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Asia in Review

Grasp the pattern, read the trend

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Dear Readers,

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

I wish you an informative read and extend special greetings to everyone who celebrates the Independence Day of Finland and United Arab Emirates and the National Day of Laos this week.

With best regards,

Henning Glaser

Editor in Chief

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

China: Senior Central Military Commission official suspended

(lb) China's anti-corruption drive within the military has attracted heightened scrutiny as Admiral Miao Hua, a senior official in the Central Military Commission (CMC), has been suspended and placed under investigation for "serious violations of discipline," a term commonly used to refer to corruption.

69-year-old Miao heads the CMC's Political Work Department and is considered a close ally of President Xi Jinping. Their relationship goes back to a shared time in Fujian province in the 1990s, when Miao was stationed and Xi worked as a local official there. A native of Fujian, a key power base for Xi, Miao advanced through the ranks within the military's political departments. In 2014, two years after Xi assumed power, Miao was promoted to political commissar of the PLA Navy, a position he held concurrently with Defense Minister Dong Jun's tenure

as the Navy's deputy chief of staff. In 2017, Miao was further promoted to director of his current position.

The investigation comes amid a broader anti-corruption campaign and purge with nearly 20 military and defense industry officials being targeted over the past year, particularly within the Rocket Force, a key branch of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), responsible for China's missile systems. In December last year, nine generals were dismissed from the National People's Congress, including commanders from the PLA Rocket Force and Air Force (see AiR No. 1, January/2024, 1). [CNN] [Al Jazeera]

The purge has also resulted in the removal of former defense ministers Li Shangfu and Wei Fenghe, who were expelled from the Chinese Communist Party over corruption charges in June (see AiR No. 27, July/2024, 1).

The suspension of Miao, an appointee of Xi himself and taking place while Xi Jinping was attending the G20 Leaders' Summit in Brazil, is seen by observers as indicative of internal challenges Xi is facing within China's military. [Devi Discourse] [The Economic Times] [The Times of India]

Mao's suspension follows the reported investigation of Defense Minister Dong Jun, which the Defense Ministry has denied.

Despite these denials, Dong's case has garnered international attention, with analysts highlighting the broader anti-corruption campaign's destabilizing impact on the PLA's leadership. The probe into Dong would mark the third consecutive defense minister implicated in corruption, following Wei Fenghe and Li Shangfu. [Aljazeera]

Dong, a former admiral and navy commander, became defense minister in December 2023 after replacing Li Shangfu, who was dismissed following a brief seven-month tenure. Dong last appeared in public on November 21, at an ASEAN Defense Ministers' meeting in Laos, where he held discussions with regional defense officials but declined a meeting with U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, citing tensions over U.S. arms sales to Taiwan (see AiR No. 48, November/2024, 4).

Notably, Dong's appointment lacked promotion to the Central Military Commission or the State Council, a deviation from tradition for Chinese defense ministers. Analysts suggest this exclusion may signal doubts about his standing.

The investigation is widely seen as reflecting a growing pattern of military leadership purges under Xi's administration, which observers believe indicates his waning confidence in the PLA's integrity and capabilities. [Radio Free Asia] [Financial Times]

China: Shanghai official investigated for corruption amid aerospace sector scrutiny

(lb) Zhu Zhisong, Communist Party chief of Shanghai's Pudong New Area, is under investigation for suspected corruption. The Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) announced the probe into Zhu, a 55-year-old aerospace veteran, citing "serious violations of discipline and law." Zhu, the first Pudong party chief to face such charges since the district's founding in 1992, is also the second senior Shanghai official to be targeted since the Communist Party's 20th Congress in October 2022. His case follows the sentencing of Dong Yunhu, former Shanghai legislator and another "tiger", to life imprisonment in August for accepting USD 20 million in bribes.

Zhu, a standing committee member of the Shanghai party committee, oversees the China (Shanghai) Pilot Free Trade Zone, a hub for economic reforms since 2013. Before his political roles, Zhu spent over two decades in Shanghai's aerospace sector, including as director of the Shanghai Academy of Spaceflight Technology. Several associates from his aerospace career, including Dai Shoulun, a former deputy director, have also faced corruption probes.

This investigation comes amid a broader anti-corruption campaign targeting China's military and aerospace sectors. In December 2023, Beijing removed three high-ranking aerospace executives from their positions in the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, signaling intensified scrutiny. These officials held key roles in state-owned aerospace and defense corporations, underscoring the government's push to combat corruption in critical sectors. [South China Morning Post]

China – Hong Kong: Democratic Party elects' leadership amid challenges

(lb) The Democratic Party of Hong Kong re-elected its chairman, Lo Kin-hei, who has led the organization since 2020. While acknowledging its financial struggles and ongoing harassment of members, the party

remains committed to its mission of advocating for diverse opinions and preserving the “one country, two systems” principle. Lo emphasized the importance of maintaining a platform for open dialogue in Hong Kong despite declining political representation.

During the internal elections, more than 90 members cast votes to reshape the party’s central and disciplinary committees. Vice-chair Mok Kin-shing retained his position, while Bonnie Ng Hoi-yan stepped down. The central committee saw an expansion from seven to nine members, signaling efforts to strengthen internal bonds and leadership. Former lawmaker Emily Lau Wai-hing also continued her role in the disciplinary committee.

Lo stated that the party had not decided on participating in the 2025 Legislative Council election, citing financial constraints and the high demands of campaigning. Despite losing seats in the legislature and district councils, the Democratic Party continues to analyze public policies and represents a significant segment of Hong Kong’s population. Efforts to improve financial sustainability include revenue expansion and cost-cutting measures.

The party’s challenges extend to its association with Hong Kong’s longest-running national security trial, which resulted in prison sentences for five prominent members. Lo expressed hope for a more open political environment, reiterating the party’s commitment to serving Hong Kong’s best interests through advocacy and policy commentary. [South China Morning Post]

China: Censors target fried rice jokes linked to Mao’s son

(lb) Chinese internet censors have removed social media posts referencing egg fried rice, which has become a controversial symbol tied to the death of Mao Zedong’s son, Mao Anying. Mao Anying was reportedly killed during the Korean War on November 25, 1950, after lighting a cooking fire that exposed his location to U.S. bombers.

Social media posts were interpreted as veiled references to this story, leading to their deletion. The date of his death has been jokingly referred to as "China’s Thanksgiving," a nod to the belief that his death prevented China from becoming a hereditary dictatorship like North Korea.

Nationalists have criticized individuals and organizations for fried rice-related content, accusing

them of insulting Mao Anying's memory. Popular food blogger Wang Gang faced backlash for repeatedly posting fried rice recipes near the anniversary of Mao's death, prompting him to publicly apologize and pledge to stop making such posts. Similar controversies in recent years have led to social media account shutdowns, including a branch of China Unicom, after a fried rice post was interpreted as mocking Mao's son.

The jokes surrounding Mao Anying's death stem from the belief that his demise averted the establishment of a dynastic leadership in China. Critics of these jokes, including "Little Pink" nationalist supporters, have actively sought to report social media accounts and posts they find disrespectful. Such actions highlight the ongoing sensitivity in China regarding discussions of Mao Zedong, his family, and the Korean War.

Authorities have also punished individuals for perceived insults to Mao Anying. In 2021, a man in Jiangxi province was jailed for commenting that fried rice was the "best thing to come out" of the Korean War. [Radio Free Asia]

These incidents reflect the strict control over historical narratives in China, where any criticism or humor targeting national heroes or Communist Party figures can result in harsh penalties.

China: Safety inspections trigger store closures in Guangdong

(lb) A nationwide safety inspection campaign by the Chinese government has led to widespread closures of businesses in Guangdong province, as owners fear steep fines for violations. Inspectors from the State Council have been conducting surprise checks and undercover investigations, threatening penalties of up to CNY 50,000 (USD 7,000). To avoid the risk, many business owners in Chaozhou and Shantou cities have chosen to temporarily shut down, with some posting humorous signs blaming "fear of ghosts" or a "bad mood."

Night markets and food stalls cooking over open flames have been particularly targeted, with some ordered to close outright. Social media posts likened the closures to scenes from the zero-COVID lockdowns. Many business owners explained the closures as a pragmatic decision, noting the financial risk of fines far outweighed potential losses from temporarily halting operations. Comments on social media reflected this logic, with one user noting, "If you open, it could be negative."

Local officials denied that the closures were linked to inspections, claiming business as usual. However, residents mocked these denials, pointing to visibly shuttered streets. Authorities later warned that intentional closures could lead to stricter inspections in the future, intensifying concerns among business owners. Despite these warnings, many remained cautious, citing fears of punitive action and high fines.

Critics of the inspections argue the campaign may also serve as a revenue-raising tactic for financially strained local governments. Business owners criticized the inspections as creating an atmosphere of fear that hinders economic activity. [Radio Free Asia]

China: Clothing retailer Uniqlo faces backlash over CEO's Xinjiang cotton comments

(lb) Japanese clothing retailer Uniqlo is facing significant criticism in China after remarks by Tadashi Yanai, CEO of its parent company Fast Retailing, were reported by the BBC. In an interview published on November 28, Yanai stated that the company does not source cotton from Xinjiang, a region embroiled in controversy over human rights allegations. The comments quickly went viral on Chinese social media, with many users accusing Uniqlo of disrespecting the country and vowing to boycott its products.

Yanai initially responded to the BBC's inquiry by saying, "We're not using" Xinjiang cotton, but quickly refrained from elaborating, calling the subject "too political." The backlash intensified on Weibo, with consumers expressing frustration and disappointment, suggesting that Uniqlo's stance might lead to a decline in its sales. The controversy has raised tensions, as the Xinjiang region is central to China's cotton industry, despite international criticism regarding forced labor and human rights abuses. [BBC]

This situation echoes a similar controversy faced by H&M in 2021, when the company halted sourcing cotton from Xinjiang in response to forced labor concerns, resulting in widespread consumer boycotts in China. Other global brands, including Nike and Adidas, have also navigated challenges related to sourcing from the region. As Uniqlo's largest overseas market, China accounts for a significant portion of Fast Retailing's revenue, and the company has more than 900 stores in the country. [CNA]

The Chinese foreign ministry commented on the matter, urging companies to make independent

business decisions free from "political pressure and malign disruption." [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China]

China: Jailed Chinese dissident ends hunger strike amid family threats

(lb) Chinese dissident Xu Zhiyong ended his hunger strike on October 29 after prison authorities threatened his family. Xu, serving a 2023 14-year sentence for “subversion of state power,” (see AiR No. 15, April/2023, 2) had initiated the strike to protest his treatment. His detainment followed an open letter urging President Xi Jinping to resign (see AiR No. 44, October/2024, 5), and his arrest came after a gathering of dissidents was tracked using facial recognition. Xu’s lawyer and family recently confirmed his decision to end the protest.

Prison officials have since restored Xu’s access to books and writing materials, privileges that were previously revoked. According to sources, the prison allows him to read provided books and practice calligraphy using supplies from his family. The hunger strike began when guards destroyed a letter from his fiancée, fellow activist Li Qiaochu, in front of him. This action, seen as a denial of Xu’s communication rights, was a key factor in his protest.

Xu’s imprisonment and trial have been widely criticized by activists as unjust. His advocacy for peaceful reform and anti-corruption has earned him recognition, including a Nobel Peace Prize nomination earlier this year. Critics argue that the charges against him and co-defendant Ding Jiaxi are fabricated, with Xu enduring harsh conditions, including forced labor and solitary confinement. [Radio Free Asia]

Xu’s treatment has drawn global attention to China’s crackdown on dissent, sparking continued calls for his release and improved rights for political prisoners. [Human Rights Watch] [ProtectDefenders.eu]

China completes 3,000-km green belt to combat desertification

(lb) China has completed a major environmental project by finishing a 3,000-km green belt around the Taklamakan Desert in Xinjiang. The project, which began in 1978, aims to curb desertification and reduce sandstorms that affect large parts of the country.

The green belt project, which stretches around the Taklamakan Desert, has seen over 30 million hectares (116,000 square miles) of trees planted. These efforts are part of China's broader goal to combat desertification, with the country's forest coverage rising from 10 percent in 1949 to more than 25 percent by the end of 2023. In Xinjiang, forest coverage has increased from 1 percent to 5 percent over the past four decades. [Global Times]

Despite these gains, critics argue that the success of the tree planting program has been limited, with low survival rates for some trees and the green belt failing to significantly reduce the frequency of sandstorms that regularly affect Beijing. The sandstorms, which are often severe in the spring, have remained a persistent problem, leading to questions about the long-term effectiveness of the green belt.

Officials, however, remain committed to further efforts to combat desertification. Zhu Lidong, a forestry official from Xinjiang, announced that tree planting would continue around the Taklamakan, with plans to restore poplar forests on the northern edge and expand forest networks to protect farmland. Despite these efforts, official data shows that nearly 27 percent of China's land remains desertified, although this figure has slightly improved over the past decade. [Reuters]

China: Home sales fall again

(lb) China's housing market showed little sign of a sustained recovery in November, as sales from the 100 largest real estate companies dropped 6.9 percent year-on-year, totaling CNY 363 billion (USD 50 billion). This marked a reversal from a 7.1 percent increase in October, and sales fell by 16.6 percent from the previous month. The decline highlights the ongoing challenges faced by the property sector, which has yet to show consistent signs of improvement.

