Dr. Boon's alleged schemes.

In addition to public fraud and money laundering charges, Dr. Boon is accused of forging his former daughter-in-law's signature to secure loans. Police have seized assets and arrested other suspects connected to the case, including individuals involved in supporting the fraudulent operations. Investigators anticipate the number of victims and the total damages to rise as complaints from across Thailand are consolidated.

Dr. Boon's prior controversies include spreading false information to inflate THG's stock price in 2022 and misrepresenting deals to import COVID-19 vaccines. Authorities are now working to extradite him from China while intensifying efforts to uncover the full extent of his fraudulent network. Should the DSI accept the case as a special investigation, it will take over responsibilities, including pursuing suspects and

coordinating international efforts to apprehend Dr. Boon. [Bangkok Post 1] [Bangkok Post 2] [Bangkok Post 3]

Thailand: Ministers summoned as Khao Kradong land dispute escalates

(lm) The House committee on land, natural resources, and the environment has summoned the interior and transport ministers to address the Khao Kradong land dispute in Buri Ram's Muang district, where 5,083 rai (8.1 square kilometers) of land is claimed by the State Railway of Thailand (SRT). The controversy centers on land rights documents issued by the Department of Land (DoL) to private individuals, despite a Supreme Court ruling affirming the SRT's ownership and ordering the DoL to reassess the land boundaries.

The DoL's land committee has resisted revoking the land titles, citing recommendations under Section 61 of the Land Code. The SRT is appealing this decision, and the House committee plans to investigate whether the DoL exceeded its authority. Concerns have also been raised about potential intervention by local officials to protect an influential political clan. [Bangkok Post 1]

Separately, a petition has been filed with the Central Criminal Court for Corruption and Misconduct Cases against nine officials, including Interior permanent secretary Ansit Sampantarat and DoL director-general Pornpoth Penpas, accusing them of negligence and ethical misconduct. Former Chief Ombudsman adviser Natthaporn Toprayoon criticized the DoL for failing to comply with the Supreme Court's ruling.

Transport Minister Suriya Jungrungreangkit reaffirmed the SRT's legal ownership of the land and pledged to resolve the situation involving approximately 900 residents occupying the disputed area within 30 days. Possible solutions include allowing residents to rent the land, though lengthy litigation may still be required to reclaim the plots.

The first court session on the corruption case is set for December 9. Meanwhile, the House committee on land rights, chaired by People's Party MP Thitikan Thitipruethikul, will meet on November 27 to discuss the dispute further. [Bangkok Post 2] [Bangkok Post 3]

Thailand: 'Cyanide killer' sentenced to death for murder, linked to 14 other

deaths

The Criminal Court has sentenced Sararat Rangsiwuthaporn, 37, to death for the premeditated murder of her friend, Siriporn Khanwong, during a merit-making trip in Ratchaburi in April 2023. Sararat poisoned Siriporn with potassium cyanide, causing her to collapse and die near the Mae Klong River. Instead of helping, Sararat fled with the victim's valuables, worth THB 154,630 (USD 4,487).

The court found fatal levels of cyanide in Siriporn's system and evidence that Sararat had purchased the poison. Traces were discovered in her car, where experts believe the victim ingested the substance. Investigations revealed Sararat had significant debts, linked to online gambling losses, and suspicious financial transactions totaling THB 95 million (USD 2.76 million) between 2020 and 2023.

Police suspect Sararat of poisoning 14 others between 2015 and 2023, primarily to evade debts or steal valuables. Most victims were poisoned through food, with only one survivor.

The court also sentenced Sararat's ex-husband, former police chief Withoon Rangsiwuthaporn, and her lawyer, Thanicha Aeksuwannawat, to two years in prison for aiding in concealing the victim's belongings. Withoon's sentence was reduced to one year and four months for cooperation, and both were released on bail of THB 100,000 (USD 2,900) pending appeals.

The court ordered all three to pay Siriporn's family THB 2.34 million (USD 67,860) in compensation. Sararat, arrested in April 2023 while pregnant, miscarried later that year. She remains detained at the Central Women's Correctional Institution. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Royal Police Cadet Academy admits sexual harassment of first-year cadet

(msz) Deputy commissioner of Thai Royal Police Cadet Academy (RPCA) Pol Maj Gen Sakrapee Priewpanich confirmed the social media report of a sexual harassment case of a first-year police cadet committed by an instructor and his friend. He added that chief of Cadet Command Division Pol Maj Gen Jirachart Charoensri had been tasked with summoning both sides for investigation and appropriate legal action. Furthermore, the victim, who has the option to file a criminal complaint, is consulting his parents about

which further actions to take. The committee will also be set up to undergo a thorough investigation and decide whether the instructor should be suspended from duty or removed from his post entirely. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Court dismisses first global lawsuit against NSO Group over Pegasus surveillance

(bk) The Civil Court has dismissed a lawsuit filed by activist Jatupat Boonpattararaksa against the Israeli company NSO Group, the maker of the Pegasus spyware, citing insufficient evidence to prove that the company violated his privacy. This case is significant as it is the first ever Pegasus-related lawsuit to reach a verdict. The use of Pegasus spyware to target political dissidents in Thailand was revealed in 2021 when Apple notified users of possible spyware infections, shedding light on the controversial and widespread use of Pegasus for surveillance globally.

What is the Pegasus spyware?

Pegasus spyware, a highly advanced and intrusive surveillance software created by NSO Group, is primarily sold to governments and law enforcement agencies for monitoring targets such as journalists, activists, and political figures. The spyware exploits vulnerabilities in mobile operating systems like iOS and Android, allowing attackers to secretly access private data, eavesdrop on conversations, and remotely control the device without the user's knowledge.

Pegasus allegedly used in activist monitoring

Jatupat, who was one of 35 Thai citizens allegedly targeted by Pegasus during the mass protests in Thailand in 2020-2021, filed the lawsuit in July 2023. This case marked the first global legal challenge against NSO Group in connection with its spyware. Jatupat claimed that NSO's spyware infiltrated his devices, accessed his personal data, and was used in collaboration with Thai state agencies. He sought an injunction to halt such activities, demanded the deletion of any data obtained through the spyware, and requested 2.5 million baht (USD 72,527) in damages for the alleged privacy violation.

Other than Jatupat, other individuals targeted by Pegasus included lawyer Arnon Nampa, who has been imprisoned for lèse-majesté and faces over 10 additional legal charges, as well as Panusaya

Sithijirawattanakul, a prominent student leader in the pro-democracy movement.

During the Gen Prayut Chan-o-cha administration, the Minister of Digital Economy and Society once admitted in parliament that surveillance tools were employed for cases involving national security and drug-related investigations, without specifying the software's name. Days later, however, he reversed his stance, denying any such use.

Amnesty International's findings on the widespread misuse of Pegasus

Amnesty International has traced Pegasus spyware infections to devices across the globe. A 2021 investigation by Amnesty and Forbidden Stories revealed the spyware has been misused against journalists and human rights defenders, challenging NSO's claims that it is used solely by governments to combat crime and terrorism.

In this case, NSO Group's defense maintained that the company only manufactures and supplies Pegasus to governments, not involved in the operation of the spyware itself. The company emphasized that it does not access client data unless explicitly authorized by the customer and that it screens potential buyers before sales. NSO also noted that it terminates contracts if misuse is detected.

Thai court upholds NSO's position

According to the court, Jatupat failed to provide sufficient evidence to substantiate his claims. While Jatupat presented an Apple notification regarding potential spyware threats, the email did not match his personal address and was concluded to be irrelevant to him. In addition, he did not present any expert witnesses from Citizen Lab, the organization that confirmed the infection of his phone, nor did he provide forensic evidence explaining how the analysis was carried out. As a result, the court dismissed the case, ruling that the evidence amounted to hearsay.

Jatupat's lawyer criticized the ruling, stating that it placed an impossible burden of proof on Jatupat, who lacked the resources to gather such technical evidence. She also noted the disparity in access to information between Jatupat and NSO Group, as the spyware manufacturer has greater access to the relevant data. Citizen Lab, she added, was reluctant to disclose its spyware detection methods for fear of NSO altering its software to avoid future detection.

Jatupat emphasized that his main goal was not financial compensation, but justice and accountability for the use of spyware to target political activists. Prior to the trial, Jatupat proposed that NSO disclose its purchase agreement with Thai authorities in exchange for withdrawing the lawsuit, but this offer was rejected. NSO responded with a settlement offer of THB 1.25 million (USD 43,516), but it included a non-disclosure agreement and no admission of wrongdoing, which Jatupat refused. [Prachatai English] [Thai Enquirer] [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Civil society launches campaign to combat discrimination

(lm) Over 80 civil groups in Thailand have initiated the "Building Bridges, Breaking Barriers" campaign, calling on the government to take decisive action against discrimination targeting vulnerable populations. Organized by the Foundation for Action on Inclusion Rights (FAIR), People's Movement to Eliminate Discrimination (MovED), and the Thai Health Promotion Foundation (ThaiHealth), the campaign seeks to promote systemic change and legal reforms to ensure a fairer and more inclusive society.

The campaign advocates for raising awareness and improving knowledge about diversity, urging the government and healthcare providers to address issues related to gender, ethnicity, mental health, prisoners' healthcare, and safe abortion. It highlights the need for standardized, inclusive, and accessible healthcare for all, with efforts to inform citizens of their entitlements under universal health coverage. Compensation for those mistreated by medical professionals is also part of the proposed reforms.

The initiative emphasizes the necessity of allocating budgets and investing in innovative solutions to promote equality. It calls for greater community involvement in monitoring government initiatives and demands revisions to existing laws and regulations to eliminate systemic biases. The groups have specifically urged the government to support a new Anti-Discrimination Bill to safeguard fair access to healthcare and other essential services. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Burmese migrants exploited in cross-border trafficking and job scams

(lm) Two incidents involving Burmese nationals highlight the exploitation and vulnerabilities of migrant workers in Thailand, with many falling victim to trafficking and fraudulent schemes.

In Pattani on November 23, Thai police intercepted a pickup truck carrying 29 Burmese migrants packed into an enclosed box, attempting to cross into Malaysia for work. The migrants, exhausted after a three-day journey, were connected to brokers operating in both Thailand and Malaysia. The Thai driver admitted to being paid THB 1,500 (USD 43.50) per person by a broker to transport the group from Hat Yai to Narathiwat. All passengers and the driver were taken into custody and now face legal proceedings. [Bangkok Post 1]

In another case, approximately 100 Myanmar workers staged a protest outside a factory in Samut Sakhon after falling victim to a job scam. Brokers, introduced by the factory's security guard, had charged each worker THB 3,000–7,000 (USD 87–203) for nonexistent jobs that were supposed to begin on November 20. After collecting the fees, the brokers disappeared. The factory's management clarified that no hiring was underway and denied any connection to the brokers. [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: Prime Minister calls for action to combat violence against women and children

(acs) Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra is promoting anti-violence campaigns against women and children in an effort to garner public support. November has been designated as National Violence Elimination Against Children and Women Month since 1999, and the government is attempting to link it to the United Nations' International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women on November 25. Paetongtarn proposed a new plan under this framework for this year to raise public awareness and support for combating violence.

She emphasized the essential role of the family in society's security, strength, and unity. However, violence has become a significant agenda as a societal problem rather than an individual-based one. In this respect, violence against women, children, and other vulnerable groups should be addressed.

Meanwhile, the National Human Rights Commission of Thailand (NHRC) released a statement urging the government to follow the principles of the Convention

on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women to address and prevent violence against women. Furthermore, the statement emphasizes the need to establish a protection mechanism specifically for individuals who are victims of violence. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Retail loyalty program apologizes for customer data breach

(lm) The 1 Co, a subsidiary of the Central Group, Thailand's largest multinational conglomerate, has apologized for a data breach affecting its loyalty program members. The breach potentially impacted the personal data of around 5 million customers. The company stated that an initial investigation found no flaws in its systems and assured customers that security measures had been strengthened.

The Office of the Personal Data Protection Commission (PDPC) is investigating the breach and has instructed The 1 Co to provide a detailed report within seven days. There were reports of a hacker demanding ransom and threatening to sell the stolen data. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Health authorities detect first case of new vaping disease

(lm) Thai health officials have reported the first case of a new vaping-related disease, E-cigarette or Vaping-associated Lung Injury (Evali), in a 32-year-old man from Buri Ram. The patient, who had been using e-cigarettes heavily—about 400 puffs per day—developed acute pneumonia and required a ventilator. Despite testing negative for infections like Covid-19, the man's lung condition worsened rapidly, and doctors identified white patches on his lungs.

Health authorities fear more cases of Evali as e-cigarette use remains prevalent in Thailand, despite being banned. E-cigarettes are easily accessible in the country, and authorities have been unable to curb their sale. The Department of Disease Control warns of the dangers of e-cigarettes, which contain harmful substances like nicotine and heavy metals, and advises people, particularly those with chronic conditions, to avoid their use. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: October exports surge 14.6 percent year-on-year, beating forecasts

(lm) Thailand's customs-cleared exports saw a significant increase of 14.6 percent in October compared to the same period last year, according to the Commerce Ministry. This performance exceeded analysts' expectations of a 5.2 percent rise and marked a notable acceleration from September's 1.1 percent growth.

Exports totaled USD 27.22 billion in October, driven by strong shipments of technology-related products, particularly computers, equipment, and components. Imports during the month rose by 15.9 percent year-on-year to USD 28.02 billion, surpassing the forecasted 6.5 percent increase and resulting in a trade deficit of USD 0.79 billion.

The Trade Policy and Strategy Office expects exports to grow strongly in the final quarter of 2024, with an annual increase of 4 percent, outpacing the ministry's target. From January to October, exports rose by 4.9 percent compared to the same period in 2023, highlighting a sustained recovery in this key economic sector. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Surge in foreign investments and structural shifts in manufacturing sectors

(acs/lm) Thailand is witnessing a significant uptick in foreign investments this year, particularly in high-tech and innovative industries, while also grappling with restructuring in its automotive manufacturing sector.

An investment report from the Ministry of Commerce's Department of Business Development revealed that foreign investment in the Eastern Economic Corridor surged by 128 percent in the first ten months of 2024, reaching a total of THB 45.74 billion (USD 1.33 billion). The corridor attracted 251 investors, with Japan leading with 86 investors contributing THB 16.18 billion (USD 471 million) and China following with 58 investors and THB 8.03 billion (USD 234 million) in investments. Key sectors include automotive, machinery, engineering services, and other innovative technologies. [Royal Thai Government]

Adding to this momentum, Chinese companies are preparing to inject an additional THB 90 billion (USD 2.61 billion) into Thailand's economy. These investments focus on electric vehicle (EV) battery

production, data center equipment manufacturing, and biodegradable packaging. The Board of Investment (BoI) highlighted that such projects will not only boost Thailand's clean energy initiatives and EV industry but also strengthen capabilities in artificial intelligence and telecommunications.

During a recent visit to Shanghai, Deputy Prime Minister Pichai Chunhavajira and BoI officials secured interest from six Chinese firms, including two in EV battery cell production and three in chip and telecommunication equipment manufacturing. Another company plans to construct a bio-packaging facility, utilizing bagasse to produce eco-friendly packaging. The delegation also discussed battery recycling challenges with Chinese energy leaders, emphasizing the need for regulatory frameworks and advanced recycling technologies. [Bangkok Post 1]

Amid this surge in foreign investments, Thailand's automotive sector is undergoing significant restructuring. Nissan Motor, a major player in Southeast Asia, announced plans to consolidate operations in Thailand, resulting in up to 1,000 job cuts. The company will reduce production at its Plant No.1, which has a capacity of 220,000 units, shifting some operations to the smaller Plant No.2 with a capacity of 150,000 units.

The move comes as Nissan struggles with declining sales in Thailand, which fell 30 percent to just 14,000 units in the last fiscal year. Japanese automakers face mounting competition from Chinese manufacturers like BYD and SAIC, particularly in the burgeoning EV market. Nissan emphasized that the consolidation aims to upgrade its equipment and confirmed no plant closures, aligning with its global strategy to cut 9,000 jobs across various markets. [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: Government receives economic reform proposals to boost growth

(lm) Thailand's government is considering a white paper with recommendations aimed at revitalizing the country's struggling economy, with the goal of achieving 3 percent growth by the end of next year. The proposals were presented during the 42nd national seminar held by the Thai Chamber of Commerce and the Board of Trade, which took place over the weekend in Chon Buri. Deputy Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul received the paper, which includes a range of suggestions from debt relief for small businesses to measures addressing flooding,

regulatory controls on energy prices, and increased support for provincial areas.

Sanan Angubolkul, chairman of the Thai Chamber of Commerce, highlighted that once the economy is restructured, particularly by tackling household debt and improving income distribution, the country could potentially achieve a growth rate of up to 5 percent. The suggestions are divided into three main categories.

The first category stresses the need to increase confidence in the government's ability to manage the economy, both domestically and internationally. This could be achieved by lowering the cost of living and reducing operating costs for businesses. Sanan proposed controlling prices of essential products and services, such as freezing electricity and diesel prices. He also suggested the creation of a joint public-private energy committee to better regulate energy prices. Furthermore, he recommended more balanced budget distribution across the country to stimulate economic activity outside major cities, as well as a new co-payment scheme to boost consumer purchasing power in secondary provinces.

The second category focuses on improving competitiveness among small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which are vital to the economy. Sanan called for policies that would alleviate the debt burden on SMEs by suspending loan repayments or extending repayment periods. The government should also protect local businesses from unfair competition due to price dumping and low-quality imports. Additionally, Sanan emphasized the need for more investment in sectors with significant growth potential and the ability to generate employment.

The third category calls for strategies to achieve sustained economic growth, including attracting more investments. This includes fostering growth in key business sectors like food, tourism, health and wellness, logistics, and education. Sanan also emphasized the importance of emerging industries, such as AI, digital technologies, electric vehicles, and green energy, which should receive government support. He cautioned that while focusing on economic growth, the government must not neglect the recurring issue of water management, as floods and droughts could hamper development.

Sanan also noted the importance of the global economic landscape, particularly in light of Donald Trump’s potential return to the United States presidency, which could introduce new uncertainties in international trade. Despite the challenges, he stated

that a trade war would still be preferable to an actual war, highlighting the need for the government to adapt to the changing geopolitical situation.

These proposals are now under review, and the government will consider how to implement these recommendations to strengthen the economy. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Third phase of cash handout faces legal challenges amid economic goals

(lm) The Thai government's plan to implement the third phase of its cash handout stimulus program, costing THB 140 billion (USD 4.06 billion), is under scrutiny due to allegations of legal violations and political motivations. Deputy Finance Minister Julapun Amornvivat announced the initiative, set for the second quarter of 2025, as part of efforts to stimulate economic growth, which is forecast at 3 percent for next year.

The program has already disbursed THB 10,000 (USD 290) each to 14.5 million people. An additional THB 40 billion (USD 1.16 billion) is earmarked for elderly recipients during Chinese New Year in January, alongside THB 40 billion allocated to reduce farmers' production costs early next year.

Southeast Asia's second-largest economy grew by 3 percent in the third quarter of 2024, its fastest rate in two years. However, overall growth for the year is expected at 2.6 percent, lagging behind regional peers due to high household debt, borrowing costs, and subdued demand from key trading partner China. Despite recent interest rate cuts, the Bank of Thailand has indicated no further adjustments are expected in December. [Bangkok Post 1]

The THB 40 billion cash handout for elderly citizens has sparked criticism, with former election commissioner Somchai Srisutthiyakorn alleging potential violations of the State Fiscal and Financial Disciplines Act. The distribution, scheduled for January 29—days before the February 1 provincial administrative organization (PAO) elections—has been accused of being a political tool to sway public opinion.

Somchai argued that the government's classification of all individuals aged 60 and above as vulnerable lacks merit and serves as a pretext to avoid accusations of electioneering. He warned that this could lead to a petition to impeach the government for breaching

Section 9 of the Act, which prohibits actions that could politically influence the public or harm the national economy.

Critics, including former PAO chief Niphon Bunyamanee, suggested the handout benefits government-aligned candidates, disadvantaging opposition contenders. Niphon urged the government to prioritize sustainable economic measures like investment in digital technology and artificial intelligence for long-term growth.

Former senator Somchai Sawangkarn echoed concerns, citing potential legal violations and emphasizing the need for transparency and adherence to fiscal discipline. Critics argue that while short-term cash injections may provide immediate relief, they do not address underlying economic issues. [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: Rising household debt prompts government interventions to avoid debt traps

(acs//lm) Thailand's household debt reached THB 16.3 trillion (USD 472.7 billion) in the second quarter of 2024, equivalent to 89.6 percent of GDP. While this represents a slight decline in the debt-to-GDP ratio from 90.7 percent in the previous quarter, the National Economic and Social Development Council (NESDC) has raised concerns about the rising trend in consumer loans, which now constitute 27.9 percent of household debt, up from 25 percent in the first quarter. The NESDC warns this increase could push households into a debt trap, forcing them to take new loans to repay existing obligations.

Overdue personal loans exceeding 90 days totaled THB 1.16 trillion (USD 33.6 billion) in the second quarter, reflecting 8.48 percent of total loans, up from 8.01 percent. Mortgage defaults, particularly on loans under THB 3 million (USD 86,900), have also risen, with some households prioritizing other debts over housing. Informal loans, estimated at THB 67 billion (USD 1.94 billion) last year, pose an additional challenge as financial institutions maintain strict lending criteria. [Bangkok Post 1]

To address these issues, the Thai government has introduced a three-year interest suspension plan targeting overdue home, car, and small- and medium-sized enterprise (SME) loans. Under the program, eligible loans must meet specific thresholds—THB 3 million for home and SME loans and THB 800,000 for

car loans—and be overdue for up to one year. Banks will be compensated for lost interest by reducing their contributions to the Financial Institution Development Fund (FIDF) from 0.46 percent to 0.23 percent of deposits.

The Thai Bankers' Association has endorsed the plan, emphasizing its importance for financial stability. The FIDF, established in 1985, has played a key role in stabilizing Thailand's financial system during crises, including the 1997 financial crisis. The remaining FIDF debt stands at THB 550 billion (USD 16 billion), with full repayment expected by 2031. [The Bank of Thailand]

The NESDC highlighted the need for targeted measures to address rising informal loans, consumer debt, and mortgage defaults. It also noted that recent flooding has exacerbated financial strain on households, impacting debt repayment and delaying welfare card reviews for low-income families earning less than THB 100,000 (USD 2,900) annually. The government plans to reconvene in early 2025 to finalize welfare card eligibility criteria.

Meanwhile, unemployment in the third quarter of 2024 rose slightly to 1.02 percent, with agricultural employment shrinking by 3.4 percent, partly due to flooding. Non-agricultural sectors grew by 1.4 percent, with notable gains in transportation (14 percent) and hospitality (6.1 percent). However, manufacturing contracted by 1.4 percent, particularly in electronics and automotive production.

Amid these challenges, the government continues to focus on economic recovery and workforce adaptation to support new investments expected to require 170,000 skilled workers. [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: Government shifts focus to harvest cost subsidies for rice farmers

(lm) The Thai government is set to replace its criticized fertilizer co-payment scheme with a programme aimed at reducing rice farmers' harvest costs, according to Agriculture Minister Narumon Pinyosinwat. A revised proposal will be presented to the National Rice Policy Committee next week for cabinet approval.

The fertilizer subsidy scheme, which provided THB 500 (USD 14.50) per rai up to 20 rai per farmer, required participants to pay half the cost upfront. This was deemed impractical by farmers, most of whom have already begun harvesting for the 2024-25 season. The scheme, initially budgeted at THB 29.9 billion (USD

870.6 million), was scheduled to run from July 2024 to May 2025 but is now expected to be scrapped.

In its place, the government plans to implement a harvest cost assistance programme alongside measures to stabilize paddy rice prices for the 2024-25 season. The stabilization plan, approved earlier this month, involves a budget of THB 60 billion (USD 1.75 billion) to support 8.5 million tons of paddy rice. It includes loans for farmers delaying rice sales, funding for farmers' organizations to enhance value-added processing, and support for private warehouse operators participating in the scheme.

Natthakit Khongthip, director-general of the Rice Department, noted that while farmers welcome the new harvest assistance programme, many are pushing for financial aid of THB 1,000 (USD 29) per rai. The rice policy committee may consider increasing the proposed aid amount during its review. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Council approves big BMA debt fulfillment budget

(lm) The Bangkok Metropolitan Council has approved a THB 14.54 billion (USD 421.6 million) budget requested by the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) to pay off debts owed to Bangkok Mass Transit System Plc (BTSC), the operator of the BTS Skytrain. This allocation is aimed at addressing the outstanding debts related to the operation and maintenance of the BTS Green Line, in compliance with a ruling from the Supreme Administrative Court issued in July.

As of November 1, the BMA's financial reserves for the 2025 fiscal year amounted to THB 81.43 billion (USD 2.35 billion), with unencumbered funds totaling THB 38.3 billion (USD 1.1 billion). Councillor Napapol Jirakul from Bangkok Noi district pointed out that the BMA's total liabilities amount to around THB 40 billion (USD 1.12 billion), incurring daily interest costs of THB 7 million (USD 196,000). He emphasized that immediate repayment of the debts could save more than THB 100 million (USD 2.9 million) in interest, which could be used for other development projects.

The council approved the proposal with a majority vote of 37 members. A 24-member ad hoc committee has been formed to review the ordinance, with 45 days to deliberate and a 10-day amendment period to finalize the draft. Governor Chadchart Sittipunt stated that the Supreme Administrative Court's decision, which included findings from the National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC), negated the need for further

appeals. Requests for more information on the NACC findings were, however, denied. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Labour minister backs bill to protect 20 million informal workers

(lm) Labour Minister Phiphat Ratchakitprakarn is advocating for a bill to enhance protections and welfare for Thailand's estimated 20 million informal workers, including delivery riders, farmers, vendors, and digital creators. The bill, reviewed by the Council of State, requires the registration of informal workers to address their vulnerability and formulate policies tailored to their needs.

The bill proposes dividing informal workers into self-employed and partly dependent categories, creating a fund to support their welfare. Registration will improve government targeting of relief and ensure better budget allocation.

A ministry project has already attracted over 17,000 interested registrants, with 9 million expected in the first year. Labour volunteers and community leaders are promoting awareness nationwide.

The initiative was first submitted under former Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin and reaffirmed by Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra. Following cabinet approval, the bill will proceed to parliament for review. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Labour Ministry studies Swedish pension model to reform social security

Labour Minister Phiphat Ratchakitprakarn led a delegation to Stockholm to explore Sweden's pension system, aiming to modernize Thailand's Social Security Office (SSO) scheme in response to its aging population. The visit focused on sustainable fund management, investment strategies, and enhancing member services.

Discussions included flexible retirement ages, pension payment customization, and setting up a "buffer fund" to balance contributions and benefits. Sweden's pension index, which adjusts payments based on factors like wages and life expectancy, was highlighted as a potential model.

Sweden’s system, as shared by Pension Agency chief Anna Pettersson Westerberg, provides over 50 types of

benefits, funded by contributions from the government, employers, and individuals, with voluntary options and workforce retention incentives. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Dispute over pharmacist-led medication scheme sparks legal and public debate

(bk) A legal battle between the Medical Council of Thailand and the National Health Security Office (NHSO) over a pharmacist-led medication scheme under the Universal Coverage Scheme (UCS) has intensified concerns about patient safety and access to healthcare. The policy, implemented in October 2022, allows patients to obtain free medications for minor ailments—such as headaches, nausea, and stomachaches—directly from registered pharmacies without consulting a doctor.

The initiative aims to reduce hospital congestion and enhance healthcare accessibility for minor conditions. According to the NHSO, over 1.79 million patients have benefited from the scheme, with a 90 percent recovery rate and no serious complications reported. The Pharmacy Council supports the program, arguing that it enables pharmacists to act as initial screeners for patients while adhering to safety protocols, such as reviewing medical histories and referring patients to doctors if symptoms persist.

However, the Medical Council opposes the scheme, arguing that allowing pharmacists to diagnose and prescribe medications compromises patient safety. They contend that seemingly minor symptoms could mask serious conditions requiring a doctor's physical examination and diagnostic tests, which are beyond the scope of pharmacists' expertise. Civil society groups, including the Thailand Consumer Council, have expressed alarm, suggesting the Medical Council's objections may risk undermining a program that has eased access to care for millions.

Initially, the Administrative Court dismissed the Medical Council's petition to revoke the NHSO's announcement, citing its late filing beyond the 90-day limit. However, the Supreme Administrative Court allowed the case to proceed, citing public interest. The Pharmacy Council has questioned whether the Medical Council's resistance is rooted in safety concerns or a reluctance to cede authority to pharmacists.

Public Health Minister Somsak Thepsuthin has proposed forming a joint committee between the

Medical Council and NHSO to address concerns and establish clearer guidelines for pharmacists prescribing medications. This initiative seeks to balance the benefits of reducing hospital overcrowding and improving healthcare access with ensuring patient safety. [Bangkok Post] [Prachatai English] [Thai PBS World]

Thailand: Feasibility study underway for Songkhla Lake crossing project

(lm) The Department of Rural Roads (DoRR) is conducting a feasibility study to develop an alternative route across Songkhla Lake, connecting Muang district with Singha Nakhon district. The study, which is evaluating the viability of a bridge or a tunnel, is expected to produce initial findings next month.

Currently, motorists rely on a car ferry service operated by the Songkhla Provincial Administrative Organization (PAO), which has faced criticism due to delays and long queues. Calls for an alternative route have grown, with over 40,000 respondents expressing support for a new crossing in a survey conducted by provincial authorities.

The ferry service currently operates five ferries making 250 trips daily, transporting approximately 3,800 cars, 1,000 motorcycles and tricycles, and 20,000 passengers. Despite this, the service incurs annual losses of about THB 35 million (USD 1.015 million).

Concerns have been raised about potential environmental impacts and the effects on local fishing communities. However, many agree that an alternative route would benefit travel and tourism in the area.

The study will be completed this year, followed by design work in 2025-2026. Construction is slated to begin in 2027 and finish in 2029. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Transport ministry proposes flood mitigation measures for northern provinces

(lm) The Transport Ministry will propose a comprehensive flood mitigation plan for Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai during a mobile cabinet meeting in Chiang Mai later this week. Transport Permanent Secretary Chayatan Phromsorn announced that the plan addresses both short-term and long-term

measures to tackle recurring floods and landslides in the northern provinces.

A task force convened by the ministry emphasized the use of Digital Elevation Models (DEMs) to analyze topographical and hydrological data, including transport networks and urban development patterns. Key recommendations include routine dredging to clear sediment from waterways, demolishing structures that obstruct natural water flow, improving early warning systems, and enhancing emergency response capabilities.

The plan prioritizes critical river basins, such as the Ping River in Chiang Mai and the Kok and Sai rivers in Chiang Rai. Inspections by the Marine Department and local authorities have identified areas requiring further dredging and waterway improvements.

Addressing transboundary challenges, the Thailand-Myanmar Joint Boundary Committee recently agreed to increase the capacity of the Sai and Ruak rivers through dredging and removing encroaching structures. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Police investigate use of cadavers in Buddhist meditation practices

Authorities in Phichit province are investigating the discovery of 41 cadavers at the Pa Nakhon Chaibovorn monastery in Pho Thale district, where they were reportedly used in meditation practices. Police are working to identify the bodies and verify whether they were legally obtained and whether the deceased died of natural causes, as claimed by the monastery.

The monastery, led by Phra Ajarn Saifon Phandito, asserts that the bodies were donated by faithful members for ritualistic and mental training purposes. However, the National Office of Buddhism has been asked to review the practice, which may conflict with Buddhist principles.

Kom Pattarakulprasert, director of the Phichit Office of Buddhism, visited the site and expressed surprise at the discovery, as initial inquiries suggested no cadavers were present. He plans to consult with local clergy to determine the appropriateness of this unconventional practice. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Police dismantle two Chinese syndicates in major cybercrime

crackdown

(lm) Thai police have dismantled two Chinese-led scam networks accused of executing over 700 million fraudulent calls and one million fake SMS messages in just three days. The operations align with Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra's directive to intensify efforts against cyber and transnational crimes.

In the first operation, authorities uncovered a syndicate renting over 10,000 phone numbers starting with 02, which were used in 730 million calls to lure victims into fraudulent investment schemes. Investigations tied these operations to three companies associated with Chinese nationals, despite no physical records of their presence in Thailand. Arrest warrants were issued for 24 suspects, including nine foreigners and 15 Thais. Ten suspects have been apprehended.

The second operation led to the arrest of a Chinese national, who was caught using false base stations installed in a vehicle to send nearly one million fake SMS messages to pedestrians in Bangkok. These messages aimed to deceive recipients into fraudulent schemes. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Royal Thai Air Force to rename and restructure as ‘Royal Thai Air Force and Space’

(bk) The Royal Thai Air Force (RTAF) is planning to rename itself "The Royal Thai Air Force and Space" to reflect its broadened responsibilities in both air and space operations. This change is part of a broader restructuring initiative, which includes the creation of a National Air and Space Interests Coordination Centre. Set to be established on April 1, 2025, this center will consolidate all air and space-related duties across the RTAF and other branches of the armed forces.

The announcement was made by Air Vice Marshal Prapas Sornchaidee following a meeting of military commanders-in-chief, which was chaired by Gen Songwit Noonpackdee, the Chief of Defense Forces. The restructuring plan will also require an amendment to the Defense Ministry’s Act, which will officially rename the force. Once the amendment is finalized, it will be submitted to Thailand's Parliament for approval. [Thai PBS World]

Thailand: Forest rangers equipped with locally-made submachine guns

(msz) The Royal Forest Department has procured locally-manufactured NIN9 submachine guns from the Ministry of Defense to protect Thailand's 32 million rai (12.8 million acres) of forest zones. The weapons, designed by the Defense Industry and Energy Center, are part of the government's initiative to enhance domestic self-reliance in weapon development.

Deputy Chief Bannarak Sermthong stated that 408 forest protection units have been established nationwide to combat encroachment and illegal logging. The decision to purchase NIN9s was driven by issues with outdated and limited weapon stocks. The NIN9s were selected for their lightweight, durability, and resistance to heavy rainfall and dust.

The cost of each NIN9 is THB 95,000 (USD 2,755), significantly cheaper than imported models, which average THB 120,000 (USD 3,480) per unit. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Insurgent attacks target development projects and infrastructure in Deep South

(bk/lm) A wave of coordinated attacks across Thailand's southern provinces has heightened tensions and underscored ongoing instability in the region.

On November 20, grenade explosions at the construction site of the world's tallest Guanyin statue in Thepha district, Songkhla, injured three people, including a 9-year-old girl. The blasts destroyed property and caused fires, while threatening leaflets in Thai and Burmese warned workers in the area. The statue, a major tourism project, is slated for completion in 2026. [Bangkok Post 1] [Bangkok Post 2]

The following day, four bombs detonated along a highway in Narathiwat's Mueang district, causing no injuries but demonstrating the region's volatile security environment. Yala saw arson attacks targeting infrastructure, while in Pattani, insurgents burned car tires, further disrupting services.

Authorities have accused the Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN) insurgent group of orchestrating these attacks to derail economic development and sow division. Security has been tightened as investigations continue. [Thai PBS World 1] [Thai PBS World 2]

Timor-Leste: National Parliament approves 2025 general state budget

(mu) On November 20, Timor-Leste's National Parliament approved the 2025 General State Budget (GSB), totaling USD 2.617 billion, with 42 votes in favor, 23 against, and no abstentions. The budget prioritizes investment in strategic infrastructure, economic growth, and social welfare.

Prime Minister Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão praised the "participatory and constructive debate" and highlighted the Government's commitment to ensuring investments benefit future generations. Emphasizing that the budget is "for the people and by the people," Gusmão reiterated its focus on national development and inclusivity.

Key allocations include USD 654 million for strategic infrastructure, USD 741 million for social capital, and USD 92.2 million for health. Education receives special attention, with USD 145.8 million for infrastructure and USD 17.2 million for scholarships. Measures to strengthen public finances and combat corruption are also integral to the plan.

The Prime Minister described the budget as more than financial figures, calling it a "bold vision" and a roadmap for addressing challenges and fostering equitable growth. The document will now be submitted to the President for promulgation. [Government of Timor-Leste] [Tatoli]

Timor-Leste: F-FDTL and PNTL to conduct joint patrol operation

(mu) The Council of Ministers has approved a draft resolution to establish a joint operational team between the FALINTIL-Timor-Leste Defense Force (F-FDTL) and the Timor-Leste National Police (PNTL). This collaboration aims to ensure security, social stability, and public safety during the official ceremonies for the 49th anniversary of the proclamation of independence, as well as Christmas and New Year festivities. [Tatoli]

Vietnam: Party Central Committee and Politburo enforce reforms and disciplinary actions

(lm/hn) The Communist Party of Vietnam's leadership is intensifying efforts to address governance issues, anti-corruption initiatives, and personnel management through the work of its 13th-tenure Party Central Committee and the Politburo.

The 13th-tenure Party Central Committee, the Party's highest decision-making body between National Party Congresses, recently convened in Hanoi to discuss significant matters, including the implementation of Resolution No. 18-NQ/TW. This 2017 directive emphasizes restructuring the political system to reduce redundancies, improve governance efficiency, and modernize Vietnam's administrative apparatus. The resolution is considered a revolutionary effort in political reform and aligns with broader goals for streamlined governance. The committee also endorsed restarting the Ninh Thuan nuclear power project, emphasizing its critical role in ensuring national energy security, fostering sustainable development, and advancing Vietnam's scientific and technological capacities. Relevant agencies were directed to develop a detailed plan for the project's future.

The Party Central Committee and Politburo have implemented stringent measures against senior officials for violations of Party regulations and neglect of anti-corruption duties. Former Party officials Pham Van Vong, Ngo Duc Vuong, and Nguyen Doan Khanh were expelled from the Party for ethical misconduct, negligence in addressing corruption, and violations that resulted in significant public dissatisfaction and damage to the Party's reputation. Bui Van Cuong, former General Secretary of the National Assembly, and Nguyen Van The, former Minister of Transport, resigned from the Party Central Committee after being implicated in misconduct and inefficiencies that led to state losses. Their resignations were approved in accordance with Party regulations.

Vuong Dinh Hue, who stepped down as National Assembly chairperson in May, and Nguyen Van The received formal warnings for failing to prevent corruption and uphold Party guidelines during their tenures. Former President Vo Van Thuong was also criticized for governance failures but has not faced immediate disciplinary action due to ongoing medical treatment.

Governance failures within the Ministry of Transport for the 2021–2026 term and the Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI) across multiple terms have been highlighted, leading to further disciplinary measures against provincial and corporate leaders.

These actions are part of the Party's intensified anti-corruption campaign, known as the "blazing furnace." Under General Secretary To Lam's leadership, the campaign has targeted high-ranking officials and systemic inefficiencies. Analysts suggest that the campaign serves not only as a tool for accountability but also as a mechanism to consolidate power ahead of the 2026 National Congress, where the Politburo will select Vietnam's top leaders, including the "four pillars" of the general secretary, president, prime minister, and National Assembly chairperson.

Following the death of former General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong in July, To Lam held a dual role as general secretary and president until October, when Luong Cuong was appointed president. Cuong's appointment is seen as a transitional move ahead of the 2026 congress, which will shape the future leadership of Vietnam.[Viet Nam News] [VnExpress] [Radio Free Asia]

Vietnam: Party chief outlines bold vision for national advancement

(lm) Party General Secretary to Lam led a discussion at the Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics, outlining Vietnam's ambitions for a transformative new era. This event, preparing for the 14th National Party Congress, emphasized a vision of a strong, democratic, and developed Vietnam, aiming for high middle income by 2030 and developed socialist nation status by 2045.

Describing the streamlining of the political apparatus as a "revolution" in organizational reform, Lam stressed its importance for national development and enhancing the rights of officials, Party members, and civil servants. He called for overhauling recruitment, training, and evaluation processes to prioritize innovation, adaptability, and digital transformation.

The Party chief championed strategic breakthroughs in development mechanisms, fostering innovation, digital transformation, and green initiatives. He also highlighted the need to address corruption, inefficiency, and obstacles in priority projects, while improving the performance of State-owned enterprises. With these reforms, Lam emphasized the importance of unity, resource mobilization, and a people-centered approach to propel Vietnam onto the global stage. [Viet Nam News]

Vietnam: NA Chairman launches review of political system restructuring efforts

(lm) National Assembly Chairman Tran Thanh Man chaired the first meeting of the Steering Committee reviewing the implementation of Resolution No. 18-NQ/TW and Resolution 56/2017/QH14, aimed at restructuring Vietnam's political system for greater efficiency.

Resolution No. 18-NQ/TW, issued in October 2017, focuses on streamlining the political system by reducing redundancies, downsizing the workforce, and creating a more effective organizational structure within the political apparatus. Resolution 56/2017/QH14, adopted shortly after, complements these goals by reforming the state administrative apparatus, specifically targeting the restructuring of the National Assembly's bodies, its Standing Committee, and its Office.

Chairman Man directed National Assembly deputy chairpersons to collaborate with relevant agencies to ensure consensus on reform proposals. A key focus is refining laws governing the National Assembly's operations and developing a skilled, credible workforce to meet modern demands. [Viet Nam News]

Vietnam: Police arrest eight during violent protest over road construction in An Giang

(lm) Authorities in Vietnam have arrested eight individuals, including five members of the same family, following violent clashes during a road construction project in An Giang province. The road, which aims to connect An Giang to neighboring Kien Giang province, requires the relocation of 641 households. While most have complied, six families have refused to vacate their land, citing inadequate compensation.

On the morning of November 18, tensions escalated when workers, accompanied by police and soldiers, attempted to proceed with the project. Protesters allegedly blocked access with excavators and attacked law enforcement with petrol bombs and other weapons. State media reported injuries to five officers but provided no visual evidence of the alleged harm or damage to equipment.

Among those arrested were Le Thi Ngoc Nhan, her husband Le Van Dien, their sons Le Phuoc Hoang and Le Phuoc Sang, and their nephew Nguyen Van Loc.

Three other residents—Le Cong Triet, Nguyen Thi Bich Thuy, and Le Thi Thuong—were also detained. Photographs published online showed one family member holding a lit Molotov cocktail on a rooftop and wearing a bloodied shirt.

The dispute dates back to 2019 when district authorities offered Ms. Nhan's family compensation equivalent to USD 10,500 for just over 120 square meters of land. Dissatisfied, the family lodged complaints, resulting in only a minimal increase in the compensation offer by 2021. Their subsequent petition to the central government was dismissed as invalid, further fueling their resistance.

Land disputes have become increasingly common in Vietnam as rising land values and government-backed development projects encroach on privately owned or farmed lands. Critics argue that compensation often fails to reflect market rates, leaving displaced families with limited options.

Efforts to reform land laws have yet to address these systemic issues. The incident in An Giang highlights the ongoing tensions between development priorities and the rights of affected residents, underscoring the urgent need for fair and transparent processes in land acquisition. [Radio Free Asia]

Vietnam: Four inmates go on hunger strike in protest over confiscated materials

(lm) Four prisoners at An Diem Prison in Quang Nam province began a hunger strike on November 1, protesting the confiscation of paper, pens, and books by prison authorities. Among them, Trinh Ba Phuong, who is serving a 10-year sentence for "propaganda against the State," continues to refuse food, while the other three—Phan Cong Hai, Hoang Duc Binh, and Nguyen Thai Binh—ended their strike due to health reasons.

Phuong's relative, speaking anonymously for security reasons, reported that Phan Cong Hai, who completed his five-year sentence on November 21, informed the family of the hunger strike after his release. Hoang Duc Binh, serving a 14-year sentence for "abusing democratic freedoms" and "resisting enforcement officers," joined the protest to demand family visitation rights but ceased after six days due to severe stomach pain and kidney stones. Nguyen Thai Binh also ended his strike around mid-November due to declining health. [Radio Free Asia]

Vietnam: Political prisoners honored with international human rights award

(lm) Three political prisoners, Bui Van Thuan, Do Nam Trung, and Dang Dang Phuoc, have been honored by the Vietnam Human Rights Network with its annual award for their contributions to promoting human rights, despite being imprisoned for “anti-state propaganda.”

Collectively serving 26 years, the prisoners were recognized for their activism and resilience under harsh conditions. The California-based organization, which announced the awards on November 19, also provided each laureate with a USD 3,000 cash prize. However, the recognition holds deeper meaning for the prisoners and their families, with Thuan's wife, Trinh Thi Nhung, calling it a "great spiritual gift" that reflects solidarity and support for prisoners of conscience.

Over its 22-year history, the Vietnam Human Rights Network has acknowledged 63 individuals and six organizations for advancing human rights. Among this year’s recipients, Bui Van Thuan gained attention for his recent protest against the use of “tiger cages” in Vietnamese prisons, which severely restrict prisoners’ ability to exercise or interact with others. Along with fellow inmates Trinh Ba Tu and Dang Dinh Bach, Thuan staged a hunger strike in September 2024, demanding fair treatment. The protest ended after prison authorities agreed to their demands.

The Vietnamese government has dismissed the awards, with state-run media labeling them a "farce" and accusing the organizers of undermining the country’s peace and development by supporting individuals who oppose the state. [Radio Free Asia]

Vietnam: Khmer Krom group urges release of monks and activists ahead of trial

(lm) The Khmers Kampuchea-Krom Federation (KKF), an international organization representing the Khmer Krom community, has called on Vietnam to release five Buddhist monks and four activists detained since March 2024. The detainees are set to face trial, scheduled for November 26-27, on charges of "abusing democratic freedoms" under Article 331 and "illegally

arresting and detaining people" under Article 157 of Vietnam's criminal code.

The Khmer Krom are ethnic Cambodians indigenous to the Mekong Delta region in southern Vietnam. Numbering about 1.3 million, they are one of Vietnam's 53 officially recognized ethnic minorities. Despite recognition, the Khmer Krom community frequently alleges discrimination, suppression of cultural and religious rights, and limited access to resources.

Among those charged are Abbot Thach Chanh Da Ra and Buddhist Kim Khiem, along with monks Duong Khai, Thach Qui Lay, Kim Sa Ruong, and Thach Chop, as well as activists Thach Nha, Kim Khu, and Thach Ve Sanal. The arrests have drawn criticism from the Khmer Krom community, which accuses the Vietnamese government of suppressing freedoms of religion, expression, and language rights. The government denies these allegations.

The KKF has alleged that the detained monks and activists were advocating for the peaceful exercise of their religious and cultural rights. The organization claims that the government coerced Khmer Krom villagers into signing statements to support the prosecution's case and has denied the detainees legal representation. Only those who signed these statements will reportedly be allowed to attend the trial.

In its statement, the KKF urged the United Nations, foreign embassies in Vietnam, and international organizations to pressure the government for a fair trial. The group also called for observers to monitor the proceedings to ensure transparency, given Vietnam's obligations as a member of the United Nations Human Rights Council. [Radio Free Asia]

Vietnam: Former party official arrested for spreading defamatory content on social media

(hn) Bui Tien Loi, a 56-year-old former lecturer in scientific socialism at the Military Engineering Officer School, was arrested on November 20 in Thai Binh province. He is accused of posting defamatory and distorted content about Vietnamese Party and state leaders, including the late General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong, on social media, which reportedly caused public unrest. Authorities charged him under Article 331 of the Penal Code for abusing democratic freedoms to infringe upon state interests and the legitimate rights of individuals and organizations.

Previously expelled from the Communist Party for publishing views contrary to the Party's guidelines, Loi had been stripped of his military rank. After his arrest, he was transferred to Binh Duong for further investigation by the Thu Dau Mot police. [VnExpress] [Dantri, in Vietnamese]

Vietnam: Police investigator arrested over death of 31-year-old man during questioning

(hn) Authorities are investigating the death of a 31-year-old man, determined to have been subjected to physical abuse after working with a police lieutenant.

The Supreme People's Procuracy Investigation Agency has detained Luu Quang Trung, a former lieutenant and investigator with the Long Thanh District Police in Dong Nai Province, on charges of "using corporal punishment" under Article 373 of the Penal Code.

According to initial findings, on March 22, Vu Minh Duc, 31, went to the Long Thanh District Police Department in response to a summons related to a public disturbance case. At 3 PM, Duc's family was informed that he had "collapsed during questioning" and was taken to Long Thanh District General Hospital and later transferred to Cho Ray Hospital in Ho Chi Minh City. By 9 PM, Duc had died from acute liver and kidney damage and injuries to his thighs. Suspecting foul play, his family requested an investigation.

Following the incident, Dong Nai Police suspended investigator Luu Quang Trung and required those involved to provide explanations. On September 5, the Supreme People's Procuracy Investigation Agency initiated a case on charges of using corporal punishment, with Trung now identified as a suspect. [VnExpress]

Vietnam: Policeman jailed for 12 years in detainee's death, accomplices also sentenced

(lm) A court in Ho Chi Minh City has sentenced former police lieutenant Vo Thanh Dat to 12 years in prison for "corporal punishment" leading to the death of a detainee, Trieu Quang Binh, in 2022. Dat, the warden of the police lock-up, was convicted of beating Binh to death with the assistance of two cellmates, Quach Bao Lam and Lu Hoai Thanh, who were sentenced to eight-

and-a-half years and seven-and-a-half years respectively.

Binh had surrendered to police and was being detained at the facility. According to court proceedings, Dat and the two inmates assaulted Binh on multiple occasions, claiming he was “acting abnormally.” An autopsy revealed Binh died of respiratory failure caused by acute pulmonary edema and had multiple soft tissue injuries.

The court acknowledged the severity of the crime, stating that Dat’s actions harmed the reputation of the police and violated the victim's dignity and rights. However, mitigating factors such as Dat's confession, his lack of prior offenses, and a plea for leniency from the victim’s family influenced the sentencing. Critics, including a Hanoi-based lawyer, argued that the sentence was lenient and that the defendants could have been charged with "intentional murder," which carries harsher penalties, including life imprisonment or the death penalty.

This case is one of several incidents in recent years highlighting the use of excessive force by Vietnamese law enforcement. Despite Vietnam’s efforts to align its practices with the United Nations Convention Against Torture, reports of detainee deaths during interrogation persist. A recent U.N. report noted that while Vietnam has implemented legal measures to prevent torture, at least nine deaths in custody with signs of abuse have been reported by state media in the past four years. [Radio Free Asia]

Vietnam: Fuel prices drop, with gasoline nearing USD 0.80 per liter

(hn) Vietnam has adjusted fuel prices as of November 21, with most products seeing a reduction.

Since the beginning of the year, gasoline prices in Vietnam have seen 22 increases and 24 reductions, while diesel prices have been adjusted 20 times upward and 26 times downward. The Fuel Price Stabilization Fund has not been utilized in recent adjustments, and its balance stood at over VND 6 trillion (USD 234,000) at the end of the second quarter, a decline of VND 600 billion (USD 23,400) compared to the end of 2023. [VnExpress]

Vietnam: Internet economy expected to reach USD 36 billion in 2024

(cc) Vietnam has recently unveiled a national action plan to accelerate the development of its digital economy, responding to the growing importance of digital transformation in the global economic landscape. The action plan aims to foster a robust and resilient digital economy by setting clear objectives to boost e-commerce, digital infrastructure, and online services. This initiative aligns with Vietnam's goal to position itself as a leading player in Southeast Asia's digital economy, capitalizing on the rapid growth of internet-based services and the increasing use of digital technologies across industries.

As part of the broader strategy, the Vietnamese government has focused on enhancing the digital ecosystem by improving internet infrastructure, digital literacy, and e-commerce. The action plan seeks to integrate advanced digital technologies into business practices, thereby improving productivity and economic efficiency. The plan also emphasizes the need for collaboration between government agencies, private businesses, and local communities to drive digital innovation and inclusive growth.

The digital economy in Vietnam is projected to continue its rapid expansion, with experts estimating that the internet economy will hit USD 36 billion in 2024, marking a 16 percent increase from the previous year. This growth is largely attributed to the rising demand for e-commerce and digital services, which have become key contributors to Vietnam's economic development. Additionally, the country’s large population, estimated at 100 million, provides a significant market for digital products and services, further supporting the growth trajectory of the internet economy.

By 2030, Vietnam's digital economy is expected to reach between USD 90 billion and USD 200 billion in value, underscoring the long-term potential of the sector. [Vietnam Economic Times] [Vietnam Plus]

Vietnam: Finance ministry proposes 2 percent VAT reduction for early 2025

(hn) The Ministry of Finance has proposed a 2 percent reduction in the value-added tax (VAT) for the first half of 2025 to support businesses and stimulate economic growth. The reduction would apply to products and services currently taxed at 10 percent, excluding

sectors such as telecommunications, financial services, real estate, and certain industrial products.

If implemented, the policy is estimated to reduce state budget revenue by approximately VND 25 trillion (over USD 1 billion). Similar VAT reductions in 2022–2024 boosted domestic consumption, contributing to year-on-year retail sales growth of 19.8 percent in 2022 and 9.8 percent in 2023. This extension aims to sustain economic recovery and provide continued relief to enterprises. [VnEconomy] [Bao dien tu chinh phu, in Vietnamese]

Vietnam: Southern provinces attract strong foreign investment interest

(hn) Southern Vietnam is experiencing a surge in foreign investor interest, with Dong Nai, Binh Duong, and Ho Chi Minh City (HCM City) standing out as key destinations. Delegations from Germany, South Korea, Japan, and the United States have recently explored opportunities in the region.

In Dong Nai, German businesses praised the investment environment, while South Korean, Japanese, and American companies proposed projects in logistics, urban development, and high-tech sectors, including semiconductors and optics.