Beijing is facing mounting difficulties in stabilizing the property market, with deflationary pressures contributing to the overall economic slowdown. Investors are hoping for more policy support to help meet China's economic growth target of around 5 percent for this year. International Monetary Fund Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva warned that China's growth could dip "way below" 4 percent in the future unless reforms to boost domestic consumption are implemented.

While there are signs of cautious optimism, such as stabilization in housing prices in major cities like Shenzhen, the recovery remains fragile. Economist Lu Ting from Nomura Holdings noted that housing prices in top-tier cities showed signs of stabilization, with a rebound in existing home prices in Shenzhen for the first time since April last year. However, the recovery may be uneven, benefiting state-owned developers and large cities, while smaller cities continue to struggle.

Analysts suggest that current stimulus measures are having a greater impact than previous ones, but the overall recovery may remain limited. Factors such as limited housing demand and an oversupply of properties in smaller cities could continue to hinder broader recovery efforts, with buyers in larger cities gravitating toward quality developments in the face of declining prices. [BNN Bloomberg]

China's home prices are expected to fall at a slower rate through 2025 before stabilizing by 2026, according to a recent Reuters poll. Analysts now forecast a 6 percent decline in 2024, an improvement over an 8.5 percent drop predicted earlier. This follows a steep 2023 downturn, with new home prices in October posting their largest year-on-year decline since 2015.

The poll suggests that the housing market's recovery will take longer, with 2025 likely seeing a 2.0 percent decline in prices. By 2026, prices may rise by 1.6 percent. While government support measures such as tax breaks and relaxed down payment rules are expected to help reverse the slump, challenges remain. Confidence among consumers and investors continues to be fragile, leaving many buyers hesitant.

First-tier cities, including Beijing and Shanghai, are expected to lead the recovery, but smaller cities may lag. The policy measures introduced in late September, combined with tax incentives and eased restrictions, have shown some positive effects, particularly in boosting sales in major urban areas. However, analysts warn that continued efforts are needed to address inventory levels and restore confidence in the property market. [Reuters]

China: Evergrande investors quietly push for accountability

(lb) Hundreds of Chinese investors who lost savings in the collapse of property developer China Evergrande have launched a coordinated campaign to pressure authorities for updates on an ongoing investigation.

Groups of investors visited three government offices in Shenzhen over several days, using cautious methods to avoid being perceived as engaging in unlawful protests. The grassroots action highlights the lingering frustration among middle-class investors who saw their wealth erased, reflecting broader financial stresses in China's slowing economy.

Evergrande's failure, with over USD 300 billion in liabilities, has exacerbated China's real estate downturn, which once contributed a quarter of the nation's economic activity. Investors, lured by high promised returns and perks like luxury goods, purchased wealth management products that later became worthless. In response, authorities detained some staff from Evergrande's financial arm last year. Despite this, investors feel progress is insufficient and continue to seek answers while navigating strict limits on public dissent.

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China's government, acutely aware of the risks social discontent poses to stability, has heightened scrutiny of financial disputes as economic pressures grow. Social tensions have been linked to recent violent incidents (see AiR No. 48, November/2024, 4) and a surge in economic protests, with analysts identifying declining stability indicators. While Beijing has introduced stimulus measures to support the property sector and local governments, the effectiveness of these policies remains uncertain.

The Evergrande protests, while unlikely to alter its liquidation, underscore the growing unrest tied to financial strain and the broader implications for China's economy. [Reuters 1]

Meanwhile, the liquidators of Evergrande have filed a winding-up petition against Tianji Holding, a unit of the group and a guarantor for certain offshore senior notes. This petition comes as part of efforts to manage Evergrande's over USD 300 billion liabilities, with the liquidators stating that the action aligns with the interests of creditors and stakeholders. The High Court of Hong Kong is set to hear the case on January 15,

2025, marking another significant step in the company's prolonged restructuring saga. [Reuters 2]

In a further development, a court in Canton imposed spending restrictions on Evergrande and its founder, Hui Ka-yan, due to the company's failure to meet its payment obligations under a formal notice. According to the filing, the Nansha District People's Court limited expenditures to those essential for life or business. Under Chinese law, individuals subject to such restrictions face bans on luxury activities such as air travel, property purchases, and enrolling children in private schools. Hui and other responsible directors now face these limitations as the embattled real estate developer struggles to address its enormous debt. [South China Morning Post]

China: October industrial profits decreased less than September

(jf) China's industrial profits continued to decline in October, although the drop was less severe than in September, as the country faced deflationary pressures and weak demand in its USD 19 trillion economy. Fresh concerns about additional U.S. tariffs on Chinese goods next year could further strain the industrial sector, particularly its export revenues. The industrial sector has grappled with challenges including weak domestic demand exacerbated by a prolonged property market slump, rising unemployment, and escalating trade tensions, pressuring policymakers to achieve the government's annual GDP growth target of approximately 5 percent.

Data from the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) showed a 10 percent year-on-year drop in industrial profits for October, a smaller decline compared to the 27.1 percent fall recorded in September. However, profits for the first ten months of the year fell 4.3 percent, a wider drop than the 3.5 percent decrease noted in the January-September period. Improvements were observed in certain industries, with equipment and high-tech manufacturing providing notable support, according to NBS statistician Yu Weining. [National Bureau of Statistics, in Chinese] [CNN]

Private economists, however, attributed part of the October improvement to a low comparison base from the previous year. In October 2023, industrial profits had grown by 2.7 percent, slowing from double-digit increases in August and September. Lynn Song, an economist at ING, noted that base effects significantly influenced the October data, while overall industrial profits remained under considerable strain.

Other economic indicators released earlier this month painted a bleak picture of demand, with consumer prices at a four-month low and new home prices falling at their fastest pace in nine years. Producer prices in October fell 2.9 percent year-on-year, marking the sharpest drop in nearly a year. Deflation at factory gates worsened in key sectors like petroleum extraction, coal processing, chemicals, and automobile manufacturing.

Analysts warned of further pressures on industrial profits, noting that both raw materials and consumer goods manufacturing sectors face the risk of continued declines and cautioning that with producer prices still in negative territory and raw material costs, such as coal, under pressure, profit margins for industrial enterprises are likely to shrink further in the coming months. [Reuters]

China: New action plan pushes for digital transformation of finical institutions

(jf) China is set to push forward with the digital transformation of its financial institutions, aiming to build robust digital finance infrastructure as outlined in a new action plan. The initiative, issued by key state bodies including the People's Bank of China and the National Development and Reform Commission, aims to align the nation’s financial system with the growing digital economy by 2027.

The plan focuses on enhancing digital management within financial institutions and improving the accessibility and adaptability of digital financial products and services. This is intended to support critical economic strategies, key sectors, and weaker areas of the economy. To achieve these objectives, financial institutions will be encouraged to collaborate with tech-focused departments to develop technologies tailored to market needs. A digital public service platform will be established to aid the digital transformation of securities and futures institutions, providing essential technological support.

Moreover, the initiative promotes the development of advanced green and smart financial data centers by qualified institutions to ensure efficient data storage and utilization. An optimized, reliable financial network will be created to improve service capabilities and resilience. The action plan also emphasizes accelerating the use of cloud computing and artificial intelligence in the financial sector. These technologies will offer precise and efficient support for digital transformation while adhering to regulatory standards.

Digital finance has been identified as one of five pillars for advancing high-quality financial development in China, alongside sci-tech finance, green finance, inclusive finance, and elderly-care finance. These pillars collectively aim to foster sustainable growth and innovation in the financial sector. [State Council]

China: New plan to reduce food loss and waste announced

(jf) China has introduced a detailed action plan aimed at reducing food loss and waste, furthering its commitment to global food security. The announcement came shortly after President Xi Jinping addressed the G20 summit in Brazil, where he affirmed China's participation in the Global Alliance Against Hunger and Poverty and its ongoing role as host of the International Conference on Food Loss and Waste.

The plan, issued by the Communist Party's Central Committee and the State Council, sets a clear objective for 2027: to lower food loss rates during production, storage, transportation, and processing to below the international average. It outlines various strategies to achieve this, including the development of technical standards for grain production and harvesting, innovations in agricultural machinery, and enhanced training for operators. Improvements in storage practices and the establishment of dedicated transport routes and specialized equipment are also emphasized to minimize grain loss.

Public awareness campaigns will form a cornerstone of the initiative, encouraging individuals and households to adopt food-saving habits, reduce waste, and embrace healthier eating practices. Restaurants and government canteens will support these efforts with anti-waste measures such as promoting the use of leftovers and penalizing excessive wastefulness.

A new statistical survey system will track waste across various food categories, including grains, meat, vegetables, fruit, and aquatic products. This initiative builds on previous legislative efforts, such as the Anti-Food Waste Law enacted in 2021 and the Law on Assuring Food Security passed last year. [State Council, China]

China's food loss rate, at 14.7 percent, is close to the global average of 13.8 percent, according to a 2021 policy research paper. However, it lags behind nations like Japan (13.1 percent) and Australia and New Zealand (5.8 percent). The report also revealed that China loses approximately 400 million tons of food

annually. Notably, over 35 million tons of grain are lost each year during storage, transport, and processing. Production and food processing account for 63 percent of total food loss, while storage and transport contribute 37 percent. At the retail level, practices like trimming vegetables to meet aesthetic preferences – such as removing cabbage outer leaves or cutting spring onions – result in as much as 80 percent of certain food losses.

Efforts to combat food waste are not new in China. In 2020, President Xi launched the "Clean Plate Campaign" to tackle restaurant and household food waste. However, this latest plan marks a significant shift toward addressing grain loss across the supply chain, reflecting Beijing's broader drive for greater food security to support its 1.4 billion citizens. [South China Morning Post]

The United Nations Environment Programme's (UNEP's) 2024 Food Waste Index Report estimates that in 2022 a total of 1.05 billion tons of food waste was generated by the whole world, equivaling 132 kilograms per capita, or nearly one-fifth of all food available to consumers. 60 percent of the total amount of food wasted occurred at the household level, while the food service sector accounted for 28 percent and the retail sector for 12 percent. China's household estimate per capita, and year, excluding Hong Kong and Macao, is at 76 kgs. [UNEP]

China: ByteDance sues intern for USD 1.1 million in AI breaching

(jf) ByteDance, the parent company of TikTok, is suing a former intern for RMB 8 million (USD 1.1 million), accusing him of intentionally disrupting its artificial intelligence large language model (LLM) training infrastructure. The case has sparked widespread interest in China, particularly given the nation's heated competition in AI development.

The lawsuit names a postgraduate student at Peking University according to Chinese media, as the defendant. ByteDance alleges that the student sabotaged model training tasks by manipulating code and making unauthorized modifications, as reported by *Legal Weekly*, which cited an internal company memo. The company had previously dismissed the former intern in August and publicly addressed the incident in October, dismissing claims that the alleged actions caused losses worth millions of dollars or involved over 8,000 graphics processing units as "seriously exaggerated."

Although disputes between companies and employees are not uncommon in China, legal action against an intern – especially for such a substantial amount – is unusual. The case has drawn attention not only for its financial implications but also because it highlights the importance and sensitivity of AI LLM training, a rapidly advancing field that has captured global interest in technologies like generative AI for producing text, images, and other outputs. [Reuters]

China: New rules introduced for nine regions' foreign hospitals

(jf) China's decision to permit wholly owned foreign hospitals in nine regions is designed to diversify healthcare options for foreigners living and working in the country, as well as meet the specialized needs of certain Chinese citizens. The National Health Commission emphasized on November 29 that this initiative aims to bring in advanced medical resources, enhance domestic healthcare services, and improve the overall business environment in these areas.

The nine trial regions include Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, Nanjing and Suzhou in Jiangsu province, Fuzhou in Fujian province, Guangzhou and Shenzhen in Guangdong province, and Hainan Island. These areas were chosen for their large populations, strong demand for healthcare services, robust infrastructure, and significant foreign investment – accounting for 45 of China's total foreign capital usage. The regions also host a high concentration of foreign enterprises and international travelers, making them suitable for the program.

An action plan released on November 30 outlines the conditions, requirements, and procedures for setting up these foreign hospitals. [China Daily] [The Straits Times]

China: Cities create "snail award" punishing inefficient government workers

(jf) Several Chinese cities have introduced a "snail award" to spotlight and reprimand government workers who exhibit slow or inefficient behavior, part of broader efforts to counter a "lying flat" mindset. This term refers to a tendency among some workers to do only the bare minimum, a trend that President Xi Jinping and disciplinary authorities have repeatedly criticized.