Binh Duong secured commitments from Warburg Pincus for a cross-border e-commerce hub and AP Moller Maersk for a logistics center. Polytex Far Eastern Vietnam announced a USD 1.54 billion expansion.

HCM City attracted interest from NVIDIA for an artificial intelligence center and Smart Tech Group for a battery factory worth USD 340–850 million. Investment promotion efforts in the United States resulted in agreements with major firms, with delegations planning follow-up visits to implement projects.

Provinces like Binh Duong and Long An have also promoted investment in Europe, Japan, and South Korea, focusing on green transformation and infrastructure, solidifying southern Vietnam's role as an economic hub. [Viet Nam News]

Vietnam: State Bank proposes decree to regulate telecommunication accounts for payments

(hn) The State Bank of Vietnam (SBV) is proposing a decree to regulate telecommunications accounts for payments, aiming to formalize and expand the Mobile-Money service. This initiative seeks to promote non-cash payments, especially in rural areas with limited banking services.

Currently operating under a pilot program, Mobile-Money has over 9.87 million registered users, with 7.1 million in rural regions. Viettel holds a 73 percent market share, followed by VNPT-Media (21 percent) and MobiFone (6 percent). The proposed decree would establish a legal framework to support service providers and ensure fair competition, contributing to greater financial inclusion and broader payment access. [Viet Nam News]

Vietnam: Prime Minister and Ericsson CEO discuss digital transformation

(lm) Prime Minister Phạm Minh Chính met with Borje Ekholm, President and CEO of Ericsson, in Hanoi to discuss expanding cooperation in Vietnam's digital transformation initiatives. Emphasizing the positive Vietnam-Sweden relationship, Chính highlighted Ericsson's strengths in capital, technology, and management, expressing confidence that Ekholm's visit would lead to further investment and business decisions in Vietnam.

Ekholm underscored Ericsson's leadership in global 5G deployment and its nearly three-decade partnership with Vietnam in supporting telecom development. He expressed the company's commitment to advancing Vietnam's digital transformation, including developing new technologies and supporting the 5G network.

Chính praised Ericsson's contributions to digital infrastructure and e-government development. He urged the company to strengthen cooperation in areas such as R&D centers, data infrastructure, technology transfer, artificial intelligence, cloud computing, IoT, and next-generation networks like 5G and 6G. He also emphasized the need for collaboration in training human resources, sharing expertise, and integrating Vietnamese companies into global supply chains. [Viet Nam News]

Vietnam: New rules for remanufactured imports under EU and UK trade deals

(lm) Vietnam has introduced Decree 66/2024/ND-CP to regulate the import and circulation of remanufactured goods under the EU-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement (EVFTA) and UK-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement (UKVFTA). The decree establishes strict criteria, including certification of origin and eligibility, and requires clear labeling with the term "remanufactured goods" in Vietnamese.

The framework applies to goods overseen by seven ministries, covering areas like import policies, taxation, product standards, energy efficiency, and environmental protection. Importers must ensure compliance, maintain accurate documentation, and submit annual reports to licensing authorities and the Ministry of Industry and Trade.

This regulation aligns remanufactured goods with the same standards as new imports, aiming to boost international trust and consumer confidence. Trade volumes with the EU and UK have grown significantly under these agreements, with Vietnam recording USD 72.3 billion in trade with the EU and a USD 34.3 billion surplus in 2023, while exports to the UK rose by nearly 5 percent. [Viet Nam News]

Vietnam: Proposal for railway joint venture under review

(lm) The Vietnam Railway Corporation (VNR) has requested approval from the Ministry of Transport (MoT) to establish a joint venture with local railway enterprises and foreign partners to develop Vietnam's railway industry. The joint venture would ensure the local party maintains a controlling capital contribution ratio.

The MoT has directed the VNR to refine its proposal, requiring clarity on the corporation’s technological capacity, the scope of production and business activities, and the localization rate within the joint venture. Pricing policies must align with market conditions and legal requirements, distinguishing railway industrial products from ordinary goods.

The VNR’s proposal outlines three key policies to support the joint venture: creating a specific pricing mechanism to allow the government to order products during initial operations, adding railway industrial products to the country’s list of key mechanical products, and developing mechanisms to price land and assets of railway enterprises to enhance capital and protect domestic enterprise interests.

Once amended, the proposal will be reviewed by the Committee for State Capital Management at Enterprises before being submitted to the Prime Minister for final approval. [Viet Nam News]

Vietnam: Prime Minister calls for urgent flood response

(lm) Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh has urged swift action to address heavy rains and flooding in central provinces, including Thua Thien Hue, Quang Ngai, and Binh Dinh. Prolonged rainfall has caused landslides, flooding, and transport disruptions, isolating communities and increasing risks in low-lying areas.

The Prime Minister directed local authorities to relocate vulnerable groups, deliver essential supplies, and ensure dam and reservoir safety. Key ministries, including defense and natural resources, are tasked with monitoring weather, managing reservoirs, deploying relief forces, and preparing for evacuations. These measures aim to mitigate the disaster's impact and protect affected communities. [VietnamPlus]

International Relations, Geopolitics and Security in Asia

Southeast Asian defense chiefs tackle regional security with United States, China, and partner nations

(rv) Southeast Asian defense leaders convened in Vientiane, Laos, for high-level talks with counterparts from the U.S., China, and other key nations. The

discussions focused on regional security challenges, particularly the intensifying disputes in the South China Sea fueled by China's assertive territorial claims.

U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and Chinese Defense Minister Dong Jun attended the closed-door meetings but did not hold direct talks, with Dong declining a one-on-one meeting amid tensions over U.S. arms sales to Taiwan. Austin described Dong's refusal as "a setback for the whole region," while Beijing insisted that U.S. actions regarding Taiwan undermined mutual dialogue. The U.S. recently approved a USD 2 billion arms package for Taiwan, prompting sharp criticism from Beijing.

The meetings underscored ASEAN's concerns over increasing maritime disputes with China, compounded by uncertainties about the incoming administration of President-elect Donald Trump. The outgoing Biden administration strongly supported a "free and open Indo-Pacific," leaving questions about whether this policy will continue.

China's assertiveness in the South China Sea has heightened tensions with ASEAN members Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, and the Philippines, who have competing territorial claims. Chinese and Philippine vessels have repeatedly clashed, and Vietnam has accused Chinese forces of assaulting its fishermen in disputed waters. Meanwhile, China has sent patrol vessels into areas claimed by Indonesia and Malaysia as exclusive economic zones.

Efforts to finalize a code of conduct for the South China Sea, aimed at regulating behavior and reducing conflict, have been slow, with disagreements over whether the agreement should be legally binding. ASEAN members and China aim to finalize the code by 2026.

The defense discussions also addressed broader regional issues, including the Korean Peninsula, the Russia-Ukraine war, conflicts in the Middle East, and Myanmar's ongoing civil war. Myanmar's military government, excluded from high-level ASEAN meetings since its 2021 coup, was represented by a lower-ranking official. The military continues to face resistance from pro-democracy forces, controlling less than half the country.

Additional topics included military cooperation, transnational crimes such as cyber scams and human trafficking, border security, and environmental challenges like transnational haze. [Associated Press] [Manila Times]

China-EU trade dispute continues

(to) Trade tensions between the European Union (EU) and China continue to persist as Beijing is set to broaden a probe into European dairy imports and issues over EV tariffs remain unresolved.

Investigation into dairy imports to be broadened

China has announced it would broaden its investigation into European Union subsidies for dairy imports, now including additional support programs in Denmark, France, Italy, and the Netherlands. The probe initially targeted EU cheese, milk, and cream imports after Brussels imposed tariffs of up to 45.3 percent on Chinese electric vehicles.

China's Ministry of Commerce stated the expanded investigation, prompted by concerns from the Chinese dairy industry, aims to address claims about unfair competition. [Reuters 1]

Issues in EV tariff talks remain unresolved

(to) The European Union and China are in discussions about alternatives to EU tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles (EVs), including the possibility of setting minimum prices for these imports. Despite earlier claims that an agreement is near, EU officials have denied this, citing unresolved issues in the negotiations.

The EU imposed tariffs of up to 45.3 percent on Chinese-made EVs following an investigation that determined their prices were artificially low due to Chinese state subsidies.

While the proposed minimum price would address these subsidies, the measure has sparked division within Europe and retaliation from Beijing. China's Chamber of Commerce to the EU criticized the tariffs as "protectionist" and "arbitrary." [Reuters 2]

China calls for stronger relations with Europe through Luxembourg

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met furthermore with Luxembourg's Foreign Minister Jean Asselborn in Beijing to discuss enhancing China-Europe relations on November 25. Wang emphasized that China and Europe should work as partners rather than rivals and called for greater cooperation in trade, diplomacy, and sustainable development. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China, in Chinese]

Wang urged the EU to maintain "strategic autonomy" despite rising tensions over trade and geopolitical issues. Luxembourg was related to as a key bridge for fostering closer relations between China and Europe, showcasing Beijing's desire for constructive dialogue in the midst of ongoing economic dispute. [AA]

EU proposes sanctions on Chinese firms aiding Russia

(to) On November 25, 2024, the European Union proposed sanctions on several Chinese companies accused of helping Russia develop attack drones used in Ukraine. The measures, part of the EU's 15th sanctions package since Russia's invasion, also target over 50 individuals and entities, including Russian military firms and a Hong Kong company supplying banned components.

China denied the allegations, with its Foreign Ministry stating it opposes unilateral sanctions and has strictly controlled exports of dual-use items like drones. [BNN Bloomberg]

China, Saudi Arabia, Iran agree to deepen cooperation

(alk) China reaffirmed its commitment to strengthening ties between Saudi Arabia and Iran during a meeting in Riyadh on November 19, part of ongoing efforts to implement the Beijing-brokered agreement that restored diplomatic relations between the two nations in March 2023 after seven years of hostility (see AiR No. 11, March/2023, 2).

Senior diplomats from the three countries also called for an immediate end to Israeli military operations in Gaza and Lebanon, condemning violations of Iran's sovereignty and territorial integrity. The statement followed Israel's confirmation that recent airstrikes targeted Iran's nuclear and defense capabilities, raising fears of further regional escalation.

The tripartite committee meeting, the second since its formation, praised progress in Saudi-Iranian relations and emphasized their shared commitment to fully implementing the Beijing Agreement. Mediated by China, the detente is considered a diplomatic success for Beijing as it seeks to expand its influence in the Middle East and challenge US dominance in the region.

The nations reiterated their dedication to fostering cooperation and neighborly ties, highlighting China's ongoing role in facilitating dialogue and peacebuilding efforts. [South China Morning Post] [Arab News]

Meanwhile, a US advisory panel has called for Congress' investigation into China's purchases of Iranian oil over the past five years, highlighting Tehran as a potential challenge for a future Trump presidency. The US-China Economic and Security Review Commission recommended a detailed study within six months to examine how China used indirect routes to evade sanctions.

According to the commission, which cited advocacy group United Against Nuclear Iran and other sources, China's imports of Iranian oil increased by 9 percent in 2023, accounting for nearly 90 percent of Iran's crude exports. This made Iran China's fourth-largest oil supplier.

China, the region's largest trading partner since 2010, has deepened ties with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt. Its telecom giants, Huawei and ZTE, have aggressively expanded in the region, securing 5G contracts in 11 countries by early 2023. China has also collaborated with Gulf nations on nuclear energy, with Saudi Arabia reportedly considering partnerships to meet its ambitious energy goals.

China's imports of Middle Eastern crude soared from 34 million metric tons in the early 2000s to 257 million metric tons in 2021, while US and European imports declined. Critics argue Beijing's engagement is "selective and transactional," leveraging economic and soft-power initiatives while relying on US-led regional security. [South China Morning Post] [Arabian Gulf Business Insight]

China's Pacific aid rebounds under adapted strategy

(alk) After a pandemic-induced lull, China's Pacific aid is resurging with increased spending and new infrastructure commitments. This revival reflects a shift to a more tailored and sustainable approach to regional engagement.

Following a peak in 2016, China's aid declined sharply due to debt concerns, stricter Chinese capital controls, and competition from traditional donors. The COVID-19 pandemic halted its infrastructure-heavy strategy, with no new loan-financed projects signed in 2020. During this pause, China introduced a White Paper

promoting “Small and Beautiful” engagement, focusing on sustainable, lower-risk development.

By 2022, aid spending rose to USD 256 million, making China the Pacific’s second-largest bilateral donor behind Australia. Significant projects include the USD 135 million Vanua Levu Road upgrade in Fiji, China’s largest grant-funded initiative in the Pacific, and other notable commitments in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu.

China has pivoted from loans to grants, now comprising two-thirds of its aid, and expanded grassroots initiatives, tripling community-level projects since 2012. However, large budget transfers, like those to Solomon Islands and Kiribati, have raised concerns over transparency and accountability.

Despite reduced lending overall, China has signed significant new loans with Melanesian nations, raising debt sustainability concerns. While a return to mid-2010s spending levels is unlikely, Beijing’s recalibrated aid strategy has gained momentum, positioning China as a competitive and visible player in Pacific development. [Lowy Institute]

Japan host “Five Eyes” meeting

(dql) In a historic first, the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing alliance – consisting of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK and the US – its first meeting in Japan – a non-member country – on November 20, highlighting Japan's growing role in Indo-Pacific security and intelligence efforts. [The Statesman]

Senior enlisted service members, including representatives from Japan’s Self-Defense Forces (SDF) and the US military, discussed field operations, challenges, and successes.

This marks Japan’s second public engagement with Five Eyes, following its participation in an operational-level meeting in Canada in October. Hosting the meeting underscores Japan's increasing importance as a regional intelligence hub, with some Five Eyes nations establishing intelligence bases in the country to enhance monitoring capabilities. Canada has also bolstered its presence, creating an Indo-Pacific-focused position in its Tokyo embassy and appointing a specialist on China-related matters. [First Post]

Chinese state media *Global Times* was quick to cite Chinese experts warning Japan of becoming the “sixth eye,” which would create the perception of Japan being

“highly valued,” but in reality “the partnership serves the Five Eyes' hegemonic purposes by forming camp confrontation.” [Global Times]

First meeting of new Japan-U.S.-South Korea secretariat held

(dql) Japan, the United States, and South Korea convened the inaugural meeting of their joint secretariat in Seoul on November 20 to enhance trilateral cooperation, particularly in national security. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan]

This meeting, held swiftly after the agreement to establish the secretariat on November 15 (see AiR No. 47, November/2024, 3), reflects efforts to institutionalize collaboration among the three nations ahead of U.S. President-elect Donald Trump’s term, given his skepticism toward multilateralism.

Attendees included Akihiro Okochi of Japan's Foreign Ministry, Robert Koepcke from the U.S. State Department, and Yi Wonwoo from South Korea's Foreign Ministry. They affirmed their commitment to fostering cooperation across various fields. [Nippon.com]

Japan, Italy, UK consider opening up jet fighter project to other countries

(dql) Meeting on the sidelines of the G20 summit in Brazil last week, Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba, British Prime Minister Keir Starmer, and Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni reaffirmed their countries’ commitment to jointly develop a next-generation fighter jet, a key initiative in trilateral defense cooperation. The joint development, formalized in December 2022, aims to deploy the fighter jet by 2035 under the Global Combat Air Program (GCAP), involving Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, BAE Systems, and Leonardo SpA. [Kyodo News]

The three heads of government also unveiled that they discussed the possibility of bringing more nations into the fighter aircraft development program, without providing further details about potential new participants and their roles.

However, the discussion reportetd included Saudi-Arabia being among the potential candidates joining the GCAP. [The Asahi Shimbun] [The EurAsian Times]

Mongolia to strengthen child protection policies in collaboration with UNICEF

(fs) Mongolia's Minister of Family, Labor, and Social Protection Enkh-Amgalan Luvsantseren has met UNICEF's Social Policy Advisor for Southeast Asia Andrea Rossi to discuss enhancing child protection measures.

The ministry plans to collaborate with UNICEF to develop a national framework for child protection, integrating evidence-based policy recommendations to foster safer environments for Mongolia's youth.

37.1 percent (1.2 million) of Mongolia's population are children, and over 70 percent of child violence cases occur within families. Although the revised Child Protection Law came into effect in September 2024, the government acknowledges the need for more robust measures. [Montsame]

UN Committee Against Torture urges Mongolia to strengthen anti-torture measures

(fs) The UN Committee against Torture (CAT) has released its findings on six nations, including Mongolia, following its recent review.

While recognizing Mongolia's pledge to submit a draft law by 2025 to establish a specialized unit for investigating torture and ill-treatment of detainees, the Committee expressed concerns about procedural delays since its previous review.

Concerns were raised about potential conflicts of interest and inefficiencies in investigations handled by the Anti-Corruption Agency's Investigation Division and the General Police Department. The Committee highlighted a high dismissal rate of torture cases and urged Mongolia to finalize legislation to create an independent investigative body. This mechanism would address misconduct by public officials, particularly law enforcement, and ensure investigators operate without hierarchical ties to accused perpetrators.

Although Mongolia has taken steps to support procedural safeguards, reports of arrests conducted without judicial orders, especially by the General Intelligence Agency and Anti-Corruption Agency,

remain troubling. The Committee called for stricter adherence to judicial oversight, emphasizing that arrests require warrants issued by judicial authorities unless the crime is in progress. [Akipress]

U.N. Committee passes North Korea Human Rights Resolution for 20th consecutive year

(mc) The Third Committee of the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution on November 20 denouncing North Korea's severe human rights violations. This marks the 20th time such a resolution has been passed.

The resolution condemned North Korea's January announcement to abandon reunification efforts with South Korea, emphasizing the detrimental effects on separated families. It also called for the repeal of repressive laws, including the Law on Rejection of Regressive Thought and Culture. Additionally, the Committee criticized North Korea's excessive military spending on nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs, highlighting the regime's failure to address basic human rights, such as access to adequate food.

South Korea's Deputy Ambassador to the UN, Kim Sang-jin, urged North Korea to comply with the resolution and cease human rights violations. Conversely, North Korea's UN Ambassador, Kim Song, rejected the resolution, asserting that his country does not recognize it.

The resolution will be presented to the full UN General Assembly in December for final approval. [Yonhap Agency News]

Bangladesh calls on International Organization Migration for safe migration for skilled human resources

(vk) Bangladesh’s Foreign Affairs Adviser Md Touhid Hossain has urged the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to focus on safer and regular migration pathways for skilled human resources. The call was made on November 20 during the submission of a Letter of Credence by Lance Bonneau, the new Chief of Mission for IOM in Bangladesh, to the foreign ministry.

Hossain stressed the importance of creating comprehensive databases for job seekers and utilizing digital tools for skills profiling and job matching to enhance the migration process. Bonneau reaffirmed IOM's commitment to maintaining the integrity of regular migration, describing it as a central element of its strategic plan. [Bss News]

India's Defence Minister Calls for Peaceful Coexistence and Climate Resilience at ASEAN Forum

(rsv) At the 11th ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus in Vientiane, Laos, India's Defence Minister Rajnath Singh emphasized the need for the global embrace of the Buddhist doctrine of peaceful coexistence. He highlighted the growing global polarization and urged nations to adopt dialogue for resolving international issues, promoting peace in the Indo-Pacific, and respecting international law.

Singh also stressed the importance of climate change resilience, calling for a collective defense strategy to address its impact. Reflecting on India's longstanding ties with Southeast Asia, he recalled Rabindranath Tagore's remark on India's cultural influence in the region, underlining the deep historical connection. He also called for a Code of Conduct that respects the rights of all nations and adheres to international law, particularly the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. Singh concluded by urging the protection of shared natural resources and the Global Commons through multilateral cooperation rather than unilateral actions. [The Hindu]

External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar highlights 'Brand Bharat' as India's growing global identity

(rsv) External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar emphasized the concept of 'Brand Bharat' as a reflection of India's authenticity, cultural heritage, and increasing confidence on the global stage. Speaking at the India Ideas Conclave, he described it as a statement of India's comfort in its own identity while balancing tradition and modernity.

Jaishankar traced India's journey from the challenges of post-independence nation-building to becoming a resilient democracy and a growing economic power. He noted that significant advancements in

infrastructure, ease of doing business, and digital innovation over the past decade have changed how the world perceives India. “Bharat is about being authentic—whether in our representation, beliefs, or actions. It signifies a nation that is increasingly drawing from its history while confidently shaping its own path,” he remarked.

The minister highlighted India’s role in global diplomacy, from vaccine distribution to supporting neighbors during crises. He pointed to India’s engagement with diverse platforms such as the Quad and BRICS, reflecting its multi-dimensional approach to international relations. He described this as the “brand of Vishwa Bandhu,” or a friend to the world.

Jaishankar also underlined that India is not just another country but one with a unique civilizational identity that stands out in its transition to a modern nation-state. “In a world asserting its independence from a globalized elite, India is engaging with the world more on its own terms,” he concluded. [TheWeek]

India to repair Coast Guard vessels from Maldives, Mauritius

(axc) India has signed an agreement to refit, upgrade, and maintain coast guard vessels from Maldives and Mauritius, offering its naval expertise at no cost to the beneficiary nations. The Maldivian CGS Huravee, a vessel gifted by India in 2023, is currently undergoing repairs in Mumbai at a cost of over USD 4 million, fully funded by the Indian government.

This initiative underscores India’s "Neighbourhood First" vision and its SAGAR ("Security and Growth for All in the Region") policy, aimed at strengthening defense ties and securing goodwill amidst regional competition with China. Earlier this month, India also gifted two fast interception craft to Mozambique, extending its strategic engagement in the Indian Ocean region. [Wionews]

47 Nepali citizens deported from Russia and Bulgaria

(lm) Russia deported 29 Nepalis for illegal work and lack of university attendance, while Bulgaria sent back 18 trafficking victims. The Russian deportees, misled by education consultancies about work opportunities, were arrested at a call center in Moscow and held at a

detention center before being repatriated. In Bulgaria, the trafficked individuals, lacking proper entry documents, were detained for three months before returning on government-sponsored tickets. [The Kathmandu Post]

UNDP to support Nepal in climate action

(rs) The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has committed to aiding Nepal in climate adaptation, damage reduction, and carbon trading under the Paris Agreement. In a bilateral meeting at COP29 in Baku, Azerbaijan, UN Assistant Secretary-General Marcos Neto assured support for Nepal's Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC 3) formulation and implementation planning.

Dr. Dipak Kumar Kharal, Secretary of Nepal's Ministry of Forests and Environment, highlighted discussions on future UNDP initiatives. Dipak KC, UNDP's Nepal Country Representative, confirmed the program's focus on Nepal's climate priorities. [The Rising Nepal]

Kathmandu Declaration urges justice access for persons with disabilities

(lm) The Kathmandu Declaration on Access to Justice for Persons with Disabilities has been launched by the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) and Transforming for Community Inclusion (TCI), in collaboration with KOSHISH and the Nepal Disabled Women's Association. The declaration calls for immediate reforms across Asia to ensure equitable access to justice for individuals with disabilities.

Presented at an event in Bangkok, the declaration highlights how discriminatory laws and policies in the region perpetuate systemic barriers for persons with disabilities, particularly those with psychosocial challenges. Participants, including UN representatives, government officials, advocates, and civil society groups, emphasized the urgent need to eliminate institutionalization and restore legal capacity to individuals denied participation in justice systems.

The declaration stems from deliberations held in Kathmandu earlier in May 2024, where it was revealed that outdated mental health laws across the Asia-Pacific often strip persons with disabilities of their legal rights, leading to forced institutionalization, coercion, and violations of other human rights.

Advocates stress the need for states to reform legal frameworks and practices to uphold the rights of persons with disabilities and ensure their full inclusion in justice processes. [The Kathmandu Post]

China, Pakistan push for trilateral cooperation amid Islamabad-Kabul tensions over TTP

(ja/mra/lm) China and Pakistan are intensifying their cooperation on regional security, counterterrorism, and economic initiatives amid escalating concerns over terrorist sanctuaries in Afghanistan and rising militant activity in the region. The two nations are set to hold their first joint counterterrorism military exercise in five years, Warrior-VIII, from late November to mid-December in Pakistan. The drills aim to bolster joint capabilities against terrorism and involve troops from the Western Theater Command of China's People's Liberation Army, engaging in live troop scenarios and multi-level training. [The Express Tribune] [Voice of America]

This collaboration follows a diplomatic initiative led by China to ease tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan over the presence of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and other militant groups operating from Afghan soil. Both nations have jointly called on Afghanistan's Taliban-led government to combat terrorism and prevent Afghan territory from being used against neighboring countries. This aligns with broader international calls for the Taliban to take "visible and verifiable" actions against militant activities that threaten regional stability.

During a visit to Islamabad, China's Special Envoy for Afghanistan, Yue Xiaoyong, was briefed by Pakistani officials on the security threats posed by the TTP and Baloch separatist groups, with evidence linking these groups to training camps in Afghanistan. Pakistani authorities emphasized that without concrete action from the Taliban to dismantle these sanctuaries, bilateral relations with Kabul would remain strained.

Yue subsequently traveled to Kabul, where he met with senior Taliban officials, including Deputy Prime Minister Maulvi Abdul Kabir and Defence Minister Mullah Yaqub, to convey these concerns. While the Taliban reiterated that Afghanistan poses no threat to its neighbors and emphasized rebuilding the economy and fostering regional cooperation, Pakistan remains frustrated with the perceived inaction on the Taliban's part to meet counterterrorism commitments. [The

Khaama Press News Agency] [amu.tv] [The News International] [tribune.com.pk]

China's engagement reflects its broader interest in regional stability, driven by the strategic importance of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a flagship project under the Belt and Road Initiative. Beijing views escalating hostilities and security threats in the region, including attacks on Chinese nationals in Pakistan, as significant risks to its economic and connectivity ambitions. Recent high-profile attacks, such as a suicide bombing in Karachi that killed two Chinese engineers and a March attack that claimed five Chinese lives, have further strained Sino-Pakistani relations.

Following the Karachi attack, Chinese Ambassador Jiang Zaidong criticized Pakistan's security measures, calling the repeated targeting of Chinese nationals "unacceptable." Islamabad dismissed the criticism as "perplexing" but pledged to enhance protections for Chinese nationals and projects, particularly those under CPEC. Pakistan's Privatization Minister Abdul Aleem Khan also assured Chinese investors of full support in Special Economic Zones (SEZs), highlighting initiatives to attract foreign investment and boost economic growth. [Arab News]

Pakistan enters into loan agreement with ADB on climate resilience

(tj) Pakistan has signed a USD 500 million loan agreement with the Asian Development Bank (ADB) under the 'Climate and Disaster Resilience Enhancement Program,' with the objective of strengthening Pakistan's capacity to manage climate change and natural disaster risks.

The agreement, regarded as a landmark development, underscores Pakistan's commitment to addressing the impacts of climate change. According to the Global Climate Risk Index, Pakistan is one of the most vulnerable globally.

The program will focus on improving disaster risk management, including enhanced disaster risk mapping, response coordination, and gender-sensitive public investments, as well as bolstering institutional frameworks for climate adaptation and disaster risk management. [Express Tribune]

Pakistan Senate chairman and business leaders strengthen ties with Saudi Arabia and UAE

(tf/lm) Pakistan's Senate Chairman Yousuf Raza Gillani arrived in Saudi Arabia on November 25 for a five-day visit aimed at deepening bilateral relations and enhancing institutional cooperation. Invited by Saudi Arabia's Shoura Council, Gillani was welcomed in Riyadh by its Speaker, Dr. Abdullah bin Muhammad bin Ibrahim Al-Sheikh. The visit includes high-level meetings with the governors of Riyadh and Madinah and discussions on legislative collaboration and economic cooperation.

The visit highlights the strong economic and strategic partnership between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Last month, the two nations signed investment agreements worth USD 2.8 billion, with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman pledging to expedite a USD 5 billion investment portfolio for Pakistan. Saudi Arabia remains a critical economic ally, frequently providing financial aid, including loan rollovers and oil on deferred payments, to support Pakistan's fragile economy. [Arab News 1]

During Gillani's visit, Pakistan assured Saudi Arabia of its commitment to tackling organized crime, specifically beggar mafias exploiting Saudi hospitality. Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi informed Saudi officials that 4,300 individuals had been placed on Pakistan’s Exit Control List (ECL) under a zero-tolerance policy targeting such networks. Both nations agreed to expedite the repatriation of 419 Pakistani prisoners in Saudi custody, with legal procedures nearing completion. [Geo News]

In parallel, Pakistan's economic ties with the UAE also gained momentum through the Sharjah-Pakistan Business Roundtable held on November 21. Over 200 investors and entrepreneurs gathered to explore opportunities in manufacturing, IT, trade, and green technology. The UAE, which has invested over USD 10 billion in Pakistan in the past two decades, saw a 12% trade increase in 2023, totaling USD 7.9 billion. The Pakistan Business Council (PBC), established in Sharjah in September, aims to boost trade volume to USD 40 billion within three years. Currently, more than 11,500 Pakistani companies operate in Sharjah's Free Zones and mainland, reflecting the UAE's significant role as Pakistan's second-largest source of remittances after Saudi Arabia. [Arab News 2]

IMF approves third review of Sri Lanka's USD 2.9 billion bailout as President commits to economic reforms

(lm/axc) The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has approved the third review of Sri Lanka's USD 2.9 billion bailout program, signaling cautious optimism as the nation shows signs of economic recovery. The approval will release an additional USD 333 million, bringing the total disbursed under the program to USD 1.3 billion.

Despite the positive developments, the IMF has cautioned that Sri Lanka's economic recovery remains fragile. Key challenges include completing a USD 12.5 billion restructuring with bondholders and a USD 10 billion rework with bilateral creditors, including China, India, and Japan.

The bailout, initiated in March 2023, helped stabilize an economy battered by its worst financial crisis in over seven decades. Sri Lanka had defaulted on its USD 46 billion external debt in April 2022, leading to severe shortages of essentials like food, fuel, and medicine and triggering mass protests that forced then-President Gotabaya Rajapaksa to resign. Since then, economic conditions have improved, with inflation controlled at 0.7 percent and economic growth projected at 4.4 percent for 2024, marking the first expansion in three years.

President Anura Kumara Dissanayake has embraced IMF-backed reforms despite his party's initial opposition. In a significant policy shift, he acknowledged the necessity of adhering to the bailout program, emphasizing, "This is not the time to discuss whether the terms are good or bad... the economy cannot take the slightest shock." The president aims to finalize debt restructuring by December 2024, with an interim budget scheduled for discussion the same month.

Dissanayake also unveiled ambitious economic growth plans targeting tourism, information technology, and the country's ocean and mineral resources. He announced a policy to attract 4 billion tourists and grow the tourism sector to USD 8 billion within three to four years. He also pledged to expand the national IT workforce from 85,000 to 200,000 and leverage natural resources through public-private partnerships and fuel subsidies. [France24]

While these measures signal optimism, the IMF cautioned that Sri Lanka remains "not out of the woods" and must maintain fiscal discipline to ensure long-term stability. Adhering to revenue targets, restructuring state-owned enterprises, and addressing

vulnerabilities in the financial system are key priorities. [Al Jazeera] [Xinhua]

Asian Development Bank approves USD 200 million loan for Sri Lanka's power sector upgrade

(raa) The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has approved a USD 200 million loan to modernize Sri Lanka's power infrastructure and support renewable energy integration. The project includes expanding transmission networks, introducing the country's first grid-scale battery energy storage system, and establishing a renewable energy center to enhance grid efficiency and reliability.

Sri Lanka, aiming for 70 percent renewable energy by 2030 and carbon neutrality by 2050, faces challenges as thermal power still accounts for 50 percent of electricity generation. The ADB loan allocates USD 150 million to the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) and USD 50 million to Lanka Electric Company (LECO), focusing on integrating renewables and adopting advanced digital energy solutions.

The project will also include capacity-building programs for utilities and initiatives supporting women in clean energy adoption, marking a key step in Sri Lanka's transition to a sustainable energy future. [adb.org]

Sri Lanka Elected to UN Commission on International Trade Law

(raa) Sri Lanka has been elected to the United Nations Commission on International Trade Law (UNCITRAL) for a six-year term starting January 2025. This achievement was announced by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka received strong support from the UN General Assembly, securing 177 votes. This was the second-highest number of votes achieved globally among all candidates. Within the Asia-Pacific Group, Sri Lanka also ranked second in terms of vote count.

UNCITRAL was established in 1966 and is headquartered in Vienna. It serves as the UN's primary legal body for international trade law, aiming to harmonize trade regulations and eliminate barriers. UNCITRAL also provides technical assistance to member States. Sri Lanka's legislation for the

facilitation of trade and investment such as the Sri Lanka Arbitration Act and the Electronic Transaction Act have benefitted from model laws by UNCITRAL.

Sri Lanka's election positions it alongside other nations from the Asia-Pacific region. These include Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Vietnam, China, Japan, and South Korea. The election also marks the country's third term on UNCITRAL, having previously served from 2004-2007 and 2016-2022. [Colombogazette]

China pledges deeper ties with Sri Lanka as IDCPC Vice Minister meets President Dissanayake; official visit to Beijing planned

(sl) China's Vice Minister of the International Department of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee, Sun Haiyan, met Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Dissanayake on November 25 at the Presidential Secretariat to discuss bilateral cooperation. Sun congratulated President Dissanayake on his party's recent electoral victory and commended the progressive political reforms under his leadership, describing them as transformative for Sri Lanka.

During the meeting, Sun reaffirmed China's commitment to strengthening collaboration with Sri Lanka in areas such as investment, technology exchange, digitalization, and rural economic development. Both sides discussed long-term cooperation and alignment on shared development goals, with an emphasis on advancing economic ties. [President's Media Division]

Additionally, President Dissanayake has received an invitation for an official visit to China. This trip will follow his first official state visit to India, planned for the third week of December, marking key engagements with two of Sri Lanka's most significant international partners. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lankan President Dissanayake must fully implement vision document with India, says predecessor

(lm) Former Sri Lankan President Ranil Wickremesinghe has urged his successor, President Anura Kumara Dissanayake, to fully implement the "vision document" signed between Sri Lanka and India during his tenure. Wickremesinghe made these

remarks ahead of Dissanayake's scheduled visit to India in mid-December 2024.

The vision document, signed in July 2023 during Wickremesinghe's visit to India, outlines key areas for bilateral cooperation, especially in the economic sector. Wickremesinghe emphasized the need to strengthen maritime, air, and energy ties, as well as people-to-people connectivity. The document also targets enhancing cooperation in tourism, trade, higher education, power, and skill development.

Wickremesinghe also expressed gratitude for India's support during Sri Lanka's recent economic crisis, recognizing the financial assistance provided by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman. He highlighted the long-standing religious, cultural, and trade ties between the two nations, noting that these shared connections form a strong foundation for continued collaboration. [Daily Mirror 1]

In related news, Sri Lanka has launched new initiatives to attract Indian tourists, with a key initiative being the "Ramayana Trail," introduced by SriLankan Airlines. The trail includes 50 significant locations in Sri Lanka associated with the Hindu epic Ramayana, such as the Seeta Amman Temple and Rumassala Hill. The initiative was officially launched in Delhi, where the Sri Lankan High Commissioner emphasized that the Ramayana is not just a story, but a cultural and spiritual connection that strengthens ties between India and Sri Lanka.

This move comes alongside the extension of India's Unified Payments Interface (UPI) to Sri Lanka, enabling seamless financial transactions for Indian tourists. Indian nationals were the largest group of foreign tourists to visit Sri Lanka in October 2024, comprising 26.8 percent of total arrivals, with 36,000 visitors from India. [Daily Mirror 2]

32 Sri Lankan victims of human trafficking rescued in Myanmar

(lm) 32 Sri Lankan nationals—eight females and 24 males—have been successfully rescued from human trafficking operations in Myanmar. The victims had been lured into cybercrime activities before falling prey to trafficking. The rescue was coordinated by the Sri Lankan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Employment, and Tourism, in collaboration with Sri Lanka's ambassadors in Thailand and Myanmar, as

well as the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

This rescue follows similar efforts in April and August 2024, where a total of 28 Sri Lankans were also freed. [Daily Mirror]

32 Sri Lankan prisoners return from Kuwait under exchange agreement

(lm) 32 Sri Lankan prisoners, who had been serving sentences for drug-related offenses in Kuwait, have returned to Sri Lanka under a prisoner exchange agreement signed between Kuwait and Sri Lanka in 2007. This marks the first implementation of the agreement, with the prisoners transported on a special flight from Kuwait.

These individuals had been convicted of drug-related crimes, including use, trade, smuggling, and transportation of dangerous drugs. No Kuwaiti prisoners remain in Sri Lanka under the same agreement. [Daily Mirror]

Cambodia hosts 12th ICAPP in Phnom Penh

(mfr) Cambodia hosted the 12th General Assembly of the International Conference of Asian Political Parties (ICAPP) in Phnom Penh from November 21 to 24. The event brought together over 200 delegates representing 57 political parties from 42 countries. ICAPP, established in 2000, is a major network of political parties from Asia, the Middle East, and Oceania, with over 350 members from 52 countries. Cambodia joined ICAPP in 2003 and previously hosted the 6th General Assembly in 2010. [Khmer Times 1]

The assembly concluded with a declaration reflecting shared aspirations for peace, reconciliation, and sustainable development. Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet emphasized peace as the cornerstone of society, commending ICAPP's efforts in uniting political parties to promote dialogue and collaboration.

Delegates also explored Cambodia's transitional justice efforts at the ECCC, underscoring the Kingdom's role in fostering justice and reconciliation in the region. [Khmer Times 2]

Global commitment to eradicate landmines grows at Siem Reap-Angkor summit

(mfr) The Siem Reap-Angkor Summit on a Mine-Free World, held in Cambodia from November 25 to 29, reinforced the global commitment to eradicating landmines. Countries, international organizations, and partners discussed strategies to address the humanitarian crisis caused by landmines and ensure a mine-free world.

The United Nations called for renewed commitment, resource mobilization, and more robust international cooperation to sustain mine action efforts globally. She stressed that the Sustainable Development Goals can only be achieved by addressing the landmine threat. [Khmer Times 1]

Australia pledged continued support for Cambodia's mine clearance efforts, with Kim Beazley, Chairman of the Australian War Memorial, reaffirming the strong bilateral relationship between the two countries. Similarly, Cambodia reiterated its commitment to assisting Myanmar with mine clearance despite its current non-membership in the Ottawa Convention. [Khmer Times 2]

Indonesia discusses eradication of poverty and hunger at G20 summit

(gk) President Subianto attended the 2024 annual summit held by G20, an international forum comprising the world's largest economies, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on November 18–19. Indonesia participated in the entire series of summits of G20, and held many bilateral meetings with different countries, including France, India, and Tanzania. [Cabinet Secretariat of The Republic of Indonesia]

President Subianto reaffirmed the nation’s commitment to addressing critical issues of hunger and poverty. Noting that education is a key pathway to eradicate poverty, he spoke about the free food program for children, aimed at supporting the younger generation's access to education. He also was positive that Indonesia would be able to eliminate hunger within three years, achieve energy independence within four years, and contribute to the Global Alliance Against Hunger and Poverty within five years. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The Republic of Indonesia 1].

President Subianto also emphasized the importance of global collaboration to address the challenges of poverty, hunger, and climate change, as well as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the green energy transition. He referred to Indonesia's experience of the direct impacts of climate change, including the rise in sea levels on the northern coast of Java, and is affecting hundreds of thousands of hectares of productive land, thus worsening poverty and hunger.

To transition to green energy, the President highlighted Indonesia's grand vision to achieve net zero emissions before 2050 through several initiatives, such as increasing the use of biodiesel and converting Steam Power Plants (PLTU) to new renewable energy. Indonesia plans to stop coal fired power plants and all fossil fuel power plants and build more than 75 gigawatts of renewable energy within the next 15 years. He also added that Indonesia is open to optimizing the prospects of 557 million tons of Indonesia carbon credits. He also announced that Indonesia is committed to providing USD 30 million to support the World Health Organization (WHO) and hoped that the amount would bridge funding gaps for WHO activities. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The Republic of Indonesia 2] [Antara 1]

While attending the Indonesia-Brazil Business Forum, which brought together businessmen from Indonesia and Brazil to discuss cooperation in strategic areas, he highlighted significant opportunities for cooperation in the development of biofuels and renewable energy, which aligns with Indonesia's aim to increase biofuel usage to fifty per cent by 2025. He also invited Brazilian entrepreneurs to invest in the maritime sector, while supporting the nation's natural resource down streaming program. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The Republic of Indonesia 4]

President Subianto also participated in the 2nd MIKTA Leaders' Gathering held on the sidelines of the G20 summit and reaffirmed the forum's role as a consultative platform to promote inclusive and responsive cooperation on global issues. MIKTA is an informal grouping of nations of Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey, and Australia, with Mexico holding the chairmanship currently. MIKTA aims to bridge the gap between developed and developing nations and promote effective multilateralism. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The Republic of Indonesia 5] [Antara 2]

Japan and UNDP join forces to bolster disaster resilience in Laos

(cc) In a promising development for Laos, a Southeast Asian nation highly susceptible to natural disasters, Japan and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) have announced a collaborative effort to strengthen the country's disaster preparedness. The initiative, unveiled on November 19 will see the construction of 12 evacuation centers in vulnerable regions across Khammouane, Salavan, and Champasack provinces.

This joint funding project, valued at USD 3.8 million, aims to provide immediate safety and essential facilities for over a million Lao citizens residing in areas frequently impacted by extreme weather events. The newly built evacuation centers will serve as crucial sanctuaries during disasters, offering temporary shelter and basic necessities to affected communities.

Beyond the immediate benefits of physical shelters, the project also seeks to create a lasting impact on Laos' disaster response capabilities. It envisions the improvement of national policies related to disaster management and the development of stronger capacities at both the community and national levels. This holistic approach aims to equip Laos with a more robust framework to effectively prepare for, respond to, and recover from natural disasters. [The Laotian Times] [United Nations Development Programme]

Malaysia pushes pan-Asian rail to connect Southeast Asia and China

(oc/dql) Malaysia's Transport Minister Anthony Loke is advocating for a high-speed pan-Asian rail network to serve as a critical alternative trade route between China and Southeast Asia, citing rising tensions in the South China Sea for the need of such a rail network. Loke views the rail link connecting Malaysia to China as a key element in enhancing regional supply chains, especially if maritime routes are disrupted. He emphasized that the network would not only benefit Malaysia and China but also countries along the route, provided there is greater cooperation and infrastructure upgrades.

Despite existing rail connections through Laos and Thailand, Loke emphasized that current infrastructure is insufficient and slow, urging enhanced commitment from all nations involved. He hopes that over the next five to ten years, the project can be realized with the

support of ASEAN partners, including Thailand. Loke also stressed the importance of ASEAN integration to strengthen regional bargaining power, particularly amid ongoing disputes over the South China Sea.

Loke further discussed Malaysia's close economic ties with China, highlighted by the Belt and Road Initiative, which has funded major infrastructure projects like the East Coast Rail Link. This project is expected to be completed by 2027, facilitating both freight and passenger transport. In addition to infrastructure, Loke emphasized areas of cooperation with China, such as renewable energy and natural resources.

On the geopolitical front, Loke expressed Malaysia's strategic position amid the US-China trade rivalry, highlighting the country's openness to both powers. He reassured that Malaysia is well-prepared to manage any potential impacts from rising tariffs and is actively diversifying its trade markets, including its recent entry into the BRICS bloc as a partner country. Loke noted Malaysia's importance as a semiconductor hub and its efforts to protect local industries from increased competition due to US-China tensions. [South China Morning Post]

Malaysia among signatories of Design Law Treaty to enhance global intellectual property protection

(ga) Malaysia is among the signatories of a declaration of support for the Design Law Treaty (DLT), also known as the Riyadh Design Law Treaty, an international agreement adopted by the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) on November 22 in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The treaty aims to simplify and standardize the process of protecting industrial designs, making it easier and more affordable for designers to protect their creations both locally and internationally. [World Intellectual Property Organization]

The declaration was signed by the director-general of the Malaysian Intellectual Property Corporation (MyIPO) Kamal Kormin, during the Diplomatic Conference to Conclude and Adopt the DLT held in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, from November 11 to 22. [Bernama]

Singapore's Defence Minister warns Myanmar's conduct risks undermining ASEAN centrality

(lm/nf) During the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM) held in Vientiane, Laos, Singapore's Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen issued a pointed warning to Myanmar, accusing the military junta of fostering a "politics of retaliation" that threatens ASEAN's unity and credibility. Myanmar's objections to expanding the ADMM-Plus defense cooperation group, which includes major external powers like China, India, Russia, and the United States, has deepened concerns about its role within the bloc.

Ng emphasized that Myanmar's actions risk dismantling the ASEAN centrality painstakingly built over two decades, particularly in defense cooperation. Centrality refers to ASEAN's role as the primary regional platform for addressing challenges and engaging external powers. Ng also urged Myanmar not to exploit ASEAN for its internal political purposes, calling on Malaysia, as the upcoming ASEAN chair, to address this growing issue. [Channel News Asia]

Myanmar, under its junta leadership since the February 2021 coup, has remained a contentious member within ASEAN. The bloc previously restricted Myanmar's representation to non-political figures after the junta's continued defiance of ASEAN's five-point consensus, which calls for an end to violence and inclusive dialogue. Despite this, Myanmar has resisted these commitments, continuing to use force against its population in what ASEAN members increasingly view as a violation of the bloc's principles of peaceful development and human security.

Myanmar's crisis is compounded by its ties with external powers, particularly China and Russia. Both nations have maintained strategic relationships with the junta, providing implicit political support that undermines ASEAN's leverage. These external influences, driven by geopolitical interests, often diverge from ASEAN's priorities, making it harder for the bloc to enforce its consensus on Myanmar. [South China Morning Post]

Multiple foreign tourist deaths linked to methanol-contaminated alcohol consumption in Laos

(bk) A 19-year-old Australian tourist, Holly Bowles, tragically became the sixth foreign tourist to die from suspected methanol poisoning in Laos. Her death occurred more than a week after she and her friend, 19-year-old Bianca Jones, also from Australia, fell seriously ill while traveling in Vang Vieng, a popular backpacker destination in northern Laos. The two had

consumed Laotian vodka and were later found sick at their hostel. After being transferred to Thailand for emergency treatment, Jones died from brain swelling caused by methanol poisoning, and Bowles' death followed shortly after. In addition to the two Australians, at least four other foreign tourists have been reported to have died from suspected methanol poisoning in the same region, including a 28-year-old British lawyer, Simone White, a U.S. man, and two Danish women, aged 19 and 20. New Zealand's foreign ministry also reported that one of its citizens was ill and possibly affected by methanol.

The deaths are believed to have been caused by contaminated alcohol, possibly from bootleg sources, which often contains methanol. Methanol is a toxic substance commonly used in industrial products and sometimes added to alcoholic beverages as a cheaper alternative to ethanol, despite its deadly effects on humans. Methanol poisoning occurs when the toxic alcohol is consumed, often in poorly distilled spirits sold in unregulated bars or hostels. Reports suggest that Bowles and Jones, along with other victims, had consumed free shots of Laotian vodka at the Nana Backpacker Hostel, where they were staying, shortly before falling ill. The hostel confirmed that it had distributed free shots to guests on the night of November 12, but no other guests reported sickness at that time.

Authorities in Laos are conducting an ongoing investigation into the source of the methanol-laced alcohol, and the management of the Nana Backpacker Hostel has been questioned as part of the inquiry. The investigation has prompted other countries, including New Zealand and the Netherlands, to monitor the situation, as they have citizens who may have been affected. The U.S. State Department has issued a health alert for travelers in Laos, warning about the dangers of methanol-laced alcoholic drinks, particularly in Vang Vieng. [BBC] [The Guardian] [Thai PBS World]

Thai authorities rescue 39 foreign nationals from forced labor in Myawaddy

(bk) The Ratchamanu Task Force in Mae Sot district, Tak province, successfully rescued 39 individuals on November 25, primarily Sri Lankans, who had been deceived into employment with misleading offers. The group, consisting of 32 Sri Lankans, 5 Nepalese, 1 Malaysian, and 1 Russian, was intercepted as they attempted to cross the Moei River into Thailand.

The operation was initiated at the request of the Sri Lankan Embassy in Thailand, which had been alerted to the situation by the victims. According to the group's representative, they had been promised favorable working conditions by a Chinese-owned business in Myawaddy. However, once they arrived, they were forced to work long hours in harsh conditions. The workers reached out to their friends and the embassy for assistance, leading to their eventual rescue.

The area where the group had been working is under the control of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), a militia group in Myanmar, located directly across from Thailand's Phop Phra district in Tak province. [Thai PBS World]

Thailand finalizes legislation to ratify 1970 UN Cultural Property Convention

(bk) Thailand has completed drafting new legislation aimed at preventing illicit activities involving cultural property, marking a necessary step toward ratifying the 1970 UN Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export, and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property. However, the ratification process is expected to take time, as the proposed legislation must first undergo cabinet and parliamentary approval.

Thailand is one of six ASEAN countries that have yet to ratify the 1970 UN Convention, with Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam having already done so. Despite not having ratified the convention, Thailand has successfully cooperated with other countries, particularly the United States, in recovering stolen cultural artefacts.

On November 14, four 3,000-year-old Ban Chiang artefacts were returned to Thailand from the United States during a ceremony at the National Museum in Bangkok, held in observance of International Day Against Illicit Trafficking in Cultural Property. The artefacts had been gifted to an American soldier in the 1960s and kept at the US embassy before being voluntarily returned. US Ambassador Robert Godec emphasized the US's continued efforts to return cultural objects to their rightful owners.

In addition to the four artefacts, the US had previously returned two significant items in May 2024, including a 900-year-old bronze statue of a Hindu god known as the "Golden Boy" (Standing Shiva) and another statue called "The Kneeling Lady," both of which had been housed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New

York since 1988. The US has also indicated plans to return two more artefacts to Thailand in the near future. [Thai PBS World] [Bangkok Post] [UNESCO]

Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam defence ministers hold annual meeting in Phnom Penh

The defence ministers of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia held their annual meeting in Phnom Penh on November 25, 2024, to strengthen trilateral cooperation in defense. The ministers emphasized the importance of their ties in maintaining peace, stability, and development in the region.

Key topics included enhancing military collaboration, including joint training and exercises to address non-traditional security challenges, and improving border security through shared information and joint patrols. The ministers also agreed to support each other in international forums, particularly within ASEAN mechanisms.

The meeting followed a joint rescue exercise in Kampong Chhnang province, which involved nearly 700 personnel from the three nations. Additionally, the Vietnamese delegation donated 30 computers to Tep Pranom high school in Kandal province. [Nhan Dan]

U.S. Treasury finds no currency manipulation by major trading partners, but several Asian economies monitored

(lm) The U.S. Department of the Treasury's latest semi-annual report concluded that no major trading partner, including those in Asia, manipulates its currency. However, seven economies—China, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, Vietnam, and Germany—remain on the "monitoring list" for their currency practices and macroeconomic policies.

China remains under scrutiny for its lack of transparency and significant trade surplus with the U.S. Japan was newly added due to its interventions to support the yen, which the Treasury noted were aimed at combating inflation. South Korea, Taiwan, and Vietnam remain on the list due to substantial trade surpluses and calls for greater transparency in their foreign exchange practices.

The Treasury emphasized the importance of transparency and market-driven exchange rates across all monitored economies. [U.S. Department Of The Treasury] [Reuters]

Chinese ambassador to Dhaka hails enduring ties with Bangladesh

(lm) Chinese Ambassador Yao Wen emphasized the "genuine friendship" between Bangladesh and China at the 2024 Reunion for Bangladeshi Persons in China event in Dhaka. Highlighting the nations' long-standing ties, Yao praised Bangladesh's trust in China and expressed readiness to deepen collaboration in trade, investment, and cultural exchanges.

Yao noted that the relationship has remained strong despite global and regional challenges, likening it to a "giant ship" navigating steadily. With 2025 marking 50 years of diplomatic relations, China plans to increase bilateral exchanges and investments while encouraging cultural and educational ties.

"China is ready to join hands with Bangladesh to sail the ship of friendship toward an even better future," Yao said, reaffirming China's commitment to peace and development in the region. [Dhaka Tribune]

Japan recovers WWII soldiers' remains from Bangladesh

(lm) Japan has successfully recovered the remains of 23 soldiers who died during World War II and were buried in Bangladesh, thanks to the strong bilateral relations between Dhaka and Tokyo. The recovery effort was led by a team from Japan's Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare (MHLW) and the Japan Association for Recovery and Repatriation of War Casualties (JARRWC) at the Mainamati War Cemetery from November 13 to November 22.

This effort is part of Japan's ongoing mission to repatriate the remains of its 2.4 million missing soldiers from WWII. To date, 1.28 million remains have been recovered globally, with Japan extending its recovery timeline to 2030. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh's interim government committed to labour reforms; US

delegation stresses labour rights

(asa) The interim government of Bangladesh is prioritizing labour reforms to align with global standards and attract more foreign buyers, Chief Adviser and de facto leader Muhammad Yunus affirmed in a meeting with a high-level United States delegation. Yunus emphasized that the interim government had appointed a special envoy dedicated to labour law reforms to address concerns raised by international labour rights groups and organizations like the International Labour Organization.

The US delegation, led by Thea Mei Lee, Deputy Undersecretary of the US Department of Labour, and Kelly Fay Rodriguez, Special Representative for International Labour Affairs, concluded their visit to Bangladesh by highlighting the crucial role of labour reforms in strengthening democracy, promoting gender equity, and ensuring sustainable economic growth. They expressed Washington's full support for improving workers' rights, including the right to form independent trade unions and bargain for better working conditions.