In Taizhou, Jiangsu province, the “snail award” has been used to address public complaints about delayed government responses. Cases cited include unresolved issues like repairing a government website, fixing streetlights, and demolishing illegal structures. Officials deemed inefficient received poor annual performance reviews and reduced bonuses, according to the *People’s Daily*. In other cities, such as Kunming in Yunnan province, authorities have compiled specific traits of this “lying flat” attitude, including complacency, procrastination, and reluctance to take responsibility.

While some cities impose penalties for this behavior, others offer positive reinforcement. Taizhou created a “horse award” to recognize efficient workers, and Hanshou county in Hunan province celebrates diligent officials with a public contest. These measures aim to inspire higher productivity among public servants.

The issue of “lying flat cadres” has been a recurring concern for Xi Jinping. In January of the previous year, during a speech at the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI), China’s top anti-corruption body, Xi emphasized the importance of maintaining a spirit of hard work and overcoming complacency. He attributed this issue to the fact that many officials had not faced challenging or adverse conditions, leaving them unprepared for tough responsibilities.

Following Xi’s remarks, the CCDI launched a nationwide campaign to address inactivity among officials. It highlighted how such behavior delays national development and harms the public’s well-being. Grassroots officials have since been named and shamed to motivate greater accountability.

However, analysts argue that systemic issues are fueling this inertia. Alfred Wu, a scholar from the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy in Singapore, noted that the problem stems from flawed incentives. In most bureaucracies, high performers are rewarded with promotions, while underperformers face consequences. In China, however, mistakes can carry severe penalties, leading many officials to avoid taking risks altogether and choosing inaction over potential errors. [South China Morning Post]

China – Hong Kong: Government proposes penalties for substandard subdivided housing

(lb) The Hong Kong government has proposed penalties of up to HKD 300,000 (USD 38,000) or three years in prison for landlords leasing substandard

subdivided units. The Housing Bureau outlined the plan in a consultation document, aiming to phase out units smaller than eight square meters or lacking basic amenities such as separate toilets and fire safety compliance. A public consultation will run until February 2025, with legislation expected next year.

Under the proposal, all subdivided units must be registered within 12 to 18 months of the law's enactment. Units failing to meet the new standards will receive a grace period of one to two years for renovations. Units that comply will be rebranded as Basic Housing Units, while enforcement will prioritize unregistered and non-compliant properties.

Hong Kong Chief Executive John Lee announced the policy in his 2024 address, citing the need to address the estimated 110,000 subdivided flats housing around 220,000 people (see AiR No. 43, October/2024, 4). Roughly 30 percent of these flats are deemed substandard and would require significant renovation to meet the proposed requirements. Those providing false registration information could face additional penalties, including fines up to HKD 10,000 or three months in jail.

Authorities pledged a phased enforcement approach, with support for affected residents to find compliant housing. Social workers will assist tenants, though residents in these units will not receive priority for public housing. Registration for subdivided units is set to begin in late 2025 following legislative approval. [Hong Kong Free Press]

China: First Long March 12 launched from the new commercial spaceport

(jf) China took a significant step in its lunar ambitions with the inaugural launch of the Long March 12 rocket on November 30. The launch also marked the debut of the Wenchang Commercial Space Launch Site, a new facility designed to increase the nation's access to space.

The two-stage, 62-meter-tall Long March 12 lifted off at 9:25 a.m. Eastern time (1425 UTC) on November 30, lighting up the night sky over the coastal spaceport. Within an hour, the Shanghai Academy of Spaceflight Technology (SAST), which developed the rocket, confirmed a successful mission. The payload included two experimental satellites, although no details about these spacecraft were disclosed.

This rocket, fueled by kerosene, is China's first 3.8-meter-diameter launch vehicle. Capable of carrying up to 12,000 kilograms to low Earth orbit or 6,000 kilograms to sun-synchronous orbit, it is expected to support projects like the construction of China's low Earth orbit megaconstellations.

The launch also introduced the YF-100K engine, an upgraded version of the YF-100, which powers several of China's modern rockets. This engine will play a critical role in the Long March 10 rocket, designed to send Chinese astronauts to the moon by the end of the decade. Future iterations of the engine, including a reusable version called the YF-100N, are under development.

The Wenchang Commercial Space Launch Site is a separate facility from the existing national spaceport, designed to accommodate higher launch frequencies and support both state and commercial missions. This aligns with China's goal of scaling up its launch capabilities, which include plans for reusable methane-liquid oxygen rockets. SAST has already successfully tested vertical takeoff and landing technology for such future launchers.

The Long March 12's debut was China's 59th orbital launch of 2024, highlighting the country's expanding role in the global space race. With additional launches anticipated in December, including the Long March 5B and other commercial rockets, China is set to close the year with an impressive number of space missions. [Space News]

China - Hong Kong: Police target illegal money lending schemes

(lb) Hong Kong police have arrested 46 individuals, including 17 men and 29 women aged 20 to 76, linked to an illegal money lending scheme exploiting domestic workers. The suspects operated under the guise of phone retailers, charging exorbitant annual interest rates of up to 400 percent, far exceeding the legal limit of 48 percent. Borrowers were required to surrender their passports, employment contracts, and employers' details to access loans, often facing harassment for missed repayments.

Investigations revealed lenders imposed hidden fees and forced workers to buy unnecessary electronics to receive loans. In one case, a domestic worker borrowed HKD 3,500 (USD 500) but only received HKD 1,000 (USD 130) in cash after deductions for a phone and fees. Police estimated one firm loaned HKD 9

million (USD 1.15 million) to 1,500 clients in six months, while another lent HKD 30 million (USD 3.84 million) to 5,000 clients.

Authorities also dismantled an illegal lending syndicate and arrested members of four lending websites that targeted domestic workers. These platforms withheld significant portions of loans as "administrative fees," with interest rates reaching up to 3,000 percent annually. The syndicate had been operational for at least a year, involving 140 victims and loans totaling HKD 700,000 (USD 89,000). [Hong Kong Free Press]

China – Hong Kong: Man found guilty of role in 2019 mob attack

(lb) A Hong Kong court convicted Tang Ka-man of rioting and conspiring to wound with intent during the July 2019 Yuen Long mob attacks, which injured 45 people. The attacks involved over 100 men, mostly wearing white, armed with rods and rattan sticks, who assaulted individuals in Yuen Long MTR station (see AiR No. 31, July/2019, 5). The mob violence was part of the broader unrest over a now-withdrawn extradition bill, which escalated into demands for democracy and investigations into police conduct during protests.

The court Tang participated as a principal offender by arming himself with a stick and encouraging others in the riot. The rattan sticks used by the white-clad attackers were described as rigid and deliberately brought to the scene, indicating prior planning. Tang was among the white-clad group conspiring to wound, reinforcing the organized nature of the attack.

His sentencing is scheduled for December 23, with rioting punishable by up to 10 years in prison, though the District Court caps sentences at seven years. Tang is the ninth white-clad man convicted in connection with the attacks. Sentences for previous convicts ranged from three and a half to seven years. [Hong Kong Free Press]

The "white-clad attackers" refer to a group of men, many dressed in white shirts, who were involved in a violent mob attack at the Yuen Long MTR station in Hong Kong on July 21, 2019, while the "black-clad" typically refers to the attire of pro-democracy protesters during the 2019 anti-extradition bill demonstrations, who commonly wore black clothing as a form of identification and solidarity.

Japan: Ruling, opposition parties seek to find common ground on reform of political funds law

(dql) Japan's ruling and opposition parties met on November 26 to discuss abolishing unreported policy activity funds, which can amount to hundreds of millions of yen. However, the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) remains reluctant to end corporate donations, a significant source of support for the pro-business party, despite concerns that such contributions may facilitate bribery and distort policymaking.

These discussions follow the LDP's loss of its House of Representatives majority in the October 27 election, compelling Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba to seek consensus with opposition parties.

The LDP aims to amend the Political Funds Control Law by year-end during the current parliamentary session, which began on November 28 and runs through December 21, as party leaders have not been required to disclose their fund expenditures, raising concerns over potential misuse. The Constitutional Democratic Party (CDP) of Japan, the main opposition party, plans to propose its own reforms, but it remains uncertain whether the LDP and opposition parties will reach an agreement. [Kyodo News]

The parliamentary session, which focuses on a supplementary budget aimed at supporting inflation-hit households and on revising the political funds law is closely observed as it marks the first major test for Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba's minority government. With opposition support crucial for passing budgets and bills, Ishiba pledged in his address on November 29 to "listen carefully to the opinions of other parties and work sincerely and humbly to reach the broadest possible consensus."

He vowed to push for the abolition of undisclosed policy activity expenses provided to lawmakers by their parties. He also proposed creating a third-party organization to audit political funds and establishing a database for income and expenditure reports. However, he stopped short of mentioning abolishing donations from corporations and organizations, a core demand of the CDP and other opposition parties. [The Asahi Shimbun 1]

Revisions to the Political Funds Control Law, passed in June under former Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, were criticized by opposition parties as insufficient. The changes failed to include a ban on corporate donations

and lacked clear guidelines for mandatory disclosure of policy activity funds (see AiR No. 26, June/2024, 4).

The revisions were part of the LDP's efforts to regain public trust after a political funds scandal that implicated senior party members from the two main factions of the party and involved creating slush funds from unreported revenues generated through the sale of party fundraising tickets. The scandal, first reported late last year, escalated during the first half of this year. Public dissatisfaction over the issue is widely seen as a key factor behind the ruling coalition of the LDP and its junior partner Komeito losing their majority in the October 27 election (see AiR No. 44, October/2024, 5).

LDP members ready to testify

In a significant reversal, 27 LDP members of the Abe faction implicated in the political funding scandal have agreed to testify before the Upper House Political Ethics Hearing Committee. The announcement, made on November 28, marked a sharp shift, as the LDP had previously informed the CDP that none of the lawmakers were willing to attend.

The scandal prompted a March resolution from the ethics committee of the House of Councillors demanding explanations from 29 LDP members. Until recently, these lawmakers ignored calls for accountability. The sudden change reflects the changing dynamics in the political party landscape following October 27 Lower House election.

Despite the lawmakers' agreement to testify, doubts remain over whether their testimony will clarify the scandal. Previous responses to questioning by LDP officials and prosecutors often consisted of vague statements like "I don't know" or "I can't recall." Observers speculate that the coordinated attendance reflects a strategic effort by senior Abe faction members to manage the political fallout. [The Asahi Shimbun 2]

Third party panel to be established

In a latest development, the ruling coalition in Japan, comprising the LDP and Komeito, announced on December 3 plans to establish a third-party panel to discuss the contentious issue of political donations from corporations and groups.

Critics view this move as an attempt to delay legislative discussions on potentially banning such contributions, a significant funding source for the LDP. Opposition parties, including the Constitutional Democratic Party

of Japan, Nippon Ishin, the Japanese Communist Party, and Reiwa Shinsengumi, have been pushing for a ban following scandals involving unreported political funds linked to the LDP.

Despite growing pressure, the LDP has shown resistance to banning corporate donations. Party officials indicated that revisions to the Political Fund Control Law during the current Diet session would not include this issue, aiming instead for further discussion next year. Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba expressed opposition to abolishing such donations, arguing they are not inherently inappropriate. [The Asahi Shimbun 3]

Japan: Second-largest opposition party elects new leader

(dql) Nippon Ishin no Kai, Japan's second-largest opposition party, has elected Osaka Governor Hirofumi Yoshimura as its new leader during a party convention in Osaka.

Yoshimura, previously co-leader, replaces Nobuyuki Baba, who resigned following the party's poor performance in October's Lower House election (see AiR No. 44, October/2024, 5). Nippon Ishin lost five seats, reducing its total to 38, and saw a significant drop in proportional representation votes.

In his acceptance speech, he vowed to rebuild the party and prepare for next summer's Upper House election. He also announced plans to appoint Lower House lawmaker Seiji Maehara as co-leader, leveraging the party charter's provision for such appointments. [The Japan Times]

The leadership race was contested by three other candidates: Upper House member Ryuna Kanemura, and Lower House members Seiki Soramoto and Shigefumi Matsuzawa. Yoshimura secured an overwhelming 8,547 votes against a combined 2,193 votes. [The Asahi Shimbun]

Japan: Hyogo Governor dismisses allegations of election law violation in reelection campaign

(dql) Motohiko Saito, recently re-elected governor of Hyogo prefecture, has denied allegations of election law violations related to his social media campaign

during the gubernatorial race. The controversy arose after Merchu Inc., a Hyogo-based PR firm, announced in a blog post that it managed various public relations activities for Saito's campaign. Critics speculate that payments to the firm could amount to vote-buying.

At a November 27 press conference, Saito stated he was unaware of the blog post's details and emphasized that his campaign had paid Merchu JPY 700,000 (USD 4,600) for permitted activities like poster production. He maintained that his campaign team independently decided its social media strategy, with the firm's head participating only as a volunteer.

The blog post, however, claimed Merchu conducted a photo shoot, proposed a slogan, prepared campaign materials, and operated a supportive social media account. [Kyodo News]

Saito was re-elected on November 17, despite losing his position earlier due to a no-confidence motion over abuse of power allegations. Observers agree that his social media campaign gained public support, with many criticizing the prefectural assembly and mainstream media for their handling of the allegations. [Japan Forward]

Japan: Issuance of new health insurance cards halted

(dql) Japan has ceased issuing new health insurance cards. The move is part of a government initiative to integrate their functions into “My Number” identification cards, advancing digitalization efforts. My Number cards, linked to health insurance, will now be required for medical care access. A one-year grace period allows continued use of existing insurance cards. Those without My Number cards can still receive insured care by presenting proof of health insurance enrollment.

As of October 2024, 82 percent of My Number cardholders (77.47 million people) have registered them as health insurance cards. Existing insurance cards remain valid until December 1, 2025, unless insurance details change due to job transitions or relocations. [Kyodo News]

The My Number system, introduced in 2016, provides each citizen and foreign resident a unique 12-digit ID, facilitating administrative tasks. Its integration with health insurance aims to improve healthcare services by allowing medical institutions to access patient data with consent, such as prescription records, enhancing

treatment quality. The system has faced challenges, including data breaches and registration errors. [Japan Today]

Japan: 20 gigawatts of electricity to be generated through thin and flexible perovskite solar cells by 2040

(dql) Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry has announced plans to generate 20 gigawatts of electricity, equivalent to 20 nuclear reactors, through thin and flexible perovskite solar cells by fiscal 2040. This initiative is part of Japan's broader push to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050, with perovskite solar cells considered as a key component in its updated energy plan to be released this month December. [Nippon.com]

As the world's second-largest producer of iodine (a key material for perovskite solar cells), Japan plans to leverage its supply chain to boost economic security. Solar energy, which already makes up for almost 10 percent of Japan's power generation as of fiscal 2024, faces space limitations for conventional silicon-based panels. In contrast, perovskite solar cells are lightweight, flexible, and can be integrated into buildings, windows, and vehicles. While commercialization of perovskite solar cells is expected in the 2030s, challenges such as durability and cost remain.

Japan's share of global solar panel production has dropped to under 1 percent, down from approximately 50 percent in 2004, as it has been outpaced by Chinese manufacturers. Japan hopes to not only adopt this technology domestically but also position itself as a major exporter of perovskite solar cells in the future. [Kyodo News]

Japan: Court upholds rejection of call for halting Miyagi Prefecture nuclear reactor

(dql) The Sendai High Court has upheld a lower court decision to reject a lawsuit to halt operations at the Onagawa nuclear power plant’s No. 2 reactor in Miyagi Prefecture, north of Tokyo. The court ruled that the plaintiffs, 17 residents of Ishinomaki, failed to provide sufficient evidence of a significant accident risk, adding that the alleged risks did not constitute a "concrete danger" warranting suspension.

The No. 2 reactor, which restarted last month, is the first to operate in northeastern Japan since the 2011 earthquake and tsunami. Currently offline for routine inspection, it is set to begin commercial operations in December.

Onagawa's three reactors were shut down following the 2011 disaster. The No. 2 reactor, a boiling water reactor similar to those at Fukushima Daiichi, passed national safety screenings in 2020 and received local approval to resume operations. [Kyodo News]

Japan: Government endorses

(dql) The Japanese government HAS approved a JPY 13.9 trillion (USD 92.6 billion) supplementary budget in an effort to address inflation-driven financial strains on households. This budget is part of a larger economic package aimed at mitigating rising energy costs and providing cash handouts to low-income households.

However, political uncertainty surrounds the approval process. Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and its coalition partner lost their majority in the October general election, raising concerns over the budget's smooth passage in the ongoing 24-day extraordinary Diet session (see article in this edition).

Approximately half of the supplementary budget is expected to be funded through new bond issuances, totaling JPY 6.7 trillion (USD 44.7 billion), prompting fears about the country's already fragile fiscal health. Finance Minister Katsunobu Kato emphasized the goal of fostering economic growth while ensuring long-term fiscal consolidation. Meanwhile, opposition leader Yoshihiko Noda has called for a reduction in the budget, arguing that some expenses are nonurgent.

The package allocates JPY 3.4 trillion (USD 22.7 billion) for inflation relief, JPY 4.8 trillion (USD 32 billion) for disaster preparedness, and JPY 5.8 trillion (USD 38.7 billion) to stimulate disposable income and support emerging industries like AI and semiconductors.

This comes as - despite economic growth in the second quarter of 2023 - concerns about faltering consumption persist, as inflation remains a pressing issue. [The Mainichi]

Japan: Crypto exchange set for liquidation

(dql) Japanese cryptocurrency exchange DMM Bitcoin has announced plans to liquidate following a JPY 48.2 billion (USD 320 million) fraud incident in May that severely disrupted its operations. The exchange will transfer its 450,000 client accounts, along with JPY 96.2 billion (USD 641 million) in assets, to SBI VC Trade, a cryptocurrency exchange under SBI Group, by March.

DMM Bitcoin, a subsidiary of e-commerce group DMM.com, halted key services after the fraud, preventing customers from purchasing or transferring cryptocurrencies. Although the company secured JPY 55 billion (USD 366 million) from group affiliates in June to compensate for the stolen bitcoin, its operational challenges persisted.

Japan has faced multiple cryptocurrency fraud cases in recent years, prompting stricter regulations. Since 2017, exchanges must register and implement enhanced security measures, including "cold wallets" for offline cryptocurrency storage. Despite using such wallets, DMM Bitcoin's implementation flaws left it vulnerable to the May fraud. [Nikkei Asia]

Japan: Duty free rules to be revised

(dql) Government sources have revealed that Japan plans to revise its duty-free rules for foreign visitors starting in the latter half of fiscal 2026. This move seeks to address concerns over abuse of the system, according to government sources. Proposed changes include reimbursing the 10 percent consumption tax upon tourists' return to their home countries, instead of granting immediate exemptions at the time of purchase.

The revisions follow reports of foreign tourists reselling duty-free goods in Japan for profit. The government aims to include these measures in the tax reform plans to be finalized this month.

To ensure compliance, devices will be installed at all international airports and ports to verify travelers' duty-free purchase histories. Further, foreign visitors will lose eligibility for tax exemptions if they send duty-free items from Japanese post offices. [Japan Today]

Japan: First landing support vessel of Ground Self-Defense Force launched

(dql) Japanese shipbuilding company Naikai Zosen has launched "Yoko" on November 28, the first landing

support vessel (LSV) ordered for Japan's Ground Self-Defense Force (JGSDF). [Ministry of Defense, Japan, X]

The Yoko measures 120 meters in length, has a draft of 4 meters, and a standard displacement of 3,500 tons. With a crew of 40, it can transport over 1,000 tons of cargo, including dozens of vehicles or 20-foot containers, at speeds up to 15 knots (28.8 km/h). Built at a cost of JPY 5.4 billion (USD 35.7 million), it features side ramps for loading and unloading and can be equipped with a 12.7 mm heavy machine gun.

Together with the previously launched Nihonbare landing craft utility (LCU), the Yoko is part of Japan's efforts to enhance troop and logistics mobility, particularly in the southwestern Nansei Islands. This strategically significant island chain includes the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, facing China along the first island chain.

To support these objectives, Japan's Ministry of Defense will establish a new Self-Defense Forces Maritime Transport Group at the JMSDF Kure Base in March 2025, starting with 100 personnel. By March 2028, the unit will operate ten vessels, including four LCUs like the Nihonbare, two LSVs like the Yoko, and four maneuver support vessels (MSVs). Both the Yoko and Nihonbare are scheduled to be deployed to the Kure base by March 2025. [Naval News]

Mongolia: Government outlines policies for youth development, housing, agriculture, and tourism

(fs) The Government of Mongolia convened its regular meeting on November 27, focusing on youth development and strategic initiatives for sustainable growth across multiple sectors.

Key discussions included the adoption of 2025 as the Year of Supporting Youth, with plans for medium-term strategies to aid young people. The Culture, Sports, Tourism, and Youth Minister presented policies for youth development, while the Minister for Family, Labor, and Social Protection highlighted a revised housing policy. Recommendations include leveraging a Mortgage Guarantee Fund to finance 50 percent of down payments and incentivizing savings for housing among young families.

In agriculture, the preparation for the 2024-2025 winter and spring seasons was reviewed, achieving 90 percent readiness nationwide. Emphasis was placed on ensuring fodder reserves, addressing winter risks, and

supporting herders with timely healthcare and social services.

To boost year-round tourism, the government decided to reduce flight ticket prices, expand flight options, and streamline visa issuance for international travelers. Proposals include upgrading airports and enhancing cross-border tourism.

The discussed strategies will undergo further development and are scheduled for final approval in subsequent government sessions. [Sonin]

Mongolia: New green housing policies announced

(fs) The Mongolian Sustainable Financial Forum-2024, held on November 27-29 at the State Palace, centered on Mongolia - Financing Green Development. Minister of Family, Labor, and Social Protection Enkh-Amgalan Luvsantseren announced initiatives targeting social housing and environmental sustainability.

A policy has been introduced to assist young families and vulnerable groups with housing down payments, covering 50 percent through the Credit Guarantee Fund. Additionally, new standards will prioritize mortgage loans for energy-efficient houses, aiming to reduce urban concentration, traffic congestion, and pollution in Ulaanbaatar.

While housing mortgage loans since 2013 have benefited 130,000 households, supply-demand imbalances have inflated housing prices. The backlog for mortgage loan processing also remains significant, with applicants facing waits of 40-55 months. [Montsame]

Mongolia: TMK Energy reports new methane gas extraction developments

(fs) Australia-listed TMK Energy has announced the start of methane gas extraction from three newly drilled wells in Mongolia.

Six wells are now operational to establish the necessary pressure for gas flow. The successful initiation of gas flow will enable TMK Energy to determine production levels and proceed with technical and economic feasibility studies. Concurrently, the company plans to launch field development activities.

An independent evaluation by Cipher Consulting of the "Gurvantes XXXV" project concluded that it meets global standards for coal seam methane gas extraction and has the potential for significant commercial production. [Bloomberg TV]

Mongolia: Foreign exchange reserves near USD 5 billion amid export growth

(fs) As of November 25, Mongolia's foreign exchange reserves surpassed USD 4.9 billion, marking a 0.8 percent increase from the year's start, as announced by the Bank of Mongolia.

The rise is attributed to improved USD inflows from exports, which reached USD 13.4 billion by October, and foreign direct investment. Coal, copper, and gold exports dominated, constituting 55 percent, 19.8 percent, and 6 percent, respectively.

Officials project reserves to exceed USD 5 billion by the end of the year, driven by continued export growth and large-scale government-led investments. [Montsame]

Mongolia: Economic growth expected to accelerate amid sectoral recovery

(fs) The World Bank's biannual "Mongolia Economic Update" projects Mongolia's economic growth at 5.3 percent in 2024, rising to 6.5 percent in 2025.

While recent data indicates stable economic activity, the agricultural sector has faced setbacks due to harsh winter conditions. Nonetheless, the mining and transport sectors continue to drive economic performance.

By 2025, economic recovery is anticipated to gain momentum, due to increased production from the Oyu Tolgoi mine and a resurgence in agriculture. Despite an expected 12 percent decline in coking coal prices during 2025-2026, growth in these sectors is predicted to offset the price drop.

Economic expansion of approximately 6% annually is forecasted for 2026-2027, supported by non-mining industries.

However, risks include inflation driven by overspending in the state budget and heightened fiscal and current account deficits. The report also warns

geopolitical tensions could exacerbate these challenges by inflating fuel prices, raising import-related inflation, and increasing production costs. [Bloomberg Mongolia] [World Bank]

North Korea: Major party meeting scheduled for next month

(dql) North Korea will hold a plenary meeting of its ruling Workers' Party Central Committee in late December, according to state media KCNA. The meeting will set major policy directions for the coming year, though no specific dates have been provided. The meeting, which has been held twice annually in recent years, will focus on issues related to the "comprehensive development of socialist construction."

Last year, after a five-day session, Kim Jong Un declared South Korea an enemy and stated that peaceful unification was no longer achievable, signaling a shift away from decades of inter-Korean cooperation. This year, North Korea has taken steps to dismantle agreements and joint projects between the two countries.

The focus of this year's meeting is believed to on North Korea's diplomatic policy with Donald Trump to return to the White House and Pyongyang deepening military ties with Moscow. Next year also marks the final year of North Korea's five-year national defense plan, with the country's nuclear and missile development expected to be high on the agenda. [Reuters] [NHK]

North Korea: Nationwide crackdown on 'seditious forces' ordered

(bw) North Korea's Ministry of State Security held a two-day training session in Pyongyang from November 20-21, instructing provincial counter-intelligence officials to increase surveillance and crackdown on dissent through the end of the year.

The focus was on addressing perceived threats, particularly opposition to the country's military ties with Russia and its designation of South Korea as a hostile state. The directives stressed the importance of secret informant networks to identify individuals expressing doubts about troop deployments to Russia or North Korea's policies on inter-Korean relations.