The delegation, which included representatives from major US brands like Gap Inc, PVH Corp, and VF Corporation, emphasized that improving labour rights, especially in the ready-made garment (RMG) sector, is a shared responsibility among governments, employers, and global buyers. The US officials also underscored the importance of worker empowerment, living wages, and safe working conditions for fostering economic stability and prosperity.

Yunus assured the delegation that labour reforms are a top priority for the interim government and urged international brands to support wage adjustments in Bangladesh by announcing price hikes for their orders. The US reaffirmed its partnership with Bangladesh, pledging continued support for worker empowerment, independent trade unions, and economic stability. [The Daily Star 1] [The Daily Star 2]

Bangladesh seeks Belgium's support for GSP+ post-LDC graduation

(lm) Bangladesh has requested Belgium’s backing through the European Union (EU) for its bid to secure GSP+ trade privileges beyond 2029 and an additional six years of international support measures (ISP) following its planned graduation from Least Developed Country (LDC) status in 2026. Belgium has assured due consideration of these requests.

During the second political consultations held on November 24, 2024, the Bangladeshi delegation, led by Additional Foreign Secretary Dr. Md. Nazrul Islam, engaged with the Belgian team led by Jeroen Cooreman, Director General for Bilateral Affairs. Discussions emphasized key areas including bilateral trade, investment, and climate change.

Belgium expressed growing business interest in Bangladesh, not only as an export destination but also for investment in manufacturing. Both countries also discussed collaboration in cancer research under a potential memorandum of understanding between the NICRH in Bangladesh and the Bordet Cancer Institute in Belgium.

The meeting highlighted Belgium's continued support for resolving the Rohingya crisis, with recognition of Queen Mathilde's visit to Bangladesh in 2023. Broader topics like human rights, the Indo-Pacific strategy, and global conflicts, including the war in Ukraine and the Israel-Palestine conflict, were also addressed.

Both nations reaffirmed their commitment to sustainable climate solutions, including the implementation of loss and damage funding. They agreed to hold the third round of political consultations in Brussels in 2025 to strengthen ties further. [Dhaka Tribune]

Russian envoy meets Bangladesh's Agriculture Adviser

(vk) The Acting Russian Ambassador to Bangladesh, Ekaterina Semenova, met Bangladesh's Agriculture Adviser Lt Gen Md Jahangir Alam Chowdhury (retd) to discuss fertilizer trade and agricultural collaboration. She proposed the exportation of as much as 400,000 metric tons of Diammonium Phosphate and 30,000 metric tons of Potash fertilizers and told the adviser that Russia is interested in Bangladesh's agriculture.

The adviser welcomed the proposal, citing Bangladesh's focus on importing quality fertilizers via G2G agreements. He also called upon Russia to import the seasonal fruits of Bangladesh, mainly jackfruit. [Bss News]

Turkey pledges continued support to Bangladesh for Rohingya crisis, explores deeper ties in agriculture, trade

(vk/lm) Turkey has reaffirmed its commitment to supporting Bangladesh in resolving the Rohingya crisis and enhancing bilateral cooperation in agriculture, trade, and institutional reforms.

During a meeting on November 24, Turkish Ambassador to Bangladesh Ramis Sen assured BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir of Turkey's continued assistance in addressing the Rohingya issue. The ambassador highlighted Turkey's engagement at the international level, particularly through the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).

In the same meeting, Turkey expressed interest in fostering stronger bilateral relations with Bangladesh, including cultural exchanges, trade, and medical collaborations. Plans for establishing a Turkish cultural center in Dhaka and discounted medical treatment packages for Bangladeshis seeking healthcare in Turkey were discussed. The Turkish envoy also expressed interest in assisting Bangladesh with institutional reforms, such as strengthening the Election Commission. [Dhaka Tribune]

In a separate meeting with Agricultural Adviser Jahangir Alam Chowdhury, the Turkish ambassador discussed opportunities for cooperation in Bangladesh's agricultural sector. Jahangir highlighted the potential for Turkish businesses to invest in agricultural logistics, mechanization, and processing, as well as research on high-yielding cotton cultivation.

Ambassador Sen underscored the strong Bangladesh-Turkey relationship, noting Turkey's role as a key supplier of textile machinery and chemicals to Bangladesh. Both sides explored opportunities to expand agricultural exports and modernize farming practices, signaling a mutual commitment to deepening ties in diverse sectors.[Bss News]

Bangladesh to send trained nurses to Saudi Arabia in early 2025

(lm) Bangladesh is set to dispatch its first batch of trained nurses to Saudi Arabia early next year, following a request from the Kingdom for 150 skilled professionals. The initiative, managed by the state-owned Bangladesh Overseas Employment and Services Ltd. (BOESL), is part of an ongoing effort to expand the country's skilled workforce abroad.

With nearly 3 million Bangladeshi expatriates already in Saudi Arabia, the number of clinicians among them remains minimal. In 2022, both countries signed an

agreement to recruit health workers, including doctors and nurses, from Bangladesh's pool of graduates from over 100 medical colleges. The current preparation involves readying more than 100 nurses for deployment to meet Saudi requirements.

BOESL Executive Director Shawkat Ali emphasized that while Bangladeshi nurses are skilled and industrious, they must pass the Saudi Prometric Exam to practice in the Kingdom. The lack of Prometric certification among most Bangladeshi nursing graduates has posed a challenge, but efforts are underway to align training programs with Saudi standards.

This initiative is part of a broader trend of increasing skilled migration from Bangladesh. According to the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training, only 2 percent of Bangladeshi workers in Saudi Arabia are skilled professionals, though their numbers have grown significantly in 2024.

The demand for Bangladeshi health workers has risen alongside the Kingdom's Vision 2030 transformation plan, which includes giga-projects requiring a diverse and skilled workforce. Ali highlighted the economic importance of this development, noting that exporting trained medical professionals will boost remittances and help Bangladesh, an import-dependent nation, meet its foreign currency needs. [Arab News]

Brunei to export processed beef products to Singapore in landmark deal

(ga) Brunei Darussalam has signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Singapore for the production, distribution, and marketing of Brunei's PDS company and Singapore's Pondok Abang company products, marking its first commercial-scale export of processed beef products to Singapore. The partnership, announced during the 4th Food Supply Working Group Meeting in Singapore, aims to begin exports in the first quarter of 2025.

PDS company, a subsidiary of Brunei's state-owned company, will lead the initiative, which reflects Brunei's focus on economic diversification and participation in international food supply chains. [Borneo Bulletin]

Cambodia expresses support for Timor-Leste's ASEAN membership

(mfr) Cambodia continues to strongly support Timor-Leste's bid to join ASEAN, highlighting the country's potential for membership. This was reaffirmed by Cambodian Senate President Hun Sen during a meeting with Timor-Leste's Ambassador to Cambodia, Ermenegildo Kupa Lopes, on November 19.

Hun Sen emphasized the importance of continued collaboration between Timor-Leste and ASEAN members in finalizing its membership. He praised Timor-Leste's expertise in energy management and thanked the country for importing 4,000 tons of Cambodian rice in 2024.

Lopes expressed gratitude for Cambodia's support and extended an invitation for Hun Sen to visit Timor-Leste, where he is expected to receive the highest national honor for his peace-building efforts in the region. [Khmer Times]

Vietnam-Cambodia friendship monument inaugurated in Phnom Penh

(mfr) The Cambodian National Assembly's new administrative building, a symbol of Vietnam-Cambodia friendship, was inaugurated in Phnom Penh on November 21. The ceremony was co-chaired by Vietnamese National Assembly Chairman Tran Thanh Man and Cambodian National Assembly President Khuon Sudary.

The building, gifted by Vietnam commemorates General Secretary Nguyen Phu Trong's state visit to Cambodia in 2017. Construction began in December 2021 and concluded in November 2024. [Khmer Times]

CPP delegation to monitor Myanmar's election in 2025

(mfr) The Cambodian People's Party (CPP) will send a delegation to observe Myanmar's general election in November 2025, following a request from the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP). The announcement came after a meeting between CPP President Hun Sen and USDP President Khin Yi in Phnom Penh during the 12th General Assembly of the International Conference of Asian Political Parties (see article in this edition).

Hun Sen also agreed to enhance bilateral relations between CPP and USDP through a formal agreement. [Khmer Times]

Tajikistan to open embassy in Cambodia in 2025

(mfr) Tajikistan will establish its official embassy in Cambodia in 2025, as announced by Muzaffar Ashuriyon, the Minister of Justice and Head of the Tajik delegation, during a meeting with Dr. Ly Thuch, Senior Minister and President of the Ottawa Convention 2024, on November 26. The meeting occurred on the sidelines of the Siem Reap-Angkor Summit on a Mine-Free World in Siem Reap province (see article in edition). [Khmer Times]

US embassy rejects claims of Biden administration backing color revolution

(mfr) The US Embassy has denied claims that the Biden administration has been funding anti-government NGOs in Cambodia. These allegations surfaced after an article in *The Sunday Guardian* suggested that the US was supporting a "color revolution" movement in the country. The claims alleged that US agencies were working with Cambodian political dissenters to destabilize the government. The article cited leaked documents suggesting an operation to overthrow the government by exploiting issues surrounding the Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam Development Triangle Area (CLV-DTA). The embassy rejected the claims, stating that the US remains committed to supporting Cambodia's democratic processes and civil society. It clarified that the US has no direct financial ties to opposition groups and emphasized its desire to collaborate with the Cambodian government on shared goals for a free, secure, and prosperous Indo-Pacific region. [The Sunday Guardian]

Government officials claimed that protests were instigated by US-funded entities aiming to destabilize the regime, citing leaked documents as evidence. At least 94 people were arrested since July for criticizing the CLV-DTA or organizing demonstrations, drawing condemnation from rights groups like Amnesty International. Despite Cambodia's withdrawal, allegations of suppression and political targeting continue to raise concerns about the government's handling of dissent.

Prime Minister Manet, for his part, expressed confidence in the government's handling of the CLV-DTA project, reaffirming that no actions were taken to compromise national sovereignty. He also noted the

public's support in rejecting any attempts to incite unrest. [Khmer Times]

Hun Manet announced on September 20, that Cambodia would withdraw from the CLV-DTA agreement to address escalating opposition and prevent further unrest (see AiR No. 39, September/2024, 4). The CLV-DTA, initiated by former Prime Minister Hun Sen in 1999, aimed to promote economic cooperation among Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam but faced criticism for allegedly enabling deforestation, land evictions, and foreign influence, particularly from Vietnam. Opposition groups and exiled figures accused the agreement of compromising Cambodia's sovereignty, sparking protests disrupted by authorities on August 18 (see AiR No. 34, August/2024, 3).

China, Singapore chart continued growth of Suzhou Industrial Park

(alk) Singapore and China have signed a 10-year blueprint to advance the Suzhou Industrial Park (SIP), a flagship project launched in 1994 as a collaboration to integrate Singapore's development model with China's industrial reforms.

Senior Minister Lee Hsien Loong, speaking in Suzhou during his first visit to China since stepping down as Prime Minister in May (see AiR No. 16, April/2024, 3), reaffirmed Singapore's confidence in China's future despite its economic and geopolitical challenges.

Over the next decade, the SIP will focus on emerging sectors like green development, digital economy, and biomedical sciences to remain competitive and attract global investments. SM Lee, addressing over 200 government and business leaders, including Chinese Vice-Premier He Lifeng, highlighted the importance of long-term cooperation and praised China's resilience in adapting to economic transitions.

The SIP, transformed from farmland into a 278 sq km modern township housing 1.17 million people, has been China's top-ranked economic and technological zone for eight years, growing 5.9 percent in 2023. It has also attracted over 5,000 foreign investment projects worth USD 40 billion, serving as a model for other industrial parks across China.

The blueprint signing coincides with the SIP's 30th anniversary, marking milestones in bilateral cooperation. SM Lee and Vice-Premier He celebrated the SIP's role in deepening ties and fostering economic

innovation. Two key projects were unveiled: the China-Singapore Life Sciences Park, focused on biomedical R&D, and the Green Digital Hub, aimed at piloting decarbonization solutions for industrial districts. Both projects, slated for completion by 2027, reinforce the SIP's global relevance and sustainability goals.

Lee emphasized that Singapore remains committed to supporting China's transformation, integration into the global economy, and constructive international engagement. Vice-Premier He described the SIP as a "window for China's opening up" and a symbol of enduring cooperation. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore] [Prime Minister's Office, Singapore]

Following his Suzhou visit, SM Lee will meet Chinese President Xi Jinping and other top officials in Beijing, concluding his trip in Shanghai before returning to Singapore on November 29. [The Straits Times] [Xinhua]

Chinese President Xi signals growing unease over developments on Korean peninsula

(alk) Chinese President Xi Jinping's recent warning about rising instability on the Korean Peninsula highlights Beijing's growing concerns over potential geopolitical turbulence, particularly with the prospect of former US President Donald Trump returning to power.

Speaking to outgoing US President Joe Biden during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Lima, Peru, Xi stated, "China does not allow conflict and turmoil to happen on the Korean peninsula. It will not sit idly by when its strategic security and core interests are under threat."

The region has become increasingly volatile due to North Korea's nuclear actions and its reported deployment of troops to aid Russia in the war in Ukraine. Observers note that Beijing faces pressure to manage its relationships with both Pyongyang and Moscow while countering criticism of its close ties with them.

Xi's remarks also reflect China's unease over the strengthening US alliance with Japan and South Korea. Analysts believe this alliance further complicates Beijing's efforts to position itself as a stabilizing force in the region. [South China Morning Post]

Donald Trump threatens additional tariffs on Chinese goods, weakening yuan

(alk/to) President-elect Donald Trump has announced plans to impose an additional 10 percent tariff on all Chinese goods entering the U.S. This follows his pledge to enact a 25 percent tariff on imports from Mexico and Canada as part of his first executive orders on January 20, signaling a sharp shift in trade policy that would effectively end the regional free trade agreement.

Trump justified the tariffs by citing illegal immigration and drug trafficking, particularly fentanyl, which he linked to Chinese production and distribution. He accused China of failing to crack down on drug smuggling, despite previous commitments, and emphasized that the US would act decisively to protect its interests.

The Chinese embassy in the U.S. refuted Trump's claims, highlighting ongoing US-China cooperation on countering narcotics since the 2023 meeting between President Xi Jinping and President Joe Biden. The embassy also warned against the negative economic consequences of a tariff war, stressing the mutually beneficial nature of bilateral trade. [Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America]

This rebuke comes as reports have surfaced that China's ambassador to the US, Xie Feng, has increased efforts to build relationships with potential members of Trump's upcoming administration. These efforts follow years of limited engagement with Republicans during President Biden's term, leaving Beijing to re-establish relations after Trump's election victory. Xie has hosted numerous former US officials and China experts in Washington, but the Chinese embassy faces challenges due to the increasingly negative stance of US policymakers toward Beijing. Observers note that Chinese officials are particularly focused on understanding Trump's trade goals. [Financial Times]

Analysts suggest China may respond to the new tariffs with economic measures, such as currency adjustments and fiscal stimulus. Goldman Sachs noted that while the 10 percent tariff is less severe than market expectations of 20 to 30 percent, it could still impact China's economy.

Market reactions were immediate. The yuan weakened against the US dollar to its lowest level in four months, while the Mexican peso and Canadian dollar also fell. Analysts expect additional tariffs could drive further

currency depreciation, complicating China's economic management efforts.

The broader implications include potential inflationary pressures in the U.S. and heightened trade tensions. Experts believe Trump's campaign rhetoric of "promise made, promise kept" may fuel fears of a renewed trade war, reminiscent of his first presidency when U.S.-China tariffs caused the yuan to depreciate significantly. [CNBC] [Reuters]

China signals willingness for dialogue on trade amid Donald Trump's tariff threats

(alk) China is open to active dialogue with the United States to foster economic and trade relations based on mutual respect, Vice Commerce Minister and International Trade Representative Wang Shouwen affirmed on November 22. [Ministry of Commerce, China]

Addressing concerns over potential tariffs from US President-elect Donald Trump, Wang expressed confidence in China's ability to handle external challenges. "We believe China and the US can maintain stable, healthy, and sustainable economic and trade relations," Wang stated at a Beijing press conference. He emphasized China's readiness to "expand cooperation and manage differences" with the US.

Trump's tariff threats – potentially exceeding 60 percent on Chinese goods – have unsettled manufacturers, prompting some to relocate to Southeast Asia. In a *Reuters* poll, economists predict tariffs as high as 40 percent could be implemented early next year, potentially reducing China's economic growth by up to 1 percentage point.

To counter trade disruptions, Chinese authorities announced new measures on 21 November to boost foreign trade. These include enhanced financing for firms and expanded agricultural exports (see article in this edition).

The Chinese yuan, which gained 10 percent in the first 18 months of Trump's presidency before sliding 12 percent during tariff disputes and the pandemic, remains a focal point. The central bank plans to maintain currency flexibility, guide market expectations, and guard against exchange rate overshooting.

US urged to increase defense spending to prepare for potential military clash with China over Taiwan

(to) US lawmakers have been presented with a recommendation to increase defense spending to over 3 percent of GDP to prepare for a potential conflict with China. The proposal came during a simulation conducted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), focusing on a 2026 scenario involving a military clash over Taiwan.

Experts argued that China's growing military capabilities, especially its industrial base, require the US to significantly boost its defense budget to maintain readiness. Taiwan remains a potential flashpoint between the two powers, with US officials frequently citing 2027 as a critical year for China's military ambitions. [South China Morning Post]

China criticizes US for blocking resolution ceasefire for Gaza

(to) China condemned the US for vetoing a United Nations Security Council resolution calling for an immediate and permanent ceasefire in Gaza. The resolution, supported by 14 of the 15 council members, aimed to stop the ongoing violence in the Palestinian enclave and secure the release of hostages. The US, holding a permanent seat, cast the sole veto.

China's top UN envoy criticized the move and accused the US of undermining global governance and shattering the hopes of Gazan civilians for survival. This marks the fourth time the US has vetoed a ceasefire resolution since the start of Israel's conflict with Hamas, further intensifying tensions in international diplomacy. [South China Morning Post]

China rejects defense talks with US, blames support for Taiwan

(to/cc) China has defended its decision to reject a proposed meeting between Chinese Defense Minister Dong Jun and US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin during last week's ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus in Laos. The talks were expected to address tensions in the South China Sea, where China's assertive actions have led to disputes with multiple ASEAN nations.

The Chinese Defense Ministry attributed the refusal to Washington's continued support for Taiwan, stating that the US cannot undermine China's core interests while expecting military dialogue "as if nothing had happened."

Beijing urged the US to correct its actions on Taiwan to create better conditions for future military exchanges, emphasizing that the responsibility for the failed talks lies entirely with Washington. [South China Morning Post]

US Secretary Austin expressed disappointment, calling the rejection "unfortunate" as the region seeks communication between each nation. Austin called the decision a "setback for the whole region," emphaszing the importance of dialogue between the two countries to ensure regional stability. [AP News]

US targets more Chinese companies

(to) The US has announced new measures targeting Chinese companies.

Chinese companies blacklisted under Uygur Forced Labour Prevention Act

The US government added 29 Chinese companies to its blacklist under the Uygur Forced Labour Prevention Act (UFLPA) on November 23. This brings the total number of blacklisted firms to over 100, as part of ongoing efforts to prevent imports of goods linked to forced labor in China's Xinjiang region.

The targeted companies produce items ranging from high-tech materials like polysilicon to food products such as tomato paste. The new restrictions, effective November 25, are part of a broader law passed in 2021 to address labor and human rights abuses in Xinjiang, home to many ethnic minorities including Uyghurs and Kazakhs. [South China Morning Post]

New export restrictions on Chinese tech firms

The US Chamber of Commerce has informed members of a lobbying group that the Biden administration is preparing to introduce new export restrictions targeting Chinese technology companies. The regulations, expected before Thanksgiving, could add up to 200 Chinese firms to a trade blacklist, limiting their access to US semiconductor technology.

This move is part of broader efforts to curb China's advancements in critical technologies, such as artificial

intelligence and chip manufacturing, amid concerns over military applications. Additional rules expected next month will address high-bandwidth memory chips, reflecting ongoing US attempts to manage tech competition with China. [Reuters]

Texas Governor Greg Abbott targets Chinese influence

(to) Texas Governor Greg Abbott has signed three executive orders aimed at limiting Chinese influence in the state. The orders target issues like cybersecurity, state contracts, and protection against foreign interference. One directive requires companies bidding for state contracts to prove they are not owned by foreign adversaries, including China.

Abbott also ordered enhanced background checks for those handling critical infrastructure and called for simulations to prepare for cyberattacks. Responding to Abbott's actions, a Chinese embassy spokesperson denied allegations of interference, calling them politically motivated and urging the US to abandon its "Cold War mentality". [Newsweek]

Meanwhile, senior White House officials met with leaders from US telecommunications companies to discuss a major cyberespionage campaign allegedly linked to China (see AiR No. 47, November/2024, 3). National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and other officials hosted the meeting to address what is seen as the "worst telecom hack in US history," which intercepted surveillance data intended for law enforcement.

The discussions focused on how the government can support telecom companies in strengthening cybersecurity against sophisticated state-sponsored attacks. Beijing has denied involvement in the hack, dismissing allegations of Chinese interference as baseless. The incident has raised concerns about protecting critical infrastructure from foreign threats. [Reuters]

US deports more Chinese nationals on repatriation flight

(alk) The United States has conducted its third repatriation flight of illegal immigrants to China in less than six months, returning 109 Chinese nationals, according to a report by Newsweek. The US

Department of Homeland Security (DHS) confirmed the operation on Saturday but did not disclose details about the flight's departure or arrival locations.

DHS described the repatriation as part of ongoing cooperation with China to enforce immigration laws and combat human smuggling networks. In a statement, the department emphasized, "Do not believe the lies of smugglers. The United States continues to enforce immigration law, and those without a legal basis to remain will be removed."

This follows a June operation in which 116 Chinese nationals were repatriated, marking the first such flight coordinated with China's National Immigration Administration since 2018. [South China Morning Post]

Chinese President Xi Jinping meets European leaders at G20 summit

(alk) On the sidelines of last week's G20 summit in Brazil, Chinese President Xi Jinping held bilateral meetings with French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancelor Olaf Scholz to bolster relations with the two major European powers amid diplomatic and trade tensions over EV tariffs and the war in Ukraine.

France highlights strategic autonomy in cooperation with China

During their talks, French President Emmanuel Macron and Chinese President Xi Jinping emphasized shared concerns and strategic cooperation amid escalating global tensions.

Macron noted a "convergence of views" between France and China on key issues, citing mutual apprehension over Russia's nuclear rhetoric and their joint call in May for a Gaza ceasefire, now extended to South Lebanon. He reiterated France's commitment to "strategic autonomy" to engage with China independently and highlighted Europe's role in fostering multilateral cooperation amid rising U.S.-China trade tensions.

Highlighting that "both China and France are independent, mature and responsible major countries," Xi acknowledged the growing global risks and uncertainties, emphasizing the "unique strategic and global significance" of China-France relations. He expressed readiness to deepen communication and cooperation to tackle shared challenges. [France 24] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China 1] [China Daily]

German Chancelor criticizes China's tacit support for Russia in war in Ukraine war

In his meeting with Xi, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz reaffirmed Germany's support for Ukraine, aligning with NATO allies, and criticized China's tacit support for Russia. He expressed concerns about reports of 11,000 North Korean troops being deployed to Ukraine, warning of the dangers of escalation. Scholz also underscored Germany's firm stance against China supplying weapons to Russia, describing his recent call with Russian President Vladimir Putin as "sobering."

On trade relations, Scholz emphasized the importance of fair competition, stating that a level playing field is essential for future economic cooperation. Xi, in turn, called for strengthening "strategic" and "long-term" ties between Germany and China. He also urged Germany to help resolve the EU's tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles, warning that the issue could escalate into a trade war. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China 2]

Despite strong economic ties, the meeting highlighted the stark divisions between Germany and China on key geopolitical issues, particularly the Ukraine war, reflecting broader tensions between the West and Beijing. [Reuters] [DW]

Denmark monitors Chinese ship after cable breaches

(to) The Danish military confirmed it is monitoring the Chinese bulk carrier Yi Peng 3, which is anchored in Danish waters. This follows the severing of two fiber-optic telecommunications cables in the Baltic Sea earlier this week. The ship, which traveled from Russia, was in the vicinity of the cable damages, leading Denmark to position a navy vessel nearby. [Reuters]

Swedish and Lithuanian defense ministers expressed deep concern over the severed Baltic Sea cable, linking it to hybrid threats in the region, and called for a thorough investigation and the potential use of EU sanctions to address such sabotage. [Ministry of Foreign Relations, Sweden]

Swedish investigators are focusing on the movements of the Chinese ship *Yi Peng 3* near the damaged Baltic Sea cables. While the Chinese government has not made any specific statements about the ship, the Chinese embassy in Stockholm said to the *Financial Times* that they had no information on the matter. China foreign military stated that it is prepared to engage with relevant parties to maintain

communication and work together to ensure the security of international submarine infrastructure. [Reuters]

Additionally, a representative from the ship's owner, Ningbo Yipeng Shipping, confirmed that the company has been asked to cooperate with the investigation. [Financial Times]

China, Morocco strengthen bilateral ties

(alk) Chinese President Xi Jinping made a brief visit November 21, to Morocco where he was welcomed in Casablanca by Crown Prince Moulay El Hassan and Prime Minister Aziz Akhannouch.

According to Morocco's state agency, the visit underscored the strong friendship, cooperation, and solidarity between Morocco and China. [Morocco World News]

The visit followed Xi's attendance at the G20 Summit in Brazil and highlighted China's growing engagement with Morocco. Recent years have seen increased Chinese investments in Morocco's infrastructure and rail sectors.

Morocco's strategic location near Europe, free trade agreements with the EU and US, and a robust automotive industry have made it an attractive destination for Chinese businesses, particularly electric vehicle (EV) battery makers. In June, Chinese EV battery firm Gotion High Tech announced plans to build Africa’s first gigafactory in Morocco, a USD 1.3 billion investment. [Reuters]

Chinese, Brazil presidents sign trade deals to deepen relationship

(to) On the sidelines of last week’s G20 summit, Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Chinese President Xi Jinping signed nearly 40 agreements in Brasília, marking a new phase in the relationship between their nations.

During Xi’s visit to Brazil to attend the G20 summit, he and President Lula announced a stronger partnership called the "China-Brazil community with a shared future," focusing on creating a fairer and more sustainable world.