This surge in surveillance coincides with growing international criticism of North Korea's alliance with Moscow and its military support for Russia's war in Ukraine. Domestically, it reflects concerns over rising public unrest. Authorities are seeking to suppress rumors and manage discontent, fearing the spread of unauthorized information. The ministry's directive emphasized the identification and elimination of "seditious forces" that could destabilize the regime.

Provincial security branches are expected to expand surveillance and ideological policing, potentially resulting in more political crime accusations. The severity of these measures has created widespread anxiety, even among those tasked with enforcing them. The intensity of the directives suggests a broader campaign to reinforce control over a population facing both internal and external pressures. [Day NK]

South Korea: Opposition party holds anti-government rally

(mc) The main opposition Democratic Party (DP) held a rally in Seoul on November 30, criticizing President Yoon Suk Yeol's administration and demanding a special investigation into First Lady Kim Keon-hee.

DP leader Lee Jae-myung, who led the rally near Gwanghwamun Square, attended by an estimated 100,000 party members and supporters, reiterated his call for President Yoon to approve a special advisory bill to investigate Kim over allegations of stock manipulation, election interference, and accepting luxury gifts.

Earlier last week, President Yoon vetoed the demanded special investigation bill, marking the third rejection of related DP-led proposals. [Yonhap News Agency]

South Korea: Opposition passes bills to restrict power of ruling party

(dql) South Korea's opposition-led National Assembly passed on November 28 two bills that challenge the ruling People Power Party's (PPP's) authority. In a 179-102 vote, a revision to the Act on the Appointment of Independent Prosecutors was passed, which removes the ruling party's right to recommend candidates for special counsel when investigating allegations against

the president or their family. This change redistributes the committee's seats to opposition lawmakers for such cases, though the president retains the power to confirm the recommendations. The bill took effect immediately, as it is not subject to a presidential veto.

Additionally, the Assembly approved a revision to the National Assembly Act by a 171-101 vote. This bill abolishes the automatic forwarding of the government's budget proposal to the plenary session if bipartisan agreement is not reached by the deadline. This comes amid ongoing disputes over the government's budget for the coming year (see article below). President Yoon Suk Yeol is expected to veto the bill.

Furthermore, a contentious grain bill, requiring government intervention to stabilize rice prices, passed with a 173-80 vote. This marks the third time the Assembly passed the bill, which has been previously vetoed by the president. [The Korea Herald]

South Korea: National Assembly Speaker postpones vote on 2025 budget

(dql) National Assembly Speaker Woo Won-shik of the main opposition Democratic Party (DP) postponed on December 2 a parliamentary vote on South Korea's 2025 budget by one week, as the party pushed for unilateral budget cuts.

The DPK, which holds a majority in the 300-seat National Assembly, proposed a reduction of over KRW 4 trillion (USD 2.86 billion) from the Yoon Suk Yeol administration's original KRW 677.4 trillion (USD 482 billion) budget plan. The ruling party People Power Party (PPP) opposed this, arguing that the cuts would hinder key initiatives.

Woo cited the failure of the current budget process to inspire hope among the public, urging cooperation between the ruling and opposition parties to reach a revised budget by December 10, the final day of the regular parliamentary session. His decision followed protests from the PPP, which had previously boycotted discussions over the budget cuts and also opposed impeachment motions related to the case of First Lady Kim Keon Hee.

Finance Minister Choi Sang-mok condemned the opposition's unilateral budget cuts, warning that such a move could harm local businesses and South Korea's credit rating amid global economic uncertainties. [The Korea Herald]

South Korea: Opposition party pushes through budget cuts despite ruling party boycott

(mc) On November 29, lawmakers from the ruling People's Power Party (PPP) staged a walkout after the main opposition Democratic Party (DP) submitted a controversial budget cut proposal during a budget committee session in the South Korean parliament. The revised 2025 budget was set at KRW 677.4 trillion (USD 485.3 billion), with the DP proposing cuts amounting to KRW 4.1 trillion (USD 2.9 billion) from the government's initial proposal.

The DP approved the cuts during the parliamentary session, targeting special operating funds for key agencies, including the presidential office, the prosecutor's office, and the police, as well as halving the government's reserve fund of KRW 4.8 trillion (USD 3.4 billion).

Criticizing the DP's budget cut proposal, Finance Minister Choi Sang-mok warned that the reductions could hinder government operations, particularly in disaster response and supervision.

The South Korean parliament has until December 2 to finalize the budget, a deadline that has been missed only twice in the past 20 years. [Yonhap News Agency]

South Korea: Opposition party pushes impeachment of state auditor

(ac/dql) The main opposition Democratic Party submitted on December 2 motions to impeach the head of the state audit agency and three prosecutors involved in scandals linked to first lady Kim Keon Hee. The motions are set to be voted on December 4, as required by law.

The impeachment of Board of Audit and Inspection Chair Choe Jae-hae follows allegations that he obstructed a parliamentary audit of the 2022 presidential office relocation and failed to investigate irregularities in the project. These irregularities include suspicions of an excessive budget, and the involvement of a construction company linked to Kim Keon Hee.

Additionally, motions were filed to impeach prosecutors, including Lee Chang-soo of the Seoul

Central District Prosecutors Office, for not indicting Kim Keon Hee in a stock manipulation scandal. [The Korea Herald]

In an earlier development, Seoul's Supreme Prosecutors' Office (SPO) issued a statement opposing the DP's separate effort to impeach three prosecutors from the Seoul Central District Prosecutors' Office. The DP aims to pass a motion to impeach Lee Chang-soo and two deputies, accusing them of failing to indict First Lady Kim Keon-hee over allegations of stock price manipulation. [Yonhap News Agency]

South Korea: Prosecutors appeal acquittal of opposition leader Lee Jae-myung in subornation case

(mc) South Korean prosecutors have appealed the acquittal of Democratic Party leader Lee Jae-myung on perjury charges, the Seoul Central District Prosecutors' Office announced in a press release on November 29.

The court appeal challenges the court's decision earlier last week to acquit Lee of allegations that he coerced a former secretary of Seongnam Mayor Kim Byung-ryang to testify falsely during a 2019 trial over election law violations (see AiR No. 47, November/2024, 3).

The case involves allegations that Lee lied about his conviction for impersonating a prosecutor in a real estate corruption investigation in the early 2000s during a TV debate 2018 while running for governor of Gyeonggi.

Furthermore, the Seoul Central District Prosecutors' Office said there were "significant errors" in the initial verdict, which came just days after Lee received a suspended one-year prison sentence for making false statements during his presidential campaign in 2022 (see AiR No. 47, November/2024, 3). If the court upholds the prison sentence, Lee could lose his right to run for parliament and risk being banned from public office for 10 years, including the 2027 presidential race.

In addition to these charges, Lee is at the centre of accusations of corruption in development projects, illegal cash transfers of $8 million to North Korea and embezzlement from the Gyeonggi provincial government. [Yonhap News]

South Korea: Ex-special counsel charged with bribery

(ac) South Korean prosecutors have requested a 12-year prison sentence for former special counsel Park Young-soo on bribery charges linked to a major property development scandal. He is accused of accepting approximately USD 573,000 from private developers in exchange for facilitating their Daejang-dong project between 2014 and 2015.

Park is also implicated in the so-called "5 Billion Won Club," allegedly receiving KRW 5 billion (USD 3.6 million) from the asset management firm Hwacheon Daeyu. Prosecutors are also seeking a fine of USD 1.14 million and the forfeiture of USD 1.26 million as part of the sentencing.

Notably, Park previously led the investigation into the corruption scandal that culminated in the 2017 impeachment of former President Park Geun-hye. [Yonhap News Agency]

South Korea: Government to offer incentives to tackle low birthrate

(dql) The South Korean government aims to increase paternity leave usage to 70 percent by 2030, up from just 6.8 percent in 2022. The government plans to raise the usage rate to 50 percent by 2027, coinciding with the end of the Yoon Suk Yeol administration. Measures include offering parental leave in two-week blocks with a monthly salary cap of KRW 2.5 million USD 1,780).

The government also targets raising maternity leave participation for new mothers to 80 percent by 2027 and 85 percent by 2030, up from 70 percent in 2022. These initiatives are part of a broader strategy to address South Korea’s declining fertility rate, which stood at 0.72 in 2023, and to promote a better work-family balance.

The Presidential Committee on Ageing Society and Population Policy, which met on December, outlined goals including reducing the percentage of women aged 30-44 who do not return to work after maternity leave from 22.3 percent to 10 percent by 2030. Additionally, it plans to expand fertility testing and improve childcare services, aiming to reduce waiting times for services from 33 days in 2023 to 5 days by 2030.

Further measures include extending parental leave to 18 months starting in February and increasing parental leave compensation. The government also plans to enhance support for parents with two or more children and provide better access to medical services for parents of newborn or premature babies.

These plans come as South Korea's fertility rate has dropped to its lowest in recent years, reaching 0.72 in 2023. However, projections by the National Assembly Budget Office suggest a slight increase to 0.74 in 2024. [The Korea Herald]

South Korea: Korea Southern Power selected as clean hydrogen electricity supplier

(mc) South Korea's state-run Korea Southern Power Co (KOSPO) has been selected as the preferred supplier for a government-led project to generate electricity from clean hydrogen. The company will provide 750 GWh of hydrogen-based electricity annually, with commercial operations scheduled to begin in 2028.

Following the project's implementation, the South Korean government will purchase the electricity for 15 years, and strict emission criteria will only approve suppliers that produce less than 4 kilograms of CO2 equivalent per kilogram of hydrogen. [Yonhap News Agency]

South Korea: Government rejects Seoul City's proposal to hire foreign bus drivers

(bw) South Korea's central government has rejected a proposal by Seoul city officials to allow foreign nationals to drive "village buses," citing legal and practical concerns.

The Ministry of Labor highlighted challenges related to visa eligibility, license compatibility, and the need for drivers to have strong Korean-language skills. Ministry representatives noted that current laws do not permit E-9 visas for skilled roles such as bus driving, and international bus licenses may require legislative amendments for recognition. Labor Minister Kim Moon-soo echoed these concerns, emphasizing that effective communication with passengers is essential for bus drivers.

Village buses, known as *maeul buses,* operate on short routes connecting neighborhoods to larger transit systems.

Labor groups expressed mixed opinions on the proposal. The Korea Automobile and Transport Workers' Federation strongly opposed the plan, while the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions supported it conditionally, calling for equal treatment for foreign workers.

City authorities argued that implementing such a policy is critical to sustaining the industry, which has been severely affected by labor shortages in recent years.

The proposal came after the recent hiring of Filipino caregivers under a government pilot program. Plans are underway to expand the program nationally, aiming to recruit 1,200 caregivers from various countries next year. However, the labor ministry will formally notify the Office for Government Policy Coordination of its decision, maintaining that foreign drivers may only be considered as a long-term solution. [The Korea Times]

South Korea: Exports rise for 14th consecutive month in November

(mc) South Korea's exports rose for the 14th consecutive month in November, supported by solid semiconductor shipments, according to data released by the South Korean Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy on December 1. Exports increased by 1.4 percent compared to 2023 to USD 56.3 billion, while imports decreased by 2.4 percent to a trade surplus of USD 5.61 billion. This was South Korea's 18th consecutive month of trade surplus.

Semiconductor exports set a record for November 2024, rising 30.8 percent year-to-year to USD 12.5 billion and reaching the highest level for the fourth consecutive month, while auto exports fell 13.6 percent due to disruptions caused by a strike among auto parts makers and adverse weather conditions that delayed shipments.

While China remained South Korea's largest trading partner, exports to China and the US fell by 0.6 percent and 5.1 percent, respectively. On the other hand, the bio-health sector recorded a growth of 19.6 percent for the fifth consecutive month.

South Korean Industry Minister Ahn Duk-Geun highlighted the benefits to the country of key export

sectors such as semiconductors and shipbuilding, which helped sustain export growth despite challenges such as strikes, unfavourable weather conditions, and external pressures. [Yonhap Agency News]

South Korea: Presidential AI committee to devise national strategy

(bw) South Korea's presidential AI committee plans to release a national strategy within the first quarter of next year to position the country among the top three global AI leaders, the Ministry of Science and ICT announced.

Established in September, the committee aims to foster public-private collaboration to strengthen AI competitiveness. The government has also increased the AI budget for 2025 to KRW 1.8 trillion (USD 1.28 billion). [The Korea Times]

South Korea: President Yoon pledges relief for small merchants burdened by delivery fees

(mc) President Yoon Suk Yeol announced plans to ease the financial burden on small merchants, particularly from high delivery app commission fees, as part of efforts to boost domestic consumption. Speaking at a public policy discussion in Gongju, Yoon presented measures aimed at supporting small businesses, such as reducing delivery fees for micro-business owners by over 30 percent within three years and exempting traditional markets from these fees.

He stated a record KRW 59 trillion won (USD 42 billion) has been allocated in next year's budget to help stimulate domestic demand and support the self-employed. Additionally, Yoon proposed lowering commission fees for mobile gift certificates, reducing the lengthy settlement periods, and introducing a reservation deposit system to combat the estimated annual loss of KRW 4.5 trillion (USD 3.2 billion) due to no-shows.

To address malicious online reviews, the government plans to establish around 90 consultation centers to resolve disputes swiftly. These initiatives are part of a broader effort to assist small businesses and enhance consumer confidence. [Yonhap Agency News]

South Korea: Development of L-SAM defense system completed

(mc) South Korea has completed the development phase of its indigenous Long Range Surface-to-Air Missile (L-SAM) system, which is expected to make a significant contribution to its air defense capabilities against North Korea's missile and nuclear threats, the South Korean Defence Ministry announced on November 29.

Designed to intercept external targets at 50 to 60 kilometers, the L-SAM is expected to work with the US Patriot Advanced Capability-3 and M-SAM II systems, which target threats at lower altitudes, increasing South Korea's missile defense capability. To hit targets at higher ranges, the US Terminal High Altitude Area Defence system is used, with a range of up to 150 kilometers. [Yonhap News Agency]

South Korea: Security on drones and undersea cables to be tightened

(ac) South Korea has proposed strengthening security regulations for drones, undersea cables, and offshore wind power plants to mitigate growing risks to supply chains and critical infrastructure.

Wan Yun-jong, the third deputy national security adviser, expressed concerns about the country's reliance on foreign imports for drone components, warning that this dependence could lead to supply chain disruptions and security risks, particularly due to export controls and potential information leaks. Furthermore, key landing stations for undersea communication cables are vulnerable to intentional damage caused by geographical factors and cyber-attacks.

Wan made these remarks as he was chairing a meeting with 13 government agencies to address potential threats to critical infrastructure. The group agreed on several measures, including enhancing the drone industry's procurement system, improving information protection, and designating key landing stations that link undersea cables with land-based communication networks. [Yonhap News Agency]

South Korea invested USD 700 billion between 2008 and 2023 to build its undersea-cable infrastructure. [Korea Economic Institute of America]

South Korea: New Aegis destroyer commissioned

(bw) South Korea has commissioned the 8,200-ton Aegis destroyer Jeongjo the Great, enhancing its naval air defense against North Korean missile threats. Named after a progressive Joseon Dynasty king, the advanced vessel officially entered service during a ceremony at Busan's naval base.

Delivered by HD Hyundai Heavy Industries, the 170-meter-long ship features radar-evading technology and the latest Aegis combat system, capable of detecting, tracking, and intercepting ballistic missiles. It is set to be equipped with Standard Missile-3 (SM-3) interceptors, capable of targeting ballistic missiles at altitudes above 100 kilometers. [Yonhap News Agency]

The warship is the South Korean Navy's fourth Aegis destroyer, with the first building contract signed in 2019 between HHI and the country's Defense Acquisition Program Administration (DAPA).

Representatives from seven countries, including defense partners such as the US, Poland, and Peru, attended the delivery ceremony. After the ceremony, the delegates witnessed the unveiling of the Chungnam-class (FFX-III) frigate set to be delivered to the navy this month. [The Defense Post]

Taiwan: Violence erupts at parliamentary session over controversial reform of Indigenous Peoples law

(sk) In Taiwan's Legislative Yuan, lawmakers engaged in heated debate over proposed amendments to the Organization Act of the Council of Indigenous Peoples. As the debate came into a deadlock, the opposition Kuomintang (KMT) called for closing the debate with their dominated seats. Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) Legislator Chen Ying rushed to the podium as tensions escalated into a physical altercation between the parties. The discussion was halted after Deputy Legislative Speaker Johnny Chiang Chi-chen, chairing the session, announced a recess.

The amendments, proposed by the KMT, included removing salaries for ethnic group committee members and rotating the chairpersonship between representatives of the plains and mountain Indigenous peoples. However, the ruling DPP opposed these changes, arguing that they would further marginalize Indigenous peoples and exacerbate issues stemming

from the problematic classification of Indigenous groups into plains and mountain categories.

Independent legislator Ciwas Ali, one of the sponsors of the amendments and a representative of the mountain Indigenous peoples, defended the proposals. Ali argued that the amendments were supported by Indigenous groups because the existing system had long failed to adequately represent the interests of all Indigenous peoples.

After the recess, Chiang concluded the session, announcing that the remaining articles would be addressed in the next meeting. He also stated that the full legislative committee would review the nomination consent rights of examination committee members, signaling that further deliberation on the amendments would follow. [TVBS] [CNA, in Chinese]

Taiwan: GDP forecast raised

(am) Taiwan has revised its full-year GDP growth forecast for 2023 to 4.27 percent, marking the highest growth rate among the "Four Asian Tigers" and outpacing the global average of 2.7 percent, according to the Directorate General of Budget, Accounting, and Statistics (DGBAS). [Taiwan News]

The adjustment, up by 0.37 percentage points, reflects stronger-than-expected export performance and robust private investment. However, the DGBAS predicts economic growth will moderate to 3.29 percent in 2024.

Exports have been a key driver of Taiwan's economic performance, with this year's export volume reaching USD 474.5 billion, an annual growth of 9.9 percent. The booming AI industry has significantly boosted the export of electronic components and IT products, solidifying Taiwan's position as a global tech hub.

Private investment also played a pivotal role. Semiconductor manufacturers continued to expand production capacities and invest heavily in research and development. Meanwhile, the transportation sector saw significant investments to enhance its capacity.

Despite the strong economic performance, the DGBAS warned of challenges posed by global overcapacity and uneven economic recoveries across different regions.

Domestically, consumption has remained resilient despite stagnant population growth. The housing

market, however, faces uncertainties, restraining some investment momentum. Private investment is expected to grow in real terms this year and next, providing continued support for the economy.

Taiwan: New Ambassador-at-Large role created

(am) Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) has introduced a new ambassador-at-large position, designed to enable senior diplomats returning from overseas assignments to contribute their expertise to critical diplomatic initiatives. [Taipei Times]

The decision allows consul-generals and counsellors on home assignments to assume the new role, focusing on special projects that leverage their international experience.

Since its establishment in 1998, the ambassador-at-large position has been filled primarily by non-civil servants with expertise in fields such as religion and cyber affairs. These individuals have represented Taiwan across multiple countries or regions, promoting the nation's global interests. The new iteration of the role, however, is specifically tailored for career diplomats.

Unlike diplomats in residence, who are typically stationed in specific countries or embassies, ambassadors-at-large operate across broader regions. They are entrusted with advancing Taiwan's international presence, fostering alliances, and advising the government on pressing diplomatic issues.

The role will involve managing projects such as opening or reopening overseas offices, facilitating Taiwan's participation in international organizations, negotiating trade agreements, and supporting exchanges with non-governmental organizations.

The initiative comes at a critical time as Taiwan seeks to expand its international presence and navigate complex geopolitical challenges.

Taiwan: Heated debate over qualifications of judicial nominees

(am) A hearing in the Legislative Yuan, Taiwan's parliament, revealed sharp disagreements among experts over the qualifications of nominees for

Taiwan's Constitutional Court and the leadership of Judicial Yuan, Taiwan's judicial branch. [Taiwan News]

The main opposition party, the Kuomintang (KMT), criticized nominees' stances on the death penalty, while the minor opposition Taiwan People's Party (TPP) highlighted a lack of diversity in legal expertise. The ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) emphasized the nominees' character, integrity, and competence. [CNA]

Taiwan: Tech leaders debate link between chipmaking and national security

(am) In a recent episode of the *Financial Times*' *Tech Tonic* podcast titled "The Geopolitics of Chips — Taiwan's Silicon Shield," prominent Taiwanese industry and government leaders explored the complex relationship between Taiwan's semiconductor industry and its national security. [Taiwan News]

For decades, Taiwan has been at the forefront of semiconductor manufacturing, earning a global reputation as the best in the business. Michael Wang, a veteran at Taiwanese chipmaker UMC, referred to the industry as the "holy mountain to protect the island", emphasizing its critical role in Taiwan's economic stability and its deterrent effect on potential aggressors, including China.

China, like many other nations, relies heavily on Taiwan-made chips, particularly those produced by the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC), the world's largest and most advanced chipmaker. A conflict in Taiwan would disrupt global supply chains, harming economies worldwide, including China's.

While Taiwan's dominance in the chip sector is widely regarded as a "silicon shield" that deters aggression, concerns about overreliance on Taiwanese semiconductors have prompted Western governments to develop their own domestic capabilities. Countries such as the United States, Germany, and Japan have invested heavily in building their semiconductor industries, often leveraging Taiwan's expertise.

However, Taiwan Semiconductor Industry Association President Wu Chih-i expressed scepticism about these efforts, noting that Taiwan's chip industry has taken decades to achieve its current position. He predicted that meaningful independence from Taiwan's chips is still decades away.

TSMC's recent investments in overseas fabs, such as its Arizona facility in the U.S., have been driven by a mix of political and customer pressure. However, FT correspondent Kathrin Hille noted significant resistance from both the Taiwan government and TSMC, who preferred to keep chip manufacturing centralized in Taiwan. Despite these investments, Hille argued that overseas fabs would only account for about 15 percent of global capacity, insufficient to replace Taiwan's output in the event of a crisis. This limited capacity has reinforced the view that Taiwan will remain indispensable to the global chip supply for the foreseeable future.

Taiwan's government is also leveraging its semiconductor industry to build international alliances. Wu Cheng-wen, Taiwan's science and technology minister, highlighted how TSMC's investments have bolstered Taiwan's relationships with countries like Japan and Germany.

"We can take advantage of [TSMC] to make friends," Wu said, adding that these investments improve local economies and foster goodwill toward Taiwan.

While Taiwan's "silicon shield" continues to play a pivotal role in deterring conflict, the government recognizes that its reliance on this strategy cannot last forever. As Hille noted, Taiwan's leaders are preparing for a future where its central role in semiconductor manufacturing may diminish.

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

Bangladesh: Constitutional reform proposals from Jatiya Party and minority group

(asa/vk) The Jatiya Party (JaPa), Bangladesh's main opposition party during the rule of the Awami League, has proposed 19 constitutional amendments aimed at reducing the prime minister's control over Parliament. Party Chairman GM Quader explained that the amendments would establish a power-sharing system between the president and the prime minister, preventing the accumulation of excessive power in a single individual and promoting a more balanced governance structure.

JaPa's proposal includes revising Article 70, which restricts MPs from voting against their party's decisions, thus centralizing power in the prime minister's hands. The party also suggests that the roles of prime minister and head of government be separate, to ensure a more even distribution of authority. Additionally, JaPa advocates for the restoration of the caretaker government system, with the Chief Adviser not coming from the judiciary to maintain judicial independence. The proposal also suggests electing the president with a three-fourths majority in Parliament to lead a neutral caretaker government. [Dhaka Tribune]

Meanwhile, the Bangladesh Hindu Bouddha Christian Oikya Parishad, a national council representing religious minorities, submitted proposals for constitutional reform aimed at ensuring equal rights and protection for minorities. The council advocates preserving the current preamble of the Constitution, which guarantees fundamental rights for all citizens, regardless of religion, race, or ethnicity, and opposes any change that would declare a "state religion." They also support maintaining the secularism and freedom of religion provisions without revision.

The council's proposals emphasize the establishment of a Minority Protection Act, a National Minority Commission, and a Ministry of Minority Affairs to address discrimination against religious and ethnic minorities. These reforms are seen as essential for promoting inclusivity and equality in Bangladesh's diverse society. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Gono Odhikar Parishad submits 9-point proposal to Election Reform Commission

(lm) On December 2, the Faruk Hasan-led faction of Gono Odhikar Parishad submitted a nine-point proposal to the Election Reform Commission, calling for significant reforms to Bangladesh's electoral system. The proposals include increasing the number of parliamentary seats from 300 to 500, lowering the support requirement for independent candidates from 1 percent to 0.10 percent, and simplifying the party registration process. Other demands include enhancing expatriate voter participation, revising the allocation of reserved seats for women, and enacting laws to appoint an Election Commissioner with no political affiliations. The group also proposed steps to clean the voter list by removing fake and deceased voters.