They agreed to work together by combining Brazil's development plans with China's Belt and Road Initiative, especially in areas like clean energy, infrastructure, and sustainability. They also pledged to cooperate more in international groups like the UN and G20, aiming to improve global decision-making and tackle major challenges together. [Ministry of Foreign Relations, China]

Agreements furthermore include establishing task forces to focus on financial cooperation and sustainable development, with priority projects to be presented within two months. Brazil and China's shared goal of promoting Global South interests and creating a more equitable international system was also highlighted during the meeting. Additionally, Xi reaffirmed China's support for Brazil's anti-hunger initiative and interest in Brazil's environmental preservation plans. [Ministry of Foreign Relations, Brazil]

China imports Brazilian commodities like soybeans and exports goods such as vehicles and medicines and is an important economic partner for Brazil. Both leaders highlighted the importance of their partnership, with Xi referring to Brazil as a "golden partner" and Lula expressing confidence in the potential of their bilateral relations. [Aljazeera]

China's Xi and Argentina's Milei hold first meeting amid shift in stance on China

(alk) Chinese President Xi Jinping met with Argentine President Javier Milei on the sidelines of the G20 summit in Rio de Janeiro on November 19, marking a significant shift in Milei's previously combative rhetoric toward China.

During their first meeting, Xi adopted a friendly tone, thanking Milei for his congratulatory letter on China's 75th anniversary and acknowledging Argentina's economic reform efforts. He expressed China's support for Argentina's reform initiatives, emphasizing development aligned with national conditions. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China]

Milei, who had once called the Chinese government "murderers" and refused to negotiate with communists, has softened his stance since his election in November 2023. Now, he views China as a valuable trade partner and has tentatively planned a visit early next year.

Elected on promises to overhaul Argentina's struggling economy, Milei has pledged deep spending cuts and monetary reforms to address the country's severe economic crisis. His foreign policy has also seen adjustments. After appointing Gerardo Werthein as foreign minister to replace Diana Mondino, who had improved ties with China and Brazil, Milei appears to be recalibrating Argentina's approach to key international partners.

Werthein, previously Argentina's ambassador to the US, has not commented on the meeting, which signals a potential thaw in Argentina-China relations. [Reuters]

Tasmania invites China to use Hobart as Antarctic gateway

(to) Tasmania has invited China to increase its use of Hobart as a gateway for Antarctic missions, aiming to boost the local economy. Chinese icebreakers, Xue Long and Xue Long 2, had frequently visited Hobart before the pandemic but have since favored Fremantle, Western Australia.

Tasmanian officials, including Premier Jeremy Rockliff, recently visited China to encourage a return to Hobart for resupply and support services.

While the move could bring economic benefits, analysts recommend caution, emphasizing the importance of updating agreements to ensure adherence to the Antarctic Treaty's environmental and non-militarization principles.

Tasmania's Antarctic sector already contributes USD 183 million annually to the state's economy, and officials believe that welcoming Chinese icebreakers back could increase this amount. [ABCnews]

Mumbai attacks accused Tahawwur Rana appeals to US Supreme Court to block extradition

(lm) Tahawwur Rana, a Canadian national of Pakistani origin accused of involvement in the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks, has filed a plea with the United States Supreme Court to block his extradition to India. This appeal represents Rana's final legal effort following defeats in lower courts and the US Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, which denied his request for a stay on September 23.

India has sought Rana's extradition for his alleged role in aiding the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) group responsible for the 26/11 attacks, which claimed 166 lives, including six Americans. Rana, who was closely associated with David Coleman Headley, a Pakistani-American terrorist involved in the attacks, is accused of facilitating the plot that targeted multiple iconic locations in Mumbai during a 60-hour siege.

Rana's plea argues that his extradition violates the principle of double jeopardy, as he was previously acquitted in a federal court in Chicago on charges related to the same incident. His petition contends that India's charges are based on identical conduct previously adjudicated in the Chicago case. He further warns that extradition could lead to a trial in India with a potential death sentence if convicted. [Hindustan Times]

Indian Army Chief Dwivedi meets Nepal's Prime Minister Oli, emphasizes bilateral ties

(lm) Indian Army Chief General Upendra Dwivedi, during his five-day official visit to Nepal, met with Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli on November 22 to discuss strengthening bilateral relations. The meeting followed a ceremonial event where President Ramchandra Paudel conferred the honorary rank of General of the Nepali Army on General Dwivedi, a tradition upheld for over seven decades as a symbol of the enduring military ties between the two neighboring nations.

Prime Minister Oli commended the exchange of honorary military titles, describing it as a reflection of the deep-rooted relationship between Nepal and India. He also stressed the importance of enhancing cooperation to further strengthen bilateral ties. General Dwivedi, expressing pride in receiving the honorary rank, pledged to reinforce the historic partnership between the two countries.

As part of his visit, General Dwivedi is addressing student officers at the Nepali Army's Command and Staff College in Shivapuri and engaging in high-level discussions with Defence Minister Rai and other officials on matters of mutual interest. He will also attend an ex-servicemen's rally in Pokhara, where he will honor Indian Army veterans and their families, further solidifying the historic and cultural bonds shared by the two nations. [The Kathmandu Post 1] [The Kathmandu Post 2]

In another effort to deepen bilateral cooperation, a delegation of 26 officers from Nepal's ministries and government departments is participating in a specialized training program in New Delhi from November 20 to November 30. Hosted by the Sushma Swaraj Institute of Foreign Service under India's Ministry of External Affairs, the training covers topics such as global political and economic issues, trade, climate change, development partnerships, and shared cultural heritage.

Ahead of their departure, Prasanna Shrivastava, deputy chief of mission at the Indian Embassy in Kathmandu, interacted with the officers, underscoring the program's significance in enhancing institutional collaboration between Nepal and India. [The Kathmandu Post 3]

Indonesia and India discuss cooperation in healthcare and education

(gk) Indonesia's President Prabowo Subianto and his Indian counterpart Prime Minister Narendra Modi held a bilateral meeting on the sidelines of the G20 summit in Brazil's Rio de Janeiro on November 18.

Both heads of state discussed strategic cooperation across various sectors, especially health and education. Given that Indonesia currently lacks 160,000 doctors, Prabowo hoped for cooperation with India, by sending professors and specialist doctors to teach at Indonesian universities.

Additionally, he also welcomed the interest of Indian companies in the health sector, including the pharmaceutical industry and the establishment of foreign hospital branches in Indonesia (see AiR No. 42, October/2024, 3). He emphasized the importance of increasing the number of Indonesian students studying in India and encouraging increased collaboration in the education sector.

Trade sector was also discussed, with Prabowo expressing hope to finalize the rice import agreement from India very soon. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The Republic of Indonesia] [Antara]

Indonesia and Singapore to step up cooperation in marine and fisheries sector

(gk) Indonesia and its neighbor Singapore have decided to ramp up their cooperation in the marine and fisheries sector.

During a meeting between Indonesian Marine Affairs and Fisheries Minister Sakti Wahyu Trenggono and Singaporean Ambassador to Indonesia Kwok Fook Seng, both nations agreed to carry out five blue economy programs, which broadly include the expansion of marine conservation areas, quota-based measured fishing, sustainable cultivation of aquatic resources, management and surveillance of coastal areas and small islands, and fishermen's participation in marine plastic waste reduction.

Trenggono highlighted his ministry's measures to advance and sustain the sector, including the implementation of measured fishing in its eastern waters. He emphasized that his office plans to revitalize thousands of hectares of idle ponds along the northern coast of Java Island, with a special focus on tilapia (fish) cultivation.

Supporting his counterpart, Kwook affirmed his nation's commitment to assisting Indonesian ministry in implementing various program to boost the economic growth rate in tandem with preserving the marine ecosystem. He added that Singapore is keen to help Indonesia in marine resource cultivation, marine conservation area expansion and marine plastic waste reduction. [Antara]

Drug smuggling convicted in Indonesia returns to Philippines

(mu) Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. announced on November 20 that Indonesia will return Filipina drug convict Mary Jane Veloso, who has been on death row and imprisoned for nearly 14 years. She was nearly executed by firing squad but received a reprieve after years of pleas from Manila.

Veloso was arrested by Indonesian police in Yogyakarta in 2010 and sentenced to death for attempting to smuggle over 2.6 kilograms of heroin. The Philippines has been negotiating with Indonesia to transfer Veloso so she can serve the remainder of her sentence in her home country. Indonesia has agreed to the transfer, although the exact date of her return remains uncertain. Marcos thanked Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto for accepting the request. [CNN] [Jakarta Globe]

Indonesia's National Commission on Human Rights (Komnas HAM) assessed the transfer as a form of "citizen protection diplomacy," which could positively influence the outcome of other death penalty cases. Komnas HAM Commissioner Anis Hidayah expressed hope that Veloso's return could set a positive precedent for cases involving Indonesians facing detention abroad.

Indonesia currently has 165 migrant workers facing the death penalty abroad, primarily in Malaysia. [Antara]

Indonesia-Brunei warships conduct joint exercise

(mu) Two Indonesian warships from the Indonesian Navy's Fleet Command II and two Brunei Darussalam Navy (TLDB) warships participated in the sea phase of the 21B/24 Helang Laut Joint Exercise in the Java Sea from November 20-23.

The Helang Laut Exercise is a biennial event alternately hosted by the Indonesian Navy and TLDB in the waters of Indonesia and Brunei Darussalam. The joint exercise aims to enhance the interoperability of both forces and sharpen their capabilities in conducting various types of operations at sea. [Antara]

Indonesia to receive US support in boosting milk production

(gk) As Indonesia prepares to launch its flagship school-feeding program, where free lunches are to be distributed to school children, the United States (U.S.) has agreed to help Indonesia produce higher-quality milk.

The U.S. Dairy Export Council (USDEC) launched a training program for Indonesian small and medium scale dairy farmers in partnership with the New Mexico Department of Agriculture and New Mexico State University. Indonesia's dairy milk producers Global Dairy Alami, Cimory, and Ultrajaya are also taking part in this project. The program will equip farmers with the know-hows and tools to enhance their milk quality and production, besides teaching farmers the best practices to manage their farm and animal health.

The free lunches to school going children, starting from preschoolers to high schoolers, are aimed to lower the national stunting rate by providing nutrient rich means including milk as a source of calcium. [Jakarta Globe]

Indonesia and France discuss economic and defense cooperation

(gk) Indonesia and France held a bilateral meeting on the sidelines of the G20 summit organized in Brazil. President Prabowo Subianto met France's President Emmanuel Macron and discussed cooperation across key sectors, including economy and defense.

While discussing economic cooperation, Macron asked for the continuation of the France-Indonesia Business Forum that was organized by the Indonesian Embassy in Paris in September. This event was a platform for discussions and collaborations between private and public sectors from Indonesia and France.

Talking about defense cooperation, Macron commended Indonesia's plan to enhance its defense cooperation with France through the provision of Rafale jet fighters and joint development of submarines (Indonesian shipbuilder PT Pal and French Naval group have collaborated to build the Scorpene Evolved submarine).

The collaboration enables is expected to enhance self-reliance in Indonesia's maritime industry. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The Republic of Indonesia] [Antara]

Indonesia and United Kingdom strengthen and revitalize bilateral relationship with new strategic partnership

(gk) Indonesia's President Prabowo Subianto met his UK counterpart Keir Starmer at Downing Street, United Kingdom. Both heads of state agreed to take their strategic partnership to another level and agreed to deliver a more prosperous, secure and sustainable future for the people of both nations, via enhanced cooperation on trade and investment, climate and defense. Collaboration in the field of education was also discussed.

The UK and Indonesia have agreed to work towards a new Economic Growth Partnership, to increase trade and investment between two countries. The UK also welcomed Indonesia's application to join the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and expressed its willingness to share its experience with the entire process of membership.

With regards to the maritime sector, Indonesia's ambitious plan to scale up its fishing fleet was supported by the UK, where it offered to deliver innovative and sustainable high-end vessels. Both nations showed concerns over illegal, unreported and regulated fishing, and agreed to promote the conservation and sustainable use of ocean resources- in line with the UK-Indonesia Blue Planet Fund Country Plan (The Blue Planet Fund is the UK's program to support developing nations to protect maritime environment and reduce poverty). To enhance maritime safety and environmental protection, both nations have decided to partner and strengthen the Indonesian Coast Guard's maritime surveillance and intelligence systems.

The UK and Indonesia also discussed the importance of robust and diverse supply chains, including critical minerals and food security. Building on the recently concluded Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on a Strategic partnership on Critical Minerals, both nations lauded the establishment of a Working Group to promote high quality ESG practices, reinforce green and sustainable supply chains, and build capacity in the minerals sector.

Talking about the education and healthcare sector, both heads of state welcomed the establishment of the first UK universities in Indonesia and recognized the need for closer collaboration in the fields of artificial intelligence and related digital innovation. The two countries agreed to enhance health education, specialist clinical expertise, and research and innovation. The UK has decided to share its experience and knowledge in support of President Subianto's aspiration of providing nutritious and healthy meals for school children and expectant mothers, by sharing best practices

Regarding the defense and foreign policy, both nations agreed to enhance their bilateral cooperation, through a new 2+2 Foreign-Defense Dialogue, a closer partnership on cybersecurity and continued cooperation on counterterrorism. The two countries agreed to enhance their defense industrial partnership, focusing on Indonesia's Merah Putih General Purpose Frigate Program. This collaboration aims to strengthen Indonesia's naval capabilities, support defense industries, and create high-value jobs and skills in both nations.

The two countries reaffirmed their commitment to advancing Indonesia's green transition and achieving its Net-Zero target by accelerating funding disbursement through the Indonesian Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP). They agreed to establish

a high-level policy dialogue on carbon pricing to develop Indonesia's carbon finance market and drive its green transition. [UK Government 1] [UK Government 2] [Jakarta Globe] [Antara]

Prabowo also attended the CEO Roundtable Forum, a meeting with 19 major British company leaders. A total investment of USD 8.5 billion was secured from this meeting, as per the official press statement, showcasing the optimism of British business leaders towards the Indonesian economy. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The Republic of Indonesia]

Indonesian President Prabowo highlights commitment to maintaining good relations with UAE

(mu/ft) President Prabowo Subianto underlined his commitment to maintaining good bilateral relations between Indonesia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) during a meeting with the President Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan. The meeting was part of Prabowo's state visit and took place in Abu Dhabi on November 23.

During the meeting, the two leaders witnessed the signing of memoranda of understanding (MoUs) in several fields, such as industry and advanced technology, energy, health, tourism, mining and infrastructure, as well as government development and renewal. [Antara]

Meanwhile, Indonesian Minister of Tourism Widiyanti Putri Wardhana urged UAE investors to increase their investments in Indonesia's growing tourism sector during a meeting with UAE Minister of Economy Abdulla Bin Touq Al Marri in Abu Dhabi.

She highlighted the sector's potential, noting a sixfold rise in UAE investments in 2023 compared to 2022, totaling USD 1.8 million this year and USD 5.66 million over the past three years. Wardhana emphasized opportunities in restaurants, travel agencies, and star hotels, promoting Indonesia's super-priority destinations and tourism SEZs. [Antara]

Japan and China discuss security issues

(sw) Japanese Defense Minister Gen Nakatani met with his Chinese counterpart, Dong Jun, in Vientiane, Laos, to address escalating military tensions, including a recent Chinese airspace breach over Japan's East China

Sea territories. The meeting took place alongside a defense ministerial gathering of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and its regional partners in Vientiane, Laos. [Ministry of Defense, Japan]

Nakatani expressed "serious concern" and lodged a formal protest over the August 26 incident involving a Chinese spy plane violation of Japan's airspace. This came after Beijing acknowledged that one of its military planes entered Japanese airspace in August, attributing the incident to turbulence and describing it as unintentional. However, Japan has maintained that the August 26 incident involving a Chinese Y-9 spy plane was a "grave violation" of its sovereignty. [Newsweek]

Nakatani also voiced concerns over Chinese incursions near the disputed Senkaku Islands, where Chinese coast guard vessels have repeatedly entered Japan's territorial waters. Dong on the other hand raised objections to Japan's stance on Taiwan.

The ministers agreed on the importance of direct communication to manage bilateral security issues and promote regional stability. Both reaffirmed their commitment to operate a bilateral defense hotline, established in 2023, to prevent future incidents.

Discussions also covered resuming military exchanges suspended since 2019 due to strained ties and the COVID-19 pandemic. [Kyodo News]

China agrees to remove controversial buoy from Japan's waters

(sw) China has informed Japan of its intention to remove a buoy installed within Japan's exclusive economic zone (EEZ) near the disputed Senkaku Islands. Despite assurances made through diplomatic channels in the summer, the buoy remains in place, prompting Japan to demand its immediate removal.

The buoy, confirmed in July last year, has been a point of contention between Tokyo and Beijing. While China claims it monitors ocean currents and weather, some analysts believe the collected data may have military applications.

China's decision to address the issue is seen as an effort to ease tensions with Japan, potentially to focus on its relationship with the United States, which is expected to face diplomatic challenges under Donald Trump's administration.

During high-level maritime talks in October and a recent meeting between Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba and Chinese President Xi Jinping in Peru, Japan expressed serious concerns over China's increased military activity in the East China Sea. Beijing is reportedly considering relocating the buoy to the Chinese side of the EEZ's median line. [Kyodo News]

U.S. plans joint bases in Japan for Taiwan contingency

(sw/sk) The U.S. military plans to establish temporary bases along Japan's Nansei island chain and the Philippines to deploy missile units in the event of a Taiwan contingency. The plan will be formalized in December as part of the first joint U.S.-Japan operational strategy addressing tensions involving Taiwan and China, which claims the island as its own.

The U.S. Marine Littoral Regiment, equipped with High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems, will operate from bases on inhabited islands in Japan's Kagoshima and Okinawa prefectures, providing rapid response capabilities. Japan's Self-Defense Forces will support the regiment with fuel and ammunition logistics.

In parallel, the U.S. Army will station its Multi-Domain Task Force in the Philippines, leveraging its expertise in land, air, sea, and cyber operations. This deployment follows a February 2023 agreement between the U.S. and the Philippines, increasing the number of U.S.-accessible bases in the country from five to nine. [Kyodo News]

Japan and the U.S. have enhanced defense cooperation to counter China's military expansion, North Korea's nuclear threats, and its growing ties with Russia. In July, Japan and the Philippines signed a defense pact to boost joint exercises and security collaboration (see AiR No. 28, July/2024, 2).

US nuclear-powered aircraft carrier returns to port in Japan

(dql) The USS George Washington, a U.S. Navy nuclear-powered Nimitz-class aircraft carrier, has returned to its home port at Yokosuka Naval Base in Japan, resuming forward deployment in the Western Pacific and ending a regional "carrier gap" during the summer, when no U.S. carriers were immediately

available due to deployments elsewhere. [Ministry of Foreign, Japan]

Previously stationed at Yokosuka from 2008 to 2015, the George Washington underwent a 2,117-day maintenance and modernization period in Virginia before being redelivered to the Navy in 2023. It departed from the U.S. West Coast on October 8, participating in a trilateral exercise near South Korea's Jeju Island from November 13 to 15.

The fleet's area of operations includes strategic hotspots such as the East China Sea, South China Sea, Taiwan Strait, and Korean Peninsula. Under the U.S.-Japan alliance, formalized in 1960, 54,000 U.S. military personnel are stationed in Japan.

The carrier's return reinforces U.S. naval presence and deterrence in the Indo-Pacific, with the George Washington expected to spend half the year at sea and its carrier-based aviation units stationed in Japan at Iwakuni and Atsugi when not embarked. [Newsweek]

Japan and U.K. set stage for economic two-plus-two talks

(sw) Japanese Foreign Minister Takeshi Iwaya met U.K. Foreign Secretary David Lammy in Rome on November 25 to discuss preparations for the inaugural Japan-U.K. economic two-plus-two ministers' meeting, planned for early next year in Tokyo. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan]

This initiative follows the agreement by Prime Ministers Shigeru Ishiba and Keir Starmer during their November 18 summit in Brazil to strengthen trade and economic security cooperation.

Both ministers highlighted their commitment to bolstering bilateral ties, with Lammy emphasizing the already strong relationship. They also reaffirmed their collaboration on economic issues, including the U.K.'s accession to the Trans-Pacific Partnership, set to take effect next month. Additionally, they reiterated support for the joint development of next-generation fighter aircraft with Italy.

The meeting also covered regional security concerns, including Russia-North Korea military cooperation and ongoing crises in Ukraine and the Middle East. The ministers pledged continued cooperation on these matters. [Japan News Yomiuri]

Laos and China strengthen legal ties with new cooperation agreement

(cc) Laos and China have formalized their commitment to legal cooperation by signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on November 21. The agreement, signed in Vientiane, outlines a comprehensive framework for bilateral collaboration in the field of law and justice.

The agreement identifies key areas of cooperation, including joint efforts to draft, amend, and harmonize laws and regulations to ensure legal coherence and consistency between the two countries. Additionally, the MoU emphasizes collaboration in the enforcement of court judgments, mutual legal assistance, and extradition matters.

The agreement also highlights joint initiatives to enhance the professional capacity of legal practitioners, including lawyers, judges, and prosecutors. Furthermore, both countries will cooperate in providing accessible and effective legal aid services, as well as promoting the use of alternative dispute resolution mechanisms such as mediation and arbitration.

To strengthen the institutional capacity of the respective justice systems, the MoU outlines joint efforts in human resource development, infrastructure development, and technology adoption. [The Laotian Times]

Laos and Vietnam inaugurate Long Sap–Pa Hang international border gate

(mt) The Long Sap (Vietnam) – Pa Hang (Laos) international border gate was officially inaugurated on November 19 in Vietnam's Son La province. Originally established in 1990, the border gate was upgraded to international status following resolutions by both governments, with Laos approving the project in September 2024. [Lao News Agency]

US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin meets Laotian counterpart

(cc) On the sidelines of last week's ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus in Vientiane, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin met with his Laotian counterpart Chansamone Chanyalath.

Both ministers reaffirmed their commitment to accelerating unexploded ordinance removal as well as to recovering and repatriating missing servicemembers. [Department of Defense, USA]

Malaysia and South Korea upgrade diplomatic relations

(oc) Malaysia and South Korea have elevated their bilateral relations to a strategic partnership, marking a significant step in their cooperation.

The announcement was made on November 25 following a meeting between Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol. This meeting was part of Anwar's state visit to South Korea from November 24-26. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Malaysia]

The leaders confirmed that the strategic partnership will focus on several key areas: peace, security, economic development, culture, and education. [ASEAN Bernama] [Bernama]

Following the visit, Ibrahim revealed that he has requested the expedited purchase of FA-50M fighter jets from South Korea. The acquisition, valued at USD 890 million, was originally scheduled for completion in 2026.

In September, Defense Minister Mohamed Khaled Nordin stated that the fighter jets were 38% complete. [The Star]

Mongolia and Vietnam strengthen bilateral trade

(fs) The bilateral trade turnover between Vietnam and Mongolia has tripled from USD 41.5 million in 2017 to USD 132 million in 2023, as revealed by the Director of the Institute of Policy and Strategy for Agricultural and Rural Development of Vietnam Công Thắng.

Speaking at the Vietnam-Mongolia Agricultural Business Forum held in Hanoi on November 20, Thắng noted that trade turnover reached USD 65.5 million in the first seven months of 2024. Both nations aim to raise this figure to USD 200 million.

The forum, co-hosted by Vietnam's Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development and the Vietnam-Mongolia Friendship Association, provided a platform

for businesses to explore collaboration opportunities. Discussions also addressed logistical challenges, such as Vietnam joining the Mongolia-Russia-China Railway Transport Agreement, to improve trade routes.

A Memorandum of Understanding was signed to facilitate the distribution of Mongolian goat and sheep meat in Vietnam. Thắng emphasized that these initiatives would build a foundation for enhanced trade ties, benefiting both countries' agricultural sectors and addressing global market demands. [Akipress]

Mongolia and Germany hold political consultative meeting in Berlin

(fs) The Foreign Ministry of Mongolia and the German Federal Foreign Office conducted a regular political consultative meeting in Berlin.

Delegations led by Battungalag Gankhuurai, Director of the Department of Europe of Mongolia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Martin Tummel, Deputy Director of the Asia-Pacific Department of Germany's Federal Foreign Office, reviewed bilateral relations and international cooperation.

Delegates reviewed the political, social, and economic priorities outlined in their respective long-term development plans and celebrated the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two nations.

Both sides expressed satisfaction with the elevation of relations to a Strategic Partnership, established during the German Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier's state visit to Mongolia the past February during which Mongolian-German ties had been elevated to a strategic partnership (see AiR No. 7, February/2024, 2).

Discussions also encompassed international collaboration, reaffirming commitments to cooperation within the United Nations and other global organizations. [Montsame]

Mongolia and Lithuania discuss expanding cooperation

(fs) The Ministries of Foreign Affairs of Mongolia and Lithuania convened their sixth political consultative meeting in Vilnius on November 19. The discussions focused on strengthening bilateral relations.

Key areas of potential collaboration were identified, including international freight transport, logistics, education, and agriculture. Both sides also agreed to finalize and establish key cooperation documents to foster a favorable environment for bilateral cooperation.

Additionally, both delegations emphasized their commitment to joint initiatives within United Nations frameworks and other international organizations. [Aki Press]

Myanmar: UWSP cracks down on scam centers in Northern Shan, deporting hundreds to China

(sc) The United Wa State Party (UWSP), an ethnic armed group in northern Myanmar, has detained over 1,000 suspected online scammers, mostly Chinese nationals, in Tangyan and deported 762 of them to China. UWSP, known for running a self-governed region in Shan State, also handed over equipment used in the operations to Chinese officials. Myanmar citizens were interrogated and released. Online scamming, often linked to Chinese gangs, remains prevalent in Southeast Asia, with scammers relocating to evade crackdowns. [Radio Free Asia]

While UWSP hasn't engaged in Myanmar's ongoing conflicts, its actions to counter scams reflect growing pressure from China to combat cross-border fraud. Despite the deportations, many scam centers persist, with operations shifting locations to evade detection.

Residents in Tangyan report that the crackdown has targeted scam hubs in areas recently occupied by UWSP forces. [Radio Free Asia]

Chinese authorities reportedly arrest Myanmar's ethnic armed group leader in Yunnan

(tl) China has reportedly detained Peng Daxun, leader of the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), in Yunnan province, allegedly to pressure the ethnic rebel group to withdraw from Lashio, the largest city in northern Shan State, which the MNDAA seized earlier this year. Peng was reportedly detained after traveling to Yunnan for medical treatment and meeting Deng Xijun, China's special representative for Asian Affairs.

However, China's foreign ministry has denied these claims, stating that Peng is in Yunnan receiving medical treatment. Reports suggest that Peng is being prevented from returning to Myanmar, fueling speculation about the situation.

The MNDAA is part of the Three Brotherhood Alliance, which launched a large-scale offensive in 2023, capturing significant territory held by Myanmar's military junta, including Lashio in August 2024. The city is strategically important as a commercial hub near the Chinese border. Despite airstrikes and shelling by the junta, the MNDAA continues to control Lashio. Beijing has also restricted supplies to MNDAA-controlled areas while increasing its support for Myanmar's military junta. [Radio Free Asia] [The Irrawaddy]

Thai military intensifies border presence, demanding UWSA's withdrawal from alleged bases

(anl) Thai media have reported that the Thai military has increased its presence along the Thai-Myanmar border, urging the United Wa State Army (UWSA) to withdraw its alleged bases from Thai territory. Nyi Yan, head of the Wa Liaison Office in Lashio, confirmed that Thai forces have reinforced their positions along the border.