Gono Odhikar Parishad, led by Faruk Hasan, is a political organization in Bangladesh focused on advocating for electoral reforms and democratic practices. Faruk Hasan, who serves as the Member Secretary of the party, has been an outspoken advocate for improving the country's political system and ensuring fairer elections. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: BNP's Tarique Rahman claims upcoming election will be party's toughest yet amid legal victories

(lm/vk) Tarique Rahman, the acting chairman of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and son of former prime minister Khaleda Zia, has stated that the upcoming national election will be the toughest in the party's history, citing shifting voter awareness and the need for stronger engagement. Speaking from the United Kingdom, Rahman urged party leaders to focus on correcting past mistakes and strengthening their connection with the people to retain public trust. He emphasized the importance of communicating the BNP's 31-point reform plan to every household and outlined the party's vision for equitable resource distribution, including family cards for women and farmers. [Dhaka Tribune]

In related news, a Gazipur court acquitted Rahman along with 59 others in connection with the 2015 arson attack on a passenger bus in Joydebpur. The court ruled the allegations baseless, as no witnesses could substantiate the charges. Rahman had been named in the charge sheet, despite no direct evidence linking him to the crime. His defense lawyers successfully argued for his acquittal, reinforcing his position ahead of the election. [The Daily Star 1]

In another significant legal victory for the BNP, the High Court acquitted party chair Khaleda Zia and two others in the Zia Charitable Trust graft case, overturning their lower court conviction. The defense argued that the case was politically motivated, and the lack of evidence for embezzlement led to the dismissal of the charges. [Bss News 1]

Additionally, BNP Standing Committee Member Dr. Khandaker Mosharraf Hossain was acquitted by a Dhaka court in a 2008 graft case, where the prosecution failed to prove charges of amassing illegal wealth. Both legal outcomes reinforce the party's political standing. [Bss News 2]

Meanwhile, BNP Standing Committee Member Hafizuddin Ahmed announced that Rahman is expected to return to Bangladesh before the elections, with hopes that ongoing legal cases against him will be resolved. He also reiterated the BNP's call for free and fair elections and democratic reforms. [The Daily Star 2]

Bangladesh: HC calls for independent committee to identify real culprits behind BDR massacre

(lm) The Bangladesh High Court has recently directed the government to form a national independent committee to identify the real culprits behind the BDR Massacre of 2009. The court has ordered the government to submit a report by December 15 detailing the steps taken to comply with this directive. This comes after the court issued a rule on November 5 seeking clarification from the authorities regarding the formation of such a committee.

The BDR Massacre occurred on February 25-26, 2009, when members of the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR), a paramilitary force, staged a mutiny in Dhaka. The rebellion, sparked by grievances over low wages and poor conditions, led to the deaths of 74 people, including 57 senior army officers and their families. The mutiny was marked by extreme violence, with mutineers taking hostages and causing widespread national shock. Although many BDR personnel were arrested and tried for their involvement, questions remain about the masterminds behind the massacre. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Election Commission to publish final voter list on March 2, 2025

(lm) The Election Commission (EC) of Bangladesh has announced that the final voter list will be published on March 2, 2025. The announcement came after a meeting of the newly appointed EC on December 2, chaired by Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) AMM Nasir Uddin and attended by the other four commissioners. The CEC and commissioners were appointed based on the government's search committee recommendations. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: Interim government urges action to fill vacant posts across ministries

(lm) Bangladesh's Ministry of Public Administration has issued a directive urging all ministries, divisions, subordinate offices, agencies, and field offices to take immediate action to fill approximately 475,000 vacant government positions. The letter, signed by Senior Secretary Md Mokhles ur Rahman, stresses the urgency of addressing these vacancies, which make up nearly one-fourth of the 2 million positions in the revenue sector, according to the "Statistics of Government Servants-2023."

The Bangladesh Public Service Commission (BPSC) is responsible for recruiting first-class, first-class non-cadre, and limited second-class officers. The BPSC has already initiated the recruitment of 3,688 officers through the 47th BCS examination. However, the remaining vacancies will need to be filled by the respective ministries, departments, subordinate bodies, and organizations.

The directive also highlights the interim government's commitment to fulfilling public expectations and addressing unemployment, particularly among educated youth. The relevant authorities are required to submit detailed progress reports on their recruitment activities within 15 working days. [The Daily Star] [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: T&Z workers on strike over 45 days' unpaid meal allowance

(lm) Around 800 workers at T&Z Group's Apparels Plus Eco Limited in Gazipur have gone on strike, demanding unpaid meal allowances for the past 45 days. The

workers have stopped working and are staying inside the factory premises. They claim that the authorities have not paid the meal allowance for the past 45 days, and they will resume work once the arrears are paid. The industrial police are attempting to resolve the issue, with a 10-member mobile team currently involved in the situation. Attempts to contact the factory owner for comment were unsuccessful. [The Daily Star]

In recent weeks, workers from multiple factories under the T&Z Group in Gazipur have staged protests demanding unpaid wages and allowances. On November 9, employees from TNZ Apparels Limited, Basic Clothing Limited, Apparels Plus Eco, Basic Knitwear Limited, and Apparel Art Limited blocked the Dhaka-Mymensingh highway, causing significant traffic disruptions. The workers had not received their September and October wages, leading to the protest.

Despite assurances from the factory management to resolve the payment issues, the workers resumed their blockade on November 11 after a brief hiatus. The protests have continued intermittently, with workers demanding the payment of their overdue wages and allowances.

Bangladesh: Health authorities confirms eight cases of zika virus in 2024

(asa) The Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control, and Research (IEDCR) has confirmed eight new cases of Zika virus infection in Dhaka over the past three months, with affected individuals residing in Dhanmondi, Shyamoli, and Banani. Last year, five cases were identified within a one-kilometer radius of Mohakhali. The Asian strain of the virus, which is locally transmitted, was confirmed in all patients, none of whom have a history of travel abroad. [Dhaka Tribune]

Zika, first discovered in Uganda in 1947, has caused significant outbreaks globally, including in the Americas and Asia. While the global prevalence of Zika has declined since its designation as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern in 2016, localized outbreaks persist in regions like Dhaka, where mosquito breeding conditions remain favorable. [bdnews24]

Bangladesh: Dengue claims 3 more lives, total fatalities reach 497

(lm) As of December 2, three more people have died from dengue in Bangladesh, bringing the total number of fatalities this year to 497. Over the past 24 hours, 705 more dengue patients were hospitalized, with 154 admitted under the Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) and 90 in the DSCC.

Currently, 2,779 patients are being treated in hospitals across the country. Since January 1, 93,056 dengue cases have been reported. In comparison, last year, dengue claimed 1,705 lives, making it the deadliest year on record, with a total of 321,179 cases and 318,749 recoveries. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: Central bank prints USD 1899 million to support six ailing banks

(asa) Bangladesh Bank (BB) recently announced that it has printed BDT 22.5 billion (USD 189 million) in new notes to provide financial assistance to six ailing banks and safeguard their depositors. This move temporarily reverses BB's earlier commitment to avoid such measures.

Governor Ahsan H Mansur disclosed the decision at a press conference, stating that it aims to address a liquidity crisis in the banking sector. To mitigate potential inflationary effects, the central bank plans to gradually recover the funds through bond issuance.

On August 20, Governor Mansur had stated that the practice of printing money would be abandoned to protect the broader economy. In response to a query, he confirmed that the subordinate committees of weak banks were dissolved and the banks were brought under accountability. [Bangla News 24]

Bangladesh: Shipping Corporation repays USD 39.91 million loan instalment to Exim Bank of China

(asa) Bangladesh Shipping Corporation (BSC) has repaid BDT 475.25 million (USD 39.91 million) to the interim government as the first installment of a loan received in 2016 from the government and Exim Bank of China to purchase ships.

The loan, amounting to over BDT 1,457 million (USD 122.39 million), enabled BSC to purchase six ships, including three bulk carriers, marking the first commercial ships added to its fleet in 27 years during the 2018-19 financial year. Five of these ships are currently in operation, transporting goods across oceans under the Bangladesh flag.

BSC is set to repay the government a total of BDT 2,425 crore (USD 203.91 million), including the principal and interest, in several installments over 13 years. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Government to purchase essential food items for TCB sales

(vk) The Bangladesh government will buy more sugar, lentils, and edible oil to sell at subsidized prices through the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB). Approved purchases include 55 million liters of soybean oil for BDT 91.3 million (USD 780,000), 20,000 tons of sugar for BDT 232.7 million (USD 1.99 million), and 10,000 tonnes of lentils for BDT 97.97 million (USD 826,000). The government will also import 50,000 tons of wheat at USD 286.08 per ton. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: CHT regional council's fate still unresolved at 27th anniversary of peace accord

(lm) The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) Accord, signed on December 2, 1997, marked a historic step toward peace in the region after decades of conflict. However, 27 years later, key issues surrounding the implementation of the accord remain unresolved, particularly concerning the CHT Regional Council.

Formed in 1999, two years after the accord, the CHT Regional Council has been operating under the leadership of Santu Larma, president of the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS). The council's legality, however, has been in question for over a decade due to legal challenges.

In 2010, the High Court declared the CHT Regional Council Act 1998 unconstitutional, ruling that it violated the unitary character of the state. This decision was challenged, and the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court stayed the verdict, allowing the council to continue functioning. Despite this, the appeals, filed by the Awami League government and

the CHT Regional Council, have yet to be resolved. The appeals have been delayed for years, with no significant progress since 2018.

The ongoing legal uncertainty means that the CHT Regional Council, which was meant to facilitate the functions of the hill district councils, remains in limbo. The issue is deeply rooted in the region's historical, political, and constitutional context, and while the Awami League government argues that the council is constitutionally valid, the writ petitioners contend that it creates a "mini-state" within Bangladesh, undermining the country's unitary system.

As the Appellate Division prepares to hear the case again, the fate of the CHT Regional Council and the full implementation of the CHT Accord remains uncertain. This has left many in the region questioning how long it will take to resolve these issues and fully realize the peace and development promised by the accord. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Army conducts operations against external influence behind unrest

(asa) The Bangladesh Army has attributed the growing unrest, including worker protests, student movements, and the killing of a lawyer in Chattogram, to third parties and identified criminals. Colonel Intekhab Haider Khan, briefing the media on the army's operations under the "In Aid to Civil Power" initiative, stated that efforts are underway to identify and bring those responsible for inciting unrest to justice.

Since November 13, the army has arrested 1,328 individuals, including 228 drug dealers, and seized 24 firearms and 365 rounds of ammunition. In the past two weeks, 123 army personnel have been injured, and one soldier has died. Colonel Khan also highlighted the army's efforts to maintain peace in Chattogram's hill communities, where a crackdown on the Kuki-Chin group resulted in the arrest of 179 active members and the death of seven soldiers.

Regarding student and worker movements, Colonel Khan pointed to three groups behind the unrest: criminals intentionally causing disruptions, the protesting public, and students influenced by external forces. He urged students, workers, and the general public to reflect on their roles in shaping the country's future and act responsibly to prevent violence, emphasizing that peaceful protests are possible with responsible behavior. [Bangla News 24]

Bangladesh: At least three Awami League leaders die in custody in 16 days

(vk) Three leaders of the ousted Awami League party have died in jail custody in Bogura over the past 16 days. The latest death occurred on November 27, when a party leader suffered a cardiac arrest in prison and died during transit to Dhaka for treatment. Earlier, another leader died of a stroke, while a third succumbed to asthma and other health issues. Concerns have been raised about the lack of adequate medical care in the jail, with some alleging negligence by the authorities. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Jubo Dal activist killed in Sylhet factional clash

(vk) A 35-year-old activist of Jubo Dal, the youth wing of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), was killed in a factional clash in Sylhet's Shahporan area on November 25. The violence reportedly stemmed from a dispute between two Jubo Dal groups vying for dominance. Six individuals have been detained for questioning, but no case has been filed yet. [The Daily Star 1]

Meanwhile, high-profile political figures were remanded for questioning in separate murder cases in Dhaka. Former law minister Anisul Huq and former food minister Qamrul Islam were taken into custody by a Dhaka court over their involvement in violent incidents during political movements, including the quota reform protests. [The Daily Star 2]

Bhutan: Home Minister details disaster preparedness initiatives

(mt) Responding to questions on Bhutan’s earthquake readiness and disaster risk strategies, Home Minister Tshering outlined comprehensive measures, including the establishment of the National Disaster Management Authority and the National Emergency Operation Centre. These bodies are enhancing disaster response coordination and preparedness, with contingency plans under review by the Cabinet.

The minister emphasized the importance of training disaster response teams, noting that 24 representatives are currently undergoing specialized

training, while nearly 400 individuals have been trained in disaster management techniques by the Search and Rescue team. Public awareness campaigns, including instructional videos and guides, are being developed to educate communities on emergency responses. [Kuensel]

Bhutan: Slow progress on rural life insurance premium increase concerns MPs

(mt) MPs in Bhutan's National Assembly criticized delays in raising rural life insurance premiums from USD 360 to USD 1,800, citing election campaign promises. Finance Minister Lekey Dorji acknowledged progress under the 13th Five-Year-Plan but highlighted economic recovery challenges and regulatory constraints.

The government has requested amendments to financial rules to allow multiple insurers to handle rural life insurance, aiming to avoid monopolies and high subsidies. The proposal will be discussed in the summer Parliament session. Addressing concerns over discontinued higher-payout schemes, Lyonpo explained that financial losses led the Royal Insurance Corporation of Bhutan to discontinue the USD 8.40 scheme independently of government influence. [Kuensel]

Bhutan: Annual journalism conference tackles press freedom crisis

(mt) Over 70 journalists and officials from the Department of Media, Creative Industry & Intellectual Property and Bhutan Information and Media Authority gathered in Paro for the two-day Annual Journalism Conference, themed “Reconnecting the Journalism Fraternity.”

The event addressed the challenges facing Bhutan's media, including press freedom, journalist attrition, financial struggles, and restricted information access. Bhutan's World Press Freedom Index ranking plummeted to 147 in 2024, reflecting tightened information control and growing self-censorship.

With just seven newspapers remaining, traditional media battles financial woes and the rise of digital platforms. Panel discussions and government

engagement emphasized improving transparency and public records access. [Kuensel]

Bhutan: International sports events boost economy and athletic development

(mt) Bhutan hosted nine international sports tournaments from January to October 2024, spanning football, judo, archery, and basketball. Events like the AFC Challenge League and SAFF U-17 Men's Championship infused approximately USD 1.2 million into the economy, benefiting hotels, transportation, and local businesses.

However, limited infrastructure remains a challenge. Investments in venues and athlete development are needed to position Bhutan as a regional sports hub and unlock the potential of South Asia's 1.8 billion population. [Kuensel]

India: Supreme Court steps in on mosque-temple dispute amid violence in Sambhal

(lm) The controversy surrounding religious sites in India has intensified, with the Supreme Court, political leaders, and the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) taking conflicting positions on the issue. Central to the dispute is the Shahi Jama Masjid in Sambhal, Uttar Pradesh, where a court-ordered survey has led to violence and legal wrangling, reflecting broader communal tensions over historical mosque-temple claims.

India's Supreme Court has stepped in to address the escalating conflict over the Shahi Jama Masjid, a Mughal-era structure that right-wing Hindu groups claim was built on the ruins of a Hindu temple destroyed by Emperor Babur. The controversy erupted after a local court ordered a survey of the mosque on November 19, 2024. The survey provoked violent clashes on November 24, leaving six Muslims dead and several others injured.

The Supreme Court has directed the Allahabad High Court to take over the case, halting further action by the trial court. Legal experts, including former Supreme Court Justice Madan Lokur, have criticized the initial order as a violation of the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991, which freezes the status of religious sites as they existed on August 15, 1947. Activists warn that entertaining such petitions risks

undermining communal harmony and perpetuating disputes over historical structures. [Voice of America]

The main opposition Indian National Congress (INC) has also entered the fray, with leaders Alok Sharma and Priya Mishra petitioning the Supreme Court to restrain courts and states from conducting surveys of religious sites. Their appeal references surveys of high-profile locations such as the Gyanvapi Mosque in Varanasi, Mathura's shrines, and Ajmer Sharif, alongside Sambhal.

The INC leaders argue that these actions contravene the 1991 Act, which was designed to prevent the politicization of historical grievances over religious sites. They have called for strict enforcement of the law to avoid communal unrest and questioned the validity of court orders authorizing surveys without proper historical evidence. Past Supreme Court rulings have emphasized the need for individualized assessments, with no blanket stay on related cases, but the INC has stressed the urgency of curbing these escalating disputes. [Deccan Herald]

Meanwhile, in response to the escalating tensions in Sambhal, authorities have extended the ban on outsiders entering the district until December 10 to maintain order. This measure came as a 15-member Samajwadi Party delegation planned to visit Sambhal to investigate the November 24 violence. The authorities also extended curbs until December 31 as part of ongoing efforts to control the situation. [Financial Express]

Amid the legal and political turmoil, the ASI has sought court approval to assume control and management of the Shahi Jama Masjid, citing its status as a protected heritage site since 1920. In its November 29 response, the ASI highlighted unauthorized structural changes, such as the 2018 installation of steel railings by the mosque’s management committee, as violations of heritage regulations. The agency also underscored its mandate to ensure public access under its guidelines.

The ASI's move has added another layer to the Sambhal dispute, which has already seen significant violence. A judicial commission led by retired Justice Devendra Kumar Arora is investigating the clashes to determine whether they were spontaneous or premeditated. The commission, given a two-month deadline, is expected to recommend measures to prevent similar incidents in the future. [The Hindu]

The tensions over the Sambhal mosque echo broader disputes across India, where right-wing groups claim that numerous mosques were built on temple ruins

during the Mughal era. The Babri Masjid demolition in 1992, which sparked nationwide violence, remains a grim precedent. Despite the Supreme Court's 2019 ruling affirming the Places of Worship Act's applicability, petitions challenging its provisions continue to surface.

India: Parliament Winter Session faces deadlock, but consensus reached on constitutional debate

(lm) The week-long deadlock in India's Parliament came to an end as the government and opposition parties reached a consensus, agreeing to hold a special discussion on the Constitution during the winter session. The agreement followed a meeting of floor leaders convened by Lower House Speaker Om Birla. The government and opposition parties agreed to discuss the Constitution in both Houses of Parliament, with the Lower House set to debate it on December 13-14, and the Upper House on December 16-17. This discussion will mark the 75th anniversary of the adoption of the Constitution by the Constituent Assembly, a demand made by the opposition.

The deadlock had been caused by several contentious issues, including the indictment of the Adani Group by US prosecutors, the unrest in Manipur, and recent violence in Sambhal. These issues led to disruptions in both Houses since the session began on November 25. Despite agreeing to resume the session, the opposition continues to press for discussions on the Adani case and other matters. Congress MPs, while participating in the Constitution debate, plan to protest at Makar Dwar during the session's resumption.

The winter session, which resumed on December 2, had seen continued disruptions due to opposition protests. The lower House was adjourned until noon after Speaker Om Birla tried to maintain order during Question Hour. In the Upper House, Chairman Jagdeep Dhankhar adjourned the House twice due to repeated disruptions over issues such as the Adani Group's alleged bribery and violence in Manipur. Dhankhar expressed frustration over the situation, likening it to Murphy's Law, where "anything that can go wrong will go wrong."

Despite the protests, the lower House successfully introduced the Coastal Shipping Bill, 2024, aimed at enhancing coastal trade and strengthening national security. A briefing on India's relations with China by External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar is expected to

take place on December 3. [The Indian Express 1] [The Indian Express 2]

India: Supreme Court urges protesting farmers to avoid causing public inconvenience

(lm) India's Supreme Court has urged farmer leader Jagjit Singh Dallewal, who is on a fast-unto-death at the Khanauri border to press for the acceptance of farmers' demands, to persuade protesters to avoid obstructing highways and causing inconvenience to the public. The court addressed a habeas corpus petition concerning Dallewal's detention by Punjab police on November 26 and his subsequent release. The bench emphasized that while peaceful protests are a democratic right, they should not disrupt public life, especially at critical locations such as the Khanauri border, a lifeline for Punjab.

The court acknowledged that Dallewal had persuaded another protestor to end their fast-unto-death earlier and stated that the issue raised by the farmers is being considered in an ongoing matter. The farmers, who have been protesting at the Shambhu and Khanauri borders since February 13, demand a legal guarantee for Minimum Support Prices (MSP), farm debt waivers, pension for farmers and farm laborers, and compensation for those who died in previous agitations. [The Indian Express]

India: ED, CGST to investigate USD 72 million Ponzi scam in Gujarat state

(rsv) The Enforcement Directorate (ED) and the Central Goods and Services Tax (CGST) department are set to investigate a Ponzi scam valued at INR 6,000 million (approximately USD 72.3 million) in Sabarkantha, Gujarat, allegedly masterminded by political worker Bhupendrasinh Jhala. The case came to light following an anonymous complaint filed with the police.

The CID (Crime), which is leading the primary investigation, has informed the CGST department, which has already begun its probe. The ED will formally start its investigation after the charge sheet is filed. On November 29, police teams raided Jhala’s residence in Raigadh village, seizing three luxury cars and two SUVs belonging to co-accused Mayur Darji. The process to confiscate Jhala’s properties is also underway.

Authorities are now recording statements from victims, with more expected to come forward. This effort aims to establish the exact scale of the fraud. Jhala, who briefly filed as an independent candidate in the Lok Sabha elections before withdrawing his nomination, has reportedly gone into hiding after the raids. [Times of India]

India: Government blocks over 28,000 social media accounts, mostly from Facebook and X

(lm) India's Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) has reported blocking 28,079 social media accounts in 2024, with the majority coming from Facebook and X (formerly Twitter). This includes URLs related to pro-Khalistan referendum campaigns, which the government has targeted under Section 69A of the Information Technology Act.

The blocked accounts also include those linked to extremist groups such as the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam), a defunct Tamil separatist organization, and Waris Punjab De, a pro-Khalistan group that advocates for the creation of an independent Sikh state.

The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) has reportedly received intelligence inputs, prompting the blocking of URLs, mobile apps, and social media accounts connected to radicalization efforts and anti-national activities. The government also targeted accounts linked to the Popular Front of India (PFI), an Islamist organization that has been banned in India.

A breakdown of the blocked accounts shows that most of the URLs came from Facebook (10,976), X (10,139), and YouTube (2,211). Other platforms like Instagram, Telegram, and WhatsApp also saw account suspensions. [The Indian Express]

India: Manipur situation will impact Assam, says Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma

(lm) Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma expressed concern that the ongoing situation in neighbouring Manipur will affect Assam, especially the Barak Valley region, which shares a border with the violence-hit state. Sarma highlighted the deployment

of additional police forces in the Barak Valley to prevent any spillover of the unrest from Manipur.

Speaking to reporters in Cachar district, Sarma stated, “I think the situation in Manipur will definitely have some impact on Assam.” He emphasized that the deployment of extra police personnel was essential to ensure peace and security in Assam.

The Barak Valley is close to Jiribam, a region in Manipur that had been relatively unaffected by the ethnic clashes between the Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities until recent violence erupted in June, following the discovery of a mutilated farmer’s body. Since May 2023, more than 250 people have been killed, and thousands displaced due to the ongoing ethnic violence between the Meitei community of Imphal Valley and the Kuki-Zo groups in the hills.

The violence intensified further in November after the disappearance of three women and three children from a relief camp in Jiribam, following a gunfight between security forces and suspected Kuki-Zo militants. The clash resulted in the deaths of 10 insurgents. [The Indian Express]

India: Prime Minister Modi highlights digital frauds, cybercrimes, and AI technology as growing security threats

(lm) India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi expressed concern about the increasing threats posed by digital frauds, cybercrimes, and artificial intelligence (AI) technology, particularly the risks of deepfake technology disrupting social and familial relations. Addressing the 59th All India Conference of Director Generals/Inspector Generals of Police in Bhubaneswar, he emphasized the need for enhanced countermeasures.

The Prime Minister further proposed that the threat posed by digital frauds, cybercrimes, and AI be turned into an opportunity by leveraging India's "double AI power"—combining artificial intelligence with the nation’s aspirations for progress. He also advocated for the scaling of urban policing initiatives across 100 cities.

In his address, Modi expanded on the SMART policing concept introduced at the 2014 conference, which aims to modernize the police force by making it Strategic, Meticulous, Adaptable, Reliable, and Transparent. The Prime Minister’s vision calls for the police to be strict, sensitive, modern, mobile, alert,

accountable, reliable, responsive, techno-savvy, and well-trained.

Around 250 senior officers attended the conference in person, with over 750 participating virtually. The event was also attended by Union Home Minister Amit Shah and National Security Advisor Ajit Doval. [The Indian Express]

Maldives: Supreme Court accepts case seeking to revoke constitutional amendments

(lm) The Supreme Court of the Maldives has accepted a case challenging recent amendments to the Constitution. The lawsuit was filed by former Kendhoo MP and lawyer Ali Hussain, who argues that the amendments contravene the Constitution and its fundamental structure. Opposition parties, including the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) and The Democrats, have announced their support for the lawsuit and their intention to join the case.

The contested amendments, proposed by the ruling People's National Congress (PNC) MP Mohamed Shahid, make significant changes to the Constitution. These amendments stipulate that Members of Parliament (MPs) who leave or are removed from the party they contested with during parliamentary elections will lose their seats if the change occurs within the same term. Additionally, the amendments dictate that if an independent MP joins a political party, they too will lose their seat.

Further amendments include a requirement for a public referendum to be held when amending important articles of the Constitution that affect citizens. It also states that any changes to the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) can only be made through a public referendum.

Additionally, the amendment requires parliamentary authorization for foreign military personnel to be active in the country for any purpose beyond training activities.

The amendments were expedited, with both the debate and committee processes completed in a single day—a record for constitutional amendments in the Maldives. President Dr Mohamed Muizzu ratified the changes shortly after they were passed by Parliament. [the edition]

Maldives: MDP activist summoned, party criticizes government for suppressing dissent

(lm) Hussain Shafiu (Thuthu), a social media activist from the main opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), has been summoned by police for questioning over a post made on November 8 that was deemed threatening. The post, which criticized the recent rise in cigarette prices, included profanity and the remark, "Don't let me see you on the street." [the edition 1]

In response, MDP Chairperson Fayyaz Ismail accused the government of suppressing public dissent and silencing opposition voices. He condemned the investigation as an attempt to intimidate critics, asserting that MDP members would continue to speak out against the administration's actions.

Minister of Homeland Security, Ali Ihusan, defended the investigation, stating that Shafiu's words could be interpreted as a threat of physical harm, justifying police action. Ihusan further emphasized the government's responsibility to ensure public safety and urged Fayyaz to refrain from politicizing the issue.

Former President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih also voiced concern over the increasing