According to reports, nine UWSA bases are located in Mae Hong Son Province, and Thai authorities have repeatedly demanded their removal over the past decade. However, the UWSA denies these allegations, asserting that its bases are exclusively within the 171 Region in southern Wa territory, near the Thai-Myanmar border in Mong Hsat District, Shan State.

The disputed areas were previously controlled by insurgent group Mong Tai Army (MTA) before being taken over by the UWSA. Discussions regarding these disputes have been ongoing for years.

On November 18-19, high-ranking officials from the UWSA and the Royal Thai Army met in Chiang Mai to address issues such as territorial disputes, drug-related activities, and smuggling. Earlier, during the Myanmar-Thai Township Border Committee meeting in Tachileik in June 2023, Thai authorities had urged the Myanmar Military Council to facilitate the withdrawal of UWSA bases along the border.

The Khaosod Thai News Agency reported that Thai forces have deployed howitzers to the disputed area and given the UWSA until December 18 to dismantle

the bases. Thai military officials emphasized their preference for resolving the issue through dialogue but stated they are prepared for emergencies if necessary. In response, the head of the Wa Liaison Office in Lashio said that the issue requires discussions at the state level, and the military junta has been informed. [Mizzima]

Officials investigate potential trafficking victims fleeing Myanmar scam centers across Thailand

(anl) Thai police reported that thirty-nine foreigners fled an online scam center in Myanmar and crossed into Thailand on November 25. Authorities are working to identify potential trafficking victims. Colonel Pittayakorn Pecharat, the police chief in Mae Sot, confirmed that the group, which includes individuals from Sri Lanka, Nepal, Malaysia, and Russia, fled from Myawaddy and entered Thailand's Tak province.

It was reported that five Nepali nationals, one Malaysian, and one Russian crossed into Thailand. Sri Lanka's embassy in Bangkok has also urged Thai authorities for assistance after learning that 32 of its citizens were trapped in Myanmar.

Thai media reported that the escapees had responded to social media ads promising well-paid jobs, only to be subjected to harsh conditions in a scam center. Myanmar media further reported that scam operators who fled the crackdown have since relocated south along the Thai border. [The Irrawaddy]

KOICA supports new hospital building in Nepal

(rs)The Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) is funding a new 150-bed building for the Nepal-Korea Friendship Municipality Hospital in Madhyapur Thimi, Nepal. The USD 7.5 million project includes six operation theaters and will offer specialized services such as neurology, gynecology, obstetrics, and orthopedics. [The Rising Nepal]

Nepal-Canada parliamentary exchanges stressed

(rs) Nepal's Ambassador to Canada, Bharat Raj Paudyal, met with Greg Fergus, Speaker of the House of Commons of Canada, on November 20 in Ottawa. The courtesy meeting focused on enhancing Nepal-Canada relations and areas of mutual interest.

Ambassador Paudyal emphasized expanding economic partnerships and fostering cooperation between the parliaments of both nations, including encouraging parliamentary exchanges to strengthen bilateral ties. [The Rising Nepal]

North Korea accused by South Korea of stealing cryptocurrency worth over USD 40 million in 2019

(bw) South Korea's National Police Agency has unveiled that North Korean hackers, including the Lazarus and Andariel groups, were responsible for stealing 342,000 Ethereum tokens from Upbit, a South Korean cryptocurrency exchange, in November 2019. Valued at KRW 58 billion (USD 41.5 million) at the time, the tokens are now worth KRW 1.47 trillion (USD 1 billion). This is the first formal confirmation by South Korean investigators of North Korea's role in cryptocurrency crimes, echoing earlier accusations by the UN and other nations.

The investigation identified North Korea's involvement through IP address tracking, analysis of North Korean language usage, and cryptocurrency flow monitoring, with assistance from the FBI. Details of the hacking methods were withheld to prevent recurrence or copycat crimes.

Police reported that North Korea laundered 57 percent of the stolen tokens by selling them at 2.5 percent below market price for bitcoin through three cryptocurrency exchanges likely controlled by North Korea. The remaining tokens were distributed across 51 overseas exchanges. In 2020, authorities located a portion of the stolen funds – 4.8 bitcoin – on a Swiss cryptocurrency exchange. After a four-year process of proving their source, police recovered the funds, worth approximately KRW 600 million (USD 427 million) and returned them to Upbit last month. [Yonhap News Agency]

North Korea's launch of spy satellite expected before year-end

(bw) South Korea's National Security Adviser, Shin Won-sik, stated in an interview that North Korea is highly likely to attempt another spy satellite launch before the end of the year, despite no immediate signs of preparation.

North Korea previously pledged to launch three satellites in 2024 but faced setbacks, including a failed attempt in May when the rocket exploded shortly after takeoff (see AiR No. 22, May/2024, 4).

Shin also noted the possibility of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un visiting Russia, potentially in response to President Vladimir Putin's visit to Pyongyang in June. Ongoing sensitive discussions between North Korean and Russian officials suggest strengthening ties between the two nations. [Yonhap News Agency]

U.S. House passes reauthorization of North Korean human rights act

(mc) The US House of Representatives passed the North Korea Human Rights Reauthorization Act on November 20, renewing efforts to promote human rights and freedom in North Korea. The bipartisan bill, passed by 335 votes to 37, is intended to replace similar legislation that expired in 2022.

The bill is expected to take effect in August 2028 and includes provisions to reunite families of North Korean descent living in the US with relatives in North Korea, appoint a special envoy for North Korean human rights, and facilitate access to information in the isolated regime. [Yonhap Agency News]

North Korea leader blames US for failing negotiations

(bw) North Korean leader Kim Jong-un stated that his country had exhausted all efforts in negotiations with the United States, only to reaffirm Washington's persistent hostility toward Pyongyang. "We have already gone to every length in negotiations with the U.S., and the outcome made one thing clear: the unchanging invasive and hostile policy toward North Korea," Kim declared during a speech.

The remarks were delivered at the opening ceremony of a military hardware exhibition on November 21, where North Korea showcased advancements in its military technology. Kim praised these achievements

while emphasizing the significant threats facing the nation and North Korea's stance on addressing them.

"We will take resolute actions to eliminate all forms of military threats to our state and people," he asserted, "and we will thoroughly break the enemies' will to use armed force by continually enhancing our defense capability and exercising our legitimate right to self-defense." [KCNA]

Kim further pledged that North Korea would never tolerate breaches of its security. He vowed that the country would never voluntarily relinquish its "pendulum of military balance" under any circumstances.

During US President-elect Donal Trump's first term in 2016, he and Kim had multiple meetings, including two summit talks in Singapore and Vietnam in 2018 and 2019, respectively (see AiR 3/6/2018, AiR 1/3/2019), which sparked hope for further positive dialogues with North Korea, but eventually failed to reach a meaningful deal. [Yonhap News Agency]

Trump's Deputy National Security Adviser choice indicates possible reengagement with North Korea

(mc) U.S. President-elect Donald Trump has appointed Alex Wong, a former key negotiator in nuclear talks with North Korea during Trump's previous term, as Deputy National Security Adviser. The appointment is widely seen as a strategic move signaling Trump's intent to revive diplomacy with Pyongyang.

Wong previously served as Deputy Special Representative for North Korea and Assistant Secretary in the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs. He was a key figure in advancing Trump's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy and addressing North Korea's nuclear and missile threats.

Wong also played a pivotal role in organizing the Trump-Kim summits in Singapore (2018) and Hanoi (2019). However, meaningful nuclear negotiations have remained stalled since those meetings. [Yonhap Agency News]

North Korean-run websites posing as American shut down by FBI

(jb) The FBI, in collaboration with the American cybersecurity firm SentinelOne, uncovered four websites operated by North Korean actors posing as businesses based in the United States and India.

A seizure warrant issued by the U.S. District Court of Massachusetts ensured the shutdown of these websites, preventing them from generating foreign currency to support North Korea's nuclear program. SentinelOne reported that the websites mimicked legitimate businesses, encouraging users to interact with their interfaces in a bid to attract traffic and financial transactions.

In 2023, the White House revealed that cyberattacks and cryptocurrency theft accounted for half of North Korea's funding for its nuclear energy development. The FBI has also identified thousands of North Korean IT workers involved in similar online theft schemes since 2022.

North Korean cyber operations have become a significant focus of U.S. cybersecurity policy under the Biden administration, presenting ongoing challenges that are expected to persist into the incoming Trump administration. [CNN]

North Korea affirms bilateral solidarity with Russia

(jb/mc/bw) Amid heightened international scrutiny of their relations, North Korea and Russia are continuing to showcase deepening cooperation.

Visit of government delegation

The 11th meeting held on November 19 by North Korea's Intergovernmental Committee for Cooperation in Trade, Economy, Science and Technology in Pyongyang saw the visit of a Russian government delegation headed by Alexandr Kozlov, Minister of Natural Resources and Environment. [Rodong Sinmun English]

Following the meeting, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un met with Kozlov to affirm the bilateral cooperation and camaraderie of both states, reaffirming that Russia-North Korea relations had "reached a new strategic level" and urging both sides to "propel the co-prosperity and development of the two countries by further promoting the inter-governmental trade, economic, scientific and technological exchange and cooperation in a more extensive and diversified way." [KCNA]

The visit comes as North Korea has deployed 10,000 troops in the Kursk region of Russia to aid Russia in the war in Ukraine and North Korea-Russia relations have deepened considerably this year, with June marking the signing of a mutual defense treaty between both nations during Russian President Putin's visit to Pyongyang (see AiR No. 26, June/2024, 4). [Al Jazeera] [Reuters]

Protocol to economic cooperation signed

During the delegations visit, a protocol to develop bilateral cooperation in trade, economy, science and technology was signed on November 21, aiming at increasing charter flights, including new routes connecting major Russian cities to Pyongyang. [Yonhap Agency News 1]

Pyongyang believed to have received anti-air missiles from Russia

Russia has reportedly supplied North Korea with anti-air missiles and air defense equipment in exchange for deploying over 10,000 North Korean troops to support Russia's war efforts in Ukraine, according to South Korea's National Security Adviser, Shin Won-sik.

In an interview with broadcaster SBS, Shin stated that Russia is believed to have provided equipment to bolster North Korea's air defense capabilities, which are considered vulnerable. He further noted that after North Korea's failed attempt to launch a military spy satellite on May 27, Russia had expressed its intent to assist Pyongyang with satellite-related technologies and has allegedly delivered various military technologies to the country. [Yonhap News Agency 2]

South Korean analysts assume that North Korea has likely acquired advanced S-400 long-range surface-to-air missiles, launchers, and radar systems from Russia. The S-400, with a range of 400 kilometers (250 miles), is among Russia's most advanced anti-aircraft weapons. The acquisition aligns with Pyongyang's increased focus on air defense, particularly after accusing South Korea of using drones to distribute propaganda leaflets over its territory. [RBC] [AP News]

North Korea and Russia sign agreement to strengthen sports exchanges

(mc) North Korea and Russia signed a protocol on November 25 to enhance sports exchanges in 2025. The agreement was signed in Pyongyang by North Korean Minister of Physical Culture and Sports Kim Il-

guk and Russian Minister of Sports Mikhail Degtyarev. Degtyarev proposed hosting the “Russian-Korean Summer Games” every two years, alternating between the two countries.

According to the Russian Embassy in Pyongyang, the protocol includes plans for joint sports events, the development of specialized sports professionals, and the promotion of sports tourism. [Yonhap News Agency]

500 North Korean soldiers killed in Ukrainian missile strike on Kursk

(mc) According to a Ukrainian media outlet citing Global Defence Corp, a Ukrainian missile strike in Russia's Kursk region reportedly killed 500 North Korean soldiers.

The report claims the missile used in the attack was a French-British-made Storm Shadow missile. However, the specifics of the incident and its outcomes have not yet been independently verified. [Yonhap News Agency]

China, Pakistan step up IT cooperation to safeguard digital corridor

(mra) China and Pakistan are enhancing IT collaboration to secure the digital corridor along the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Ammar Jaffri, Director General of the Pakistan Centre of Information Technology, announced plans to establish a Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT) to address cyber threats using advanced Chinese technologies like AI, big data, and quantum computing.

Jaffri stressed the need to tackle emerging challenges and develop skilled professionals for CPEC-CERT. Efforts to overcome language barriers in IT training are underway, supported by growing cultural and educational exchanges, including 26,000 Pakistani students in China. [The Nation]

Malayasia, Pakistan enhance military cooperation

(lm) Pakistan and Malaysia have agreed to strengthen military ties, focusing on joint air force training and

collaboration. During his first visit to Pakistan, Royal Malaysian Air Force Chief General Mohd Asghar Khan Goriman Khan met Pakistan Air Force Chief Air Chief Marshal Zaheer Ahmed Baber Sidhu in Islamabad on November 21.

The two sides discussed defense cooperation, joint exercises, and technology sharing. Pakistan reaffirmed its commitment to providing basic and tactical training for Malaysian personnel. General Asghar praised Pakistan's advancements in indigenization and technological innovation.

The Malaysian air chief also toured the National Aerospace Science & Technology Park and PAF Cyber Command, lauding Pakistan's capabilities and innovations showcased at IDEAS-2024 in Karachi. [Arab News]

Pakistan, Belarus strengthen ties with new economic agreements during President Lukashenko's visit

(lm) Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko arrived in Islamabad on November 25 for a three-day visit, leading efforts to bolster economic and diplomatic ties between Pakistan and Belarus.

Hosted by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, the visit underscores Islamabad's push for foreign investment to stabilize its USD 350 billion economy amidst an International Monetary Fund (IMF)-mandated reform agenda. With Lukashenko's visit, Islamabad aims to deepen its economic ties with Minsk while showcasing itself as an investment hub in South Asia, aligning with its broader strategy to attract partnerships from Central Asian economies and beyond.

A 68-member delegation, including Belarusian ministers, business leaders, and investors, arrived ahead of Lukashenko's visit, resulting in agreements on agriculture, pharmaceuticals, electric vehicles, and infrastructure development. Specific deals were signed in sectors such as tractors, veterinary medicine, and tires, highlighting the focus on joint ventures (JVs) and technology transfer. Notable discussions included enhancing agricultural productivity, establishing tractor manufacturing plants, and exploring opportunities in the electric vehicle and SME sectors.

Pakistan's Industries Minister Rana Tanveer emphasized the country's export potential, citing goods like sports equipment, rubber products, and footwear as untapped opportunities for trade with

Belarus. Belarusian Minister for Industries Aliaksandr Yafimua highlighted that Pakistan's current trade volume with Belarus does not reflect its true potential, noting the USD 17.2 billion Belarus imports annually.

The legal sector also featured in bilateral discussions, with Pakistan's Law Minister Azam Nazeer Tarar meeting his Belarusian counterpart to deliberate on judicial digitization, international arbitration, and capacity building for legal professionals.

This visit marks 30 years of diplomatic relations between Pakistan and Belarus, with Pakistan being one of the first nations to recognize Belarus after the Soviet Union's dissolution. The countries have a history of collaboration, including prior agreements to establish a tractor plant and work on livestock protection, mechanized agriculture, and seed development. [Arab News]

German Ambassador to Pakistan reaffirms support for renewable energy reforms

(sn) Alfred Grannas, the German ambassador to Pakistan, has reaffirmed Germany's support for Pakistan's energy sector, which is currently being reformed. Germany has been a long-standing partner of Pakistan's sustainable energy sector, with recent partnerships including renewable and battery projects and smart grid solutions to reduce energy costs and increase energy intelligence. During a meeting between Grannas and Power Minister Sardar Awais Ahmed Khan Leghari, the Pakistani minister lauded Germany's contributions and addressed future collaborations with Germany.

Germany has stated that financial and technological support will continue to be provided to Pakistan as the nation struggles with an inefficient energy sector fuelled by unsustainably high prices. Pakistan continues to explore solutions, with Leghari stating, "By 2034, Pakistan aims to include 88 percent renewable energy in its energy mix." The minister invited German investors to continue investing in Pakistan's energy solutions, underscoring the necessity of the German-Pakistani partnership and the need to continue addressing the nation's energy challenges. [Daily Times] [The News International]

United Kingdom commits GBP 108 million to boost climate resilience and jobs in Pakistan

(lm) The United Kingdom has announced GBP 108 million in funding to help Pakistani businesses address climate challenges, develop innovative technologies, and attract private sector investments. The initiative, launched during British Parliamentary Under-Secretary Hamish Falconer's visit to Islamabad, aims to tackle Pakistan's vulnerability to climate change, which ranks among the highest globally.

The program, in partnership with the International Finance Corporation, is expected to mobilize 5–6 times the UK's investment from private sources and create over 100,000 jobs in Pakistan. Falconer emphasized the UK's commitment to addressing climate threats in collaboration with the Pakistani government and local businesses.

Pakistan faces severe climate risks, as evidenced by the 2022 floods that displaced 33 million people, caused over 1,700 deaths, and resulted in USD 33 billion in damages. The country's economic struggles and unpredictable weather patterns, including record April rainfall and severe heatwaves, further highlight the urgent need for climate adaptation. [Arab News]

Indonesia agrees to transfer Filipino death-row convict Mary Jane Veloso home

(rv) Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. announced that Indonesia has agreed to transfer Mary Jane Veloso, a Filipino on death row for drug trafficking, back to the Philippines to serve her sentence. Veloso was arrested in 2010 and narrowly avoided execution in 2015 after pleas from the Philippine government.

The agreement follows a decision by Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto, with terms including Veloso's continued detention in the Philippines under the original sentence imposed by the Indonesian court. Her transfer, potentially in December, requires formal requests from the Philippine Department of Justice and the covering of repatriation costs by Manila.

Veloso's case has drawn significant public attention in the Philippines. Her family and supporters maintain she was unwittingly used as a drug courier, having been deceived by illegal recruiters who promised her a

domestic worker job and provided her with a suitcase concealing 2.6 kilograms of heroin.

Marcos highlighted the decision as a testament to the strong relationship between the Philippines and Indonesia, emphasizing justice and compassion. He noted that Veloso's story resonates deeply as a reflection of many Filipinos' struggles with poverty and exploitation.

Veloso's transfer eliminates the risk of execution, as the Philippines abolished the death penalty decades ago. She will also serve as a key witness in the Philippines' human trafficking case against the recruiters who facilitated her ill-fated journey. President Marcos said he is open to granting Veloso clemency, noting that this case is unprecedented and all options remain on the table.

Her return sheds light on the broader plight of overseas Filipino workers, many of whom endure hardships and exploitation in pursuit of better opportunities abroad. Philippine authorities report that 59 Filipinos face the death penalty worldwide, primarily for drug-related and murder convictions. [Associated Press] [Manila Times]

Philippines' President Marcos Jr. discusses alliance with Trump amid strengthening ties

(er) Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. underscored the growing strength of the U.S.-Philippines alliance during a recent phone call with U.S. President-elect Donald Trump. The leaders discussed their commitment to deepening security and defense cooperation, particularly as tensions rise in the South China Sea. Marcos described the conversation as productive and expressed plans to meet Trump soon. This follows his administration's efforts to rebuild ties with the U.S., strained under his predecessor Rodrigo Duterte, and to counter China's aggressive activities in the contested waters. [Reuters]

The alliance was further emphasized during U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin's visit to Palawan, where he reaffirmed Washington's "ironclad" commitment under the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty. Austin introduced the "U.S. Task Force Ayungin," a unit supporting Philippine operations in the South China Sea through intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance activities. The task force, though newly disclosed, has reportedly been in operation for some time, providing technical assistance at the Western

Command's headquarters in Palawan. [U.S. Department od Defense]

Philippine officials clarified that U.S. troops do not directly participate in resupply missions to the Ayungin Shoal, which have been frequently harassed by Chinese vessels. National Security Adviser Eduardo Año emphasized that U.S. involvement is limited to maritime domain awareness and information-sharing, enhancing Philippine operational planning and decision-making. This support aligns with bilateral frameworks like the Mutual Defense Board-Security Engagement Board and the Bantay Dagat initiative under the 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA). [Inquirer.net]

Seychelles, Lebanon sign visa waiver deal

(axc) Seychelles and Lebanon have strengthened bilateral ties with the signing of a visa waiver agreement, allowing citizens of both nations to travel visa-free. The agreement aims to enhance mobility and cooperation between the two countries. [Seychelles News Agency]

Seychelles President Ramkalawan strengthens ties with Ghana

(axc) Seychelles' President Wavel Ramkalawan and First Lady Linda Ramkalawan visited Ghana, meeting with President Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo at Jubilee House in Accra. The visit included a ceremonial guard of honor and discussions on enhancing cooperation in tourism, culture, youth development, and the Blue Economy.

The two nations signed agreements on tourism and culture, formalized by Seychelles' Ambassador Conrad Mederic and Ghana's Minister for Tourism, Arts, and Culture, Andrew Egyapa Mercer.

President Ramkalawan also honored Ghana's heritage with ceremonies at the Kwame Nkrumah Mausoleum and the W.E.B. Du Bois Memorial Centre and met with the Seychellois community in Ghana. He expressed gratitude to the diaspora, reflecting his ongoing commitment to engaging Seychellois abroad since taking office in 2020. [Seychelles News Agency]

Seychelles, Kenya collaborate on biological risk assessment tool

(lm) Seychellois and Kenyan experts are collaborating on a national biological risk assessment tool under the European Union's Project 99. The initiative aims to identify potential biological risks over the next five years and improve preparedness for incidents involving human, animal, and environmental health.

A five-day workshop in Seychelles has brought together 30 experts from various fields to address biological risks, including zoonotic diseases like bird flu and plant toxins. This effort is part of the EU-funded project involving 11 Eastern and Central African countries, coordinated by the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI).

The project, running until 2026, aims to equip stakeholders with the tools to mitigate biological risks and implement policies effectively. [Seychelles News Agency]

China, Singapore joint counter-terror drill

(fi) China and Singapore recently conducted a joint army exercise focused on urban counter-terrorism operations at a training base in Henan province, central China. The exercise involving the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF), aims to enhance combat readiness for counter-terrorism operations in complex environments. It also seeks to foster both army's capabilities in joint command, collaborative cooperation, and unified execution.

For Singapore, a city-state, its military mission prioritizes urban defense and anti-terrorism strategies. This year marks the sixth installment of joint army exercise between China and Singapore with the fifth edition held in Singapore in 2023.

In addition to the army drill, the two nations conducted a joint maritime exercise in Zhanjiang, South China's Guangdong Province, in September. [MINDEF Singapore] [Ministry of National Defense People's Republic of China]

Singapore, Vietnam set for elevation to comprehensive strategic partnership

(fi) Singapore Prime Minister Lawrence Wong recently met Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh on the sidelines of the G20 summit on November 20. Both leaders discussed plans to elevate bilateral ties to a comprehensive strategic partnership, signaling a new phase of cooperation between the nations.

During the meeting, the two Prime Ministers agreed to promote delegation exchanges, upgrade the Vietnam-Singapore Industrial Parks (VSIPs)- established in 1996- into green and digital facilities, and strengthen infrastructure, logistics connectivity, and digital linkages.

They also explored opportunities to share experiences in renewable energy development, advance a Southeast Asian electricity network, establish international financial centers, and address regional issues of mutual interest.

Vietnam and Singapore established diplomatic relations on August 1, 1973, and elevated their relationship to a strategic partnership in 2013. Over the decades, economic ties have grown between the two countries. Singapore is Vietnam's second-largest investor with a cumulative investment of USD 81.1 billion, following South Korea at USD 87.4 billion.

According to data from the Vietnam trade office in Singapore, bilateral trade turnover reached USD 17.3 billion (SGD23.2 billion) in the first three quarters of this year, marking a 6.82 percent increase compared to the same period last year. Vietnam is now Singapore’s 12th biggest trade partner, highlighting the strengthening economic partnership. [The Investor] [Tuoitre News]

Singapore, Germany issue joint declaration on Strategic Partnership

(fi) To elevate bilateral relations between Singapore and Germany to a Strategic Partnership, the two countries issued a joint declaration building upon the 2022 Joint Declaration: Partners for a Resilient and Sustainable Future. This development comes as the two nations prepare to commemorate 60 years of diplomatic in 2025, underscoring the deepening collaboration across various sectors.

The strategic partnership will be guided by a joint work plan structured around five key pillars;1) Political, Defense, (Cyber) Security, and Intelligence 2) Trade, Investment, Transport, and Digital 3) Climate, Green

Economy, Energy Transition 4) Research Science, Tech, Innovation 5) Multilevel Cooperation for the Future.

The joint work plan aims to leverage the mutual strength of both countries. Respective foreign ministers will regularly review and refine the Joint Work Plan to enable both nations to identify and pursue opportunities for cooperation effectively. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs Singapore]

Singapore, Sweden sign multiple MoU during monarch's visit

(fi) Singapore and Sweden reinforced their bilateral relationship during a state visit by Sweden's King Carl XVI Gustaf from November 19 to 21, 2024. Hosted by President Tharman Shanmugaratnam, the visit focused on fostering collaboration in defence, trade, green transition, and innovation.

Prime Minister Lawrence Wong and King Carl XVI Gustaf witnessed the signing of ten MOUs in areas such as aviation, energy, healthcare innovation, transport, and defence technology. Notable agreements included the expansion of a Defence Technology MOU to enhance collaboration in dual-use technologies and underwater security and an energy partnership to advance High Voltage Direct Current (HVDC) technologies supporting the ASEAN Power Grid.

A healthcare MOU emphasized innovation partnerships, while a renewed transport cooperation agreement underscored shared goals in sustainable mobility. An aviation deal between Sweden's Luftfartsverket and Singapore's Civil Aviation Authority aims to strengthen civil aviation ties. [Ministry of Defence Singapore]

Maritime security was a key focus, with the King touring Singapore's Navy Museum and riding the Civil Defence Force's Red Manta vessel. Foreign Minister Maria Malmer Stenergard highlighted the shared importance of safe sea routes and rules-based international order, noting the alignment of Sweden's Baltic Sea expertise with Singapore's maritime challenges. [The Straits Times]

The Singapore-Sweden Royal Business Forum brought together over 300 participants, emphasizing opportunities in digitalization and the green transition. Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and Sweden's Lund University signed an MOU to expand research in sustainability and artificial intelligence. NTU also partnered with Swedish firm Anodox to develop

advanced energy storage solutions. [Asian Power] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs Singapore] [The Government of Sweden]

South Korea condemns North Korea's troop deployment at ASEAN-led defense meeting

(mc) At last week's ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM)-Plus in Laos, South Korean Deputy Defence Minister Kim Seon-ho reiterated his condemnation of North Korea's deployment of troops to Russia, highlighting the danger that North Korea could use the technology and resources gained from bilateral cooperation to strengthen its nuclear and missile programs (see article in this edition)

Kim criticized the use of young North Korean soldiers as "cannon fodder mercenaries" in the Ukrainian war and called for the immediate withdrawal of North Korean troops from the war in Ukraine and increased international solidarity steps against the growing military ties between Pyongyang and Moscow.

Kim also emphasized that South Korea-ASEAN relations have been transformed into a "comprehensive strategic partnership" this year and that maritime security, arms development and peacekeeping efforts will be more comprehensively addressed. [Yonhap Agency News]

South Korean unification ministry doubts imminent launch of North Korean spy satellite

(mc) The South Korean Ministry of Unification reported a lack of evidence to suggest North Korea is preparing to launch another spy satellite following its failed attempt in May (see AiR No. 22, May/2024, 4). Despite North Korea's earlier pledge to launch three satellites in 2024, it appears to have fallen behind schedule. Officials from the ministry noted the absence of any observable preparations for another satellite launch and assessed it as unlikely that North Korea would meet its stated goals by the end of the year. [Yonhap Agency News]

Additionally, the ministry raised concerns about unauthorized activities at the Kaesong Industrial Complex, where North Korea is reportedly operating

approximately 40 South Korean-owned facilities without permission. [Maeil Business Newspaper]

South Korea boycotts Japanese Sado mine memorial

(mc) South Korea boycotted Japan's November 24 commemoration of victims of forced labor at the Sado mining complex, following Tokyo's decision to send Akiko Ikuina, a controversial official, as its representative.

The South Korean Foreign Ministry criticized Japan's choice of Ikuina, a deputy parliamentary minister known for visiting the Yasukuni Shrine, commemorates those who died in service of Japan and is seen in South Korea as a symbol of Japan's militarist past. The forced labor of over 1,500 South Koreans at the Sado mines during Japan's colonial rule from 1910 to 1945 remains a controversial chapter in the shared history of the two countries.

Ikuina made no reference to forced labor in his speech during the ceremony, and the 30 seats reserved for the South Korean delegation remained empty.

Meanwhile, on November 25, the families of the Korean victims held a separate event near the mine site, attended by the South Korean ambassador. The ceremony included a moment of silence and wreath-laying in honor of the victims. [Yonhap Agency News] [The Korea Times]

South Korea, Malaysia to enhance bilateral trade cooperation

(jb) South Korean Minister for Trade Cheong In Kyo held a meeting with his Malaysian counterpart Tengkul Zafrul Aziz during his Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's three-day visit to South Korea which began November 24.

Cheong and Aziz renewed their promise of completing their countries' bilateral Free Trade Agreement by 2025's end after a five-year pause, which will enhance the ties between South Korea and its third largest trading partner in Southeast Asia. Both ministers also discussed the status of South Korean companies in Malaysia and anticipated the impact of the incoming Trump administration on international relations.

The visit also saw the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between both nations on climate change solutions and carbon capture. [The Korea Times]

South Korea and Mongolia hold new round of talks on economic partnership agreement

(bw) South Korea commenced its fourth round of talks with Mongolia for a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) in Seoul on November 26, aiming to strengthen trade, investment, and supply chain cooperation. The four-day discussions will focus on commerce, public procurement, and collaborative initiatives.

Trade Minister Cheong In-kyo emphasized Mongolia's rich natural resources and its emerging economy as key drivers for deepening ties in logistics, infrastructure, and digital sectors. "With complementary industrial structures, South Korea and Mongolia have significant potential for collaboration," Cheong remarked during his opening address.

The proposed agreement is expected to establish legal and policy frameworks for joint energy and resource development projects, thereby strengthening the supply chain for advanced industries. [Yonhap News Agency]

US Pentagon official highlights broader scope of cost sharing with South Korea

(mc) Jedidiah Royal, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defence for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs, announced at a forum held at the Korea Society on November 22 that the US will make broader contributions to ensure South Korea's regional security.

Royal's remark comes after earlier this month, South Korea and the U.S. reached the 12th Special Measures Agreement (SMA) on the cost-sharing for the stationing of U.S. Forces Korea (USFK), which will last through 2030. Under the agreement, South Korea will contribute KRW 1.52 trillion (USD 1.08 billion) in 2026, an increase from KRW 1.4 trillion in 2025 (see AiR No. 45, November/2024, 1).

Following the deal, former President Donald Trump claimed that, under his administration, South Korea would pay USD 10 billion annually for USFK presence, calling the country a "money machine." This sparked speculation that Trump might push for a revision to increase South Korea's share.

Royal emphasized that the new SMA positions both countries well for future U.S. troop presence in South Korea, stressing the importance of sharing security responsibilities in the region. [Yonhap Agency News]

South Korea, Lithuania discuss North Korean forces in Russia

(jb) In a Presidential office meeting in Seoul on November 26, the national security advisors of South Korea and Lithuania discussed the recent developments in North Korean troop deployment in Russia.

The two sides agreed to cooperate on matters of international security, deeming North Korean involvement in the Ukraine war to be an international threat. [The Korea Herald]

U.S. Navy aircraft transits Taiwan Strait

(dql) A U.S. Navy P-8A Poseidon aircraft transited the Taiwan Strait on November 26, with Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense (MND) closely monitoring the airspace and waters during the flight. The MND reported no unusual activity. [Ministry of Defense, Taiwan, in Chinese]

The U.S. 7th Fleet stated that the flight took place in international airspace and emphasized that the U.S. operates in accordance with international law to uphold navigational rights and freedoms.

In response, the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) protested the U.S. transit, accusing it of distorting international law and attempting to mislead the global community. The PLA deployed forces to respond and urged the U.S. to help maintain regional peace and stability. [Focus Taiwan]

US Senator visits Taiwan for security talks

(am) U.S. Senator Jeff Merkley visited Taiwan on November 25 as part of an Indo-Pacific trip to discuss Taiwan-U.S. relations, regional security, and trade. [Taiwan News]

Merkley, a Senate Foreign Relations Committee member and co-chair of the Congressional-Executive Commission on China, is a strong advocate for Taiwan's democracy and human rights in China. Earlier this year, he co-introduced a resolution reaffirming U.S. commitment to Taiwan.

In April, Merkley and Senator Marco Rubio introduced a resolution reaffirming America's commitment to Taiwan's democracy while commemorating the 45th anniversary of the Taiwan Relations Act. At the time, Merkley emphasized that "strong partnerships like the United States' with Taiwan are crucial to advancing our interests around the globe."

The visit occurs amid rising U.S.-China tensions, highlighted by Beijing rejecting a U.S. request for high-level defense talks (see article in this edition) after a proposed arms sale to Taiwan, including NASAM systems and advanced missiles.

Steady increase of US state offices in Taiwan

(am) 14 U.S. states opened or reopened offices in Taiwan between 2022 and 2024.

A senior Taiwanese diplomat described this development as a testament to the vitality of Taiwan-U.S. relations at a reception by the American State Offices Association (ASOA) in Taipei, adding that five new ones – New York, Michigan, New Jersey, Texas, and Indiana – were established in 2024.

The diplomat highlighted Taiwan's increased collaboration with state offices, having welcomed visits by the governors of Michigan, Texas, and Idaho in 2024.

The ASOA, founded in 1985, is an organization dedicated to promoting relations between Taipei and State Governments in the US. [Focus Taiwan].

Taiwan strengthens cooperation with European countries

(sk) Taiwan has strengthened its cooperation with four European countries, including Estonia, Latvia, Poland and Ukraine.

MoU with Latvia and Estonia on drone industry cooperation

The Taiwanese Drone Supply Chain Alliance, led by Chairman Hu Kai-hung of the Aerospace Industrial Development Corporation (AIDC), has signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on drone industry cooperation with Latvia and Estonia on November 19.

The MoU ceremony was attended by 16 Taiwanese companies from various sectors, including information and communications technology, aerospace, electronics, and other drone-related industries. It was also joined by 33 firms and industry federations from Latvia and Estonia. [Focus Taiwan]

Since 2022, the Taiwanese government has promoted international cooperation in the drone industry, and in 2024, AIDC established the Drone Supply Chain Alliance.

This MOU marks the third agreement signed by the alliance, following an MOU with the Oklahoma Defense Industry Association in early October and with the Polish-Taiwanese Chamber of Industry and Commerce on November 15. [Taiwan's Ministry of Economic Affairs, in Chinese] [CAN 1, in Chinese]

Direct flights between Taiwan and Poland, aid to Ukraine to be increased

(sk) Taiwan's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lin Chia-lung, announced the launch of direct flights between Taiwan and Poland and the donation of laptops and electric generators to Ukraine during his first visit to Warsaw on behalf of President Lai Ching-te's administration.

Minister Lin was accompanied by representatives from several Taiwanese technology and communications firms, including Hon Hai Precision Industry, Chunghwa Telecom, and CHIMEI Corporation, who engaged with Polish government and industry leaders to explore further investment opportunities in Poland.

Andrzej Dycha, Chairman of the Board of the Polish Investment and Trade Agency (PITA), emphasized Taiwan's strategic role in developing artificial intelligence (AI) and semiconductors in Poland, complementing Japan's and South Korea's recent focus on the automotive and battery industries. [CAN 2, in Chinese]

Additionally, Lin presented laptops and electric generators to the Association of Ukrainian Cities (AUC), intended for distribution across 580 Ukrainian cities. Chunghwa Telecom further signed a Letter of Intent with Bucha, a city in Ukraine's Kyiv Oblast, to collaborate on the development of a 5G Smart City project in Bucha [CAN 3, in Chinese]

Dutch Parliament supports Taiwan-Europe investment agreement

(am) The Netherlands House of Representatives passed a resolution on November 19 urging the Dutch government to support negotiations for an investment agreement between Taiwan and European nations. [Taiwan News]

The resolution, spearheaded by Jan Paternotte of the Democrats 66 party and co-chair of the Netherlands chapter of the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China (IPAC), advocates initiating official talks on such an agreement between Taiwan and a coalition of European countries.

Emphasizing the critical role of Taiwan's semiconductor industry and the Netherlands' ASML, which specializes in the development and manufacturing of photolithography machines, in the global economy, the resolution highlights the importance of fostering ties with Taiwan for Dutch economic interests and regional stability. It also warns of significant economic risks stemming from potential conflict over Taiwan and calls for closer relations as a signal of Europe's commitment to the status quo in the face of increasing Chinese aggression.

Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) welcomed the resolution, noting growing Dutch support for Taiwan. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Taiwan, in Chinese]

This marks the fourth pro-Taiwan resolution passed by the Dutch Parliament this year, following previous measures endorsing Taiwan's international participation and addressing Chinese military activities. In October, the Dutch Parliament also sent its largest-ever delegation to Taiwan.

Taiwanese President Lai Pacific tour revealed

(sk) On November 22, Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced President Lai Ching-te's upcoming

official visits to three South Pacific allies: Palau, Tuvalu, and the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI). This marks President Lai's first official overseas trip since assuming office. [CNA 1, in Chinese]

Responding to speculation about possible stopovers in Hawai'i or Guam, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Tien Chung-kwang declined to confirm details during a press conference but called on China to avoid unnecessary interference. [CNA 2, in Chinese]

An unnamed member of the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) outlined the reasons for choosing the Pacific region for President Lai's first overseas trip. The visit acknowledges and reciprocates the support of Taiwan's Pacific allies, particularly following President Tsai Ing-wen's visit over five years ago. It also highlights the geopolitical importance of the Pacific amid rising U.S.-China tensions, emphasizing the strategic need for stronger engagement with Pacific Island nations. Furthermore, the trip addresses shared challenges, including climate change, public health, and sustainability, which underscore the mutual interests of Taiwan and its Pacific allies. Additionally, the visit serves to demonstrate Taiwan's commitment to supporting Pacific Island nations under a "democratic umbrella" to counter the influence of authoritarian regimes. [CAN 3, in Chinese]

In response, the Chinese foreign ministry criticized the visit as "political manipulation activities and provocations", which would lead to nowhere, warning that the foundation of one-China principle shall not be shaken [China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs]

Former President Tsai urges compatriots in Canada to support Taiwan's bid for regional economic agreement

(am) On November 21 former Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen, who is currently on a visit to Canada, urged Taiwanese living in Canada to support Taiwan's bid to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). [Focus Taiwan]

Speaking at an event organized by Taiwanese compatriots in Canada, Tsai spoke of her gratitude for their contribution to Taiwan from 2016-2024, when she was in office.

Tsai said Taiwan is the 21st largest economy in the world and the country has played a critical role in the

global supply chain so "Taiwan's participation in the CPTPP is expected to allow Taipei to work with more partners to boost prosperity in the region.

Tsai added Taiwanese compatriots in Canada acted together and served as an important voice urging Taiwan's participation in the World Health Assembly by highlighting Taiwan's achievement in public health. These Taiwanese compatriots have also attempted to work with several Canadian parliamentarians to organize forums to advocate for Taiwan's participation in the UN and the CPTPP.

Thailand urged to set up border shelters for Rohingya migrants to combat human trafficking

(bk) The Rohingya Association of Thailand has urged the Thai government to establish temporary shelters along the border for Rohingya migrants, aiming to protect them from falling prey to human trafficking networks.

According to the Association, the primary driver for the Rohingya's migration is the ongoing internal conflict in Myanmar, particularly in Rakhine State. The state, home to the ethnic Muslim Rohingya, has long been a hotspot of violence and discrimination, forcing many to flee. The Association suggests that these shelters could provide safe havens for migrants, allowing them to remain there until the conflict subsides and they can return to Myanmar safely. This approach would help prevent migrants from resorting to traffickers who exploit their vulnerability.

The Association has called on Thai authorities to take stronger action against trafficking rings that target these vulnerable individuals. A significant number of migrants have already been trafficked into Thailand and are hiding across various provinces, waiting for further movement. On November 16, a group of 30 Rohingya migrants was arrested while traveling through Kamphaeng Phet province. Traffickers charged them between THB 70,000 (USD 2,030) and THB 100,000 (USD 2,900) each to escape violence in Myanmar, with some paying as much as THB 160,000 (USD 4,640) to brokers operating from Myanmar's border town of Myawaddy. To make matters worse, these migrants are often subjected to severe abuse at the hands of traffickers, enduring torture, sexual violence, and being forced into labor in industries such as fishing. [Thai PBS World]

Singaporean man who made false bomb threat at Bangkok's Don Mueang Airport arrested

(hrs) The suspect identified as "Mr Ho" made a hoax call for a bomb threat targeting Thai AirAsia flight FD 3114 that was scheduled for takeoff at 2:47pm to Hat Yai. He was apprehended the same evening within the airport terminal, with police using his phone signal to trace him. 162 passengers and 6 crew members disembarked for security checks, and the flight was delayed for hours to facilitate a thorough inspection. Ho now faces prosecution under Thailand's Air Navigation Act, and potentially along with deportation, permanent blacklisting from Thailand, civil lawsuits from affected parties. [Yahoo News]

Malaysia to deploy elite force on Thai border to combat crime

(lm) Malaysia will deploy the Senoi Praaq, an elite police force, to strengthen border security along Kelantan state's boundary with Thailand's Narathiwat province. The move, endorsed by Malaysia's national police chief, signals a serious effort to combat smuggling and other cross-border crimes.

At least 90 personnel, trained by the British SAS and once dubbed "The Silent Killer" by the CIA during the Indochina War, will take over border assignments from regular police. The deployment coincides with Malaysia's stricter enforcement measures, including arrests of citizens using unauthorized border crossings.

Kelantan police chief Mohd Yusoff Mamat emphasized the unit's role in controlling smuggling and curbing corruption at national borders. Malaysian authorities have reiterated that only three official checkpoints are permitted for crossing between Kelantan and Thailand's Narathiwat province: Sungai Kolok-Rantau Panjang, Tak Bai-Penkalan Kubor, and Waeng-Bukit Bunga.

The Sungai Kolok-Rantau Panjang checkpoint remains the busiest crossing in the region, second only to the Sadao-Bukit Hitam checkpoint between Songkhla province and Kedah state. Bangkok Post]

Thailand, Sweden strive for closer ties

(msz) During her visit to Thailand on November 22, Swedish Foreign Minister Maria Malmer Stenergard met with Thai Foreign Minister Maris Sangiampongsa with both seeking closer bilateral ties. Maris and Stenergard held discussions on various topics, including enhancing trade, investment, Thailand's membership bid for the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), workers' rights, such as the protection of Thai berry pickers facing unjust working and living conditions in Sweden as well as on international conflicts such as the Myanmar political crisis and the Russia-Ukraine war. The two top diplomats also had dialogues regarding security affairs emphasizing the importance of defense technologies.

According to the Embassy of Sweden in Bangkok, the bilateral diplomatic relations are 156 years old, with up to 100 Swedish companies operating in Thailand, over 70,000 Thai nationals residing in Sweden and more than 200,000 Swedish tourists visiting Thailand each year. [The Nation]

Timor-Leste, Portugal discuss cooperation for 2025

(mu) Portuguese Ambassador to Timor-Leste, Manuel Bairros, met with President José Ramos-Horta at the Presidential Palace in Dili on November 20 to discuss strengthening bilateral ties and cooperation for 2025.

Key topics included Portugal's participation in the upcoming Asia Lusophone Conference Unit, the continuation of Portuguese education programs in Timor-Leste, and exploring historical connections in education, culture, and diplomatic exchange. [Tatoli]

Timor-Leste, Australia strengthen commitment to Greater Sunrise development

(mu) Timor-Leste's Prime Minister Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão met with Australia's Special Representative for the Greater Sunrise Project, Steve Bracks, in Dili on November 21 to discuss progress and next steps for the strategic gas project. The meeting focused on implementing infrastructure to transport gas to Timor-Leste's south coast, a national priority for economic and social development.

Discussions centered on the conceptual study by Wood Australia, commissioned by the Greater Sunrise

consortium—comprising TIMOR GAP (56.6 percent), Woodside (33.44 percent), and Osaka Gas Australia (10 percent). The study identifies options for developing, processing, and commercializing gas from the fields, which are considered vital to Timor-Leste's sustainable economic growth.

Steve Bracks emphasized Australia's readiness to support the project, calling the conceptual study a critical step toward advancing the initiative. [Government of Timor-Leste]

The Greater Sunrise project development, is considered one of the world's largest untapped gas fields yet to be developed. Timorese Prime Minister, Xanana Gusmão, has reiterated the Timorese position of establishing a gas pipeline from the offshore Greater Sunrise field to the south coast to develop the country's economy and petroleum industry. [Independente]

Vietnam's top legislator visits Cambodia in first trip abroad

(lm/hn) Vietnam's National Assembly Chairman Tran Thanh Man's has concluded an official visit to neighboring Cambodia for bilateral meetings and to attend the International Conference of Asian Political Parties (ICAPP) and the International Parliament for Tolerance and Peace (IPTP-11). This marked his first visit to Cambodia as Vietnam's top legislator, aligning with Vietnam's foreign policy priorities.

Key outcomes of the visit included agreements to enhance legislative cooperation between Vietnam and Cambodia under a 2022 framework, focusing on law-making, parliamentary exchanges, and supervision of bilateral agreements. Chairman Man and his Cambodian counterpart, Samdech Khuon Sudary, inaugurated a new administrative building for Cambodia's National Assembly, gifted by Vietnam, symbolizing Vietnam's commitment to Cambodia's development.

The visit also emphasized mutual efforts in defense-security cooperation, particularly ensuring neither country's territory is used by hostile forces against the other. Leaders agreed to ease border trade regulations and encourage Vietnamese investments in Cambodia. Enhanced cultural exchanges, such as annual cultural weeks, were also proposed to foster deeper people-to-people ties. [Viet Nam News]

Meanwhile, Cambodian King Preah Bat Samdech Preah Boromneat Norodom Sihamoni is set to pay a state visit to Vietnam from November 28–29 at the invitation of Vietnam's State President Luong Cuong. [Nhan Dan]

Malaysia, Vietnam elevate ties amid South China Sea tensions

(lm) Vietnam and Malaysia have agreed to strengthen bilateral relations, upgrading their ties to a "comprehensive strategic partnership" during a meeting between Vietnamese Communist Party General Secretary To Lam and Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim in Putrajaya. This partnership marks the highest level of Vietnam's diplomatic engagement and is the first such agreement between Vietnam and an ASEAN member state.

The discussions focused on maintaining peace, stability, and freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, where both countries have overlapping territorial claims alongside China, the Philippines, Brunei, and Taiwan. The agreement comes amid rising tensions following Malaysia's recent protest over Vietnam's island-building activities in the disputed waters, particularly on Barque Canada reef in the Spratly Islands.

Lam and Anwar emphasized mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, pledging to resolve disputes based on international law. They also explored potential collaborations in the fishing industry to address longstanding issues, including accusations of illegal, unregulated, and unreported fishing by Vietnamese vessels in Malaysian waters.

The leaders witnessed the signing of agreements to boost cooperation in trade promotion and renewable energy. Malaysia is Vietnam's second-largest trade partner and third-largest foreign investor in ASEAN, with investments exceeding USD 13 billion across 700 projects. Vietnam pledged its support for Malaysia's ASEAN chairmanship in 2025 and reaffirmed its commitment to the ASEAN Blueprint 2025.

Lam's visit, his first official trip to Malaysia as general secretary, was the first by a Vietnamese Communist Party chief in 30 years. The meeting underscores the two nations' commitment to fostering closer ties and addressing shared challenges in the region. [Radio Free Asia]

Vietnam receives first US military aircraft, signaling potential arms deals

(lm) Vietnam has received its first United States military aircraft, with five Beechcraft T-6C Texan II trainers landing at Tan Son Nhat Airport in Ho Chi Minh City. This delivery marks a significant milestone in Vietnam's defense relations with the United States, pointing to the potential for future arms deals, including fighter jets like the F-16.

The T-6C Texan II is a single-engine turboprop used primarily for pilot training, including preparation for advanced U.S. fighter jets. Analysts see the acquisition as part of Vietnam's efforts to modernize its air force, which has historically relied on Soviet-made hardware. Vietnam ordered 12 T-6C trainers in 2021, and these are expected to be delivered between 2024 and 2027.

The newly arrived trainers will be stationed at Phan Thiet military airport in Binh Thuan province and are intended to complement Vietnam’s existing fleet, which includes older Soviet-era aircraft like the Su-22 and Su-30. This purchase represents Vietnam's first direct acquisition of US military hardware since the end of the Vietnam War and the lifting of Washington’s ban on lethal weapon sales to Vietnam in 2016.

The US and Vietnam have deepened defense ties in recent years. At Vietnam’s 2022 defense expo, US officials expressed a commitment to supporting Hanoi’s efforts to globalize and diversify its armed forces. While the T-6C purchase is significant, analysts caution that Vietnam's defense budget may limit the acquisition of more advanced US aircraft, such as the F-35.

Russia, Vietnam's traditional arms supplier, has proposed sales of its Su-57 and Su-75 stealth fighters. However, concerns over Western sanctions and safety issues with Russian equipment may lead Vietnam to consider diversifying its defense procurement. [Radio Free Asia]

Vietnam, Armenia deepen ties during high-level visit

(hn) Vietnam’s State President Luong Cuong welcomed Armenian National Assembly President Alen Simonyan on November 20, underscoring Vietnam's appreciation for its relationship with Armenia. Cuong praised Armenia's development achievements and noted Vietnam's transformation into a thriving economy

ranked among the top 35 globally in GDP and top 20 in international trade, attributing part of this progress to international partnerships, including with Armenia.

The discussions highlighted the positive growth in Vietnam-Armenia ties, especially in political, economic, and legislative cooperation. Two-way trade surpassed USD 400 million in early 2024, and both leaders expressed interest in enhancing exchanges, investment, tourism, and collaboration in new sectors. Simonyan affirmed Armenia's commitment to deepening ties with Vietnam and emphasized mutual support in international forums. Both sides viewed the visit as a milestone in strengthening bilateral relations and legislative collaboration. [Nhan dan, in Vietnamese]

Vietnam, Bulgaria leaders discuss deepening cooperation

(lm) Vietnam's State President Luong Cuong hosted Bulgarian President Rumen Radev in Hanoi to strengthen Vietnam-Bulgaria relations ahead of the 75th anniversary of diplomatic ties in 2025. Both leaders emphasized the importance of Vietnam-Bulgaria cooperation, with President Cuong thanking Bulgaria for its past support during Vietnam's liberation struggles and its continued assistance in national development. President Radev highlighted Vietnam as a key partner in Southeast Asia and pledged Bulgaria's commitment to collaboration across multiple sectors.

Discussions focused on expanding trade, investment, and bilateral relations, with the Vietnam-EU Free Trade Agreement (EVFTA) serving as a key mechanism. Both leaders agreed to bolster economic ties, particularly in information technology, supporting industries, and digital transformation, with Bulgaria offering to act as a gateway for Vietnam into the EU market. President Cuong urged Bulgaria to advocate for broader EU ratification of the Vietnam-EU Investment Protection Agreement (EVIPA) and to help lift the "yellow card" on Vietnam's seafood exports.

The talks also covered defense, education, agriculture, and tourism, alongside new areas like digital transformation and environmental collaboration. On international matters, including the South China Sea, both sides stressed resolving conflicts through peaceful means aligned with the UN Charter and international law. The visit culminated in the signing of agreements on education, trade, and local

cooperation, with President Radev inviting President Cuong to visit Bulgaria. [Viet Nam News]

Vietnam's Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh completes historic visit to Dominican Republic

(hn) Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh's visit to the Dominican Republic from November 19–21 marked a historic milestone as the first official visit by a Vietnamese leader to the Latin American country. This visit underscored the shared commitment to enhancing bilateral relations in diplomacy, trade, culture, and economic collaboration, ahead of the 20th anniversary of diplomatic ties in 2025.

During his meeting with Dominican President Luis Abinader Corona, the leaders emphasized the strategic importance of their partnership, highlighting Vietnam and the Dominican Republic as gateways to Southeast Asia and Latin America, respectively. Both sides agreed to expand cooperation in critical sectors such as telecommunications, agriculture, renewable energy, tourism, and infrastructure.

Key agreements signed included a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to establish a Joint Committee for trade and technical cooperation and an MoU between the diplomatic academies of both nations. The leaders also discussed visa waiver negotiations for ordinary passport holders, complementing the existing exemptions for diplomatic and official passports.

Speaking at the Vietnam-Dominican Republic Business Forum, Prime Minister Chinh stressed the potential for stronger economic ties and invited businesses to identify specific collaboration opportunities. Vietnam sees the Dominican Republic as a strategic entry point into the broader Caribbean and Latin American markets, while the Dominican Republic is prioritizing investments in aviation, renewable energy, and electric vehicles.

With trade volume reaching USD 96 million in 2023 and USD 56 million in the first nine months of 2024, both sides aim to further enhance economic exchanges. Future agreements are planned in tourism, cultural collaboration, and investment protection to solidify their partnership. [VnExpress 1] [VnExpress 2] [Nhan Dan]

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].

Team:

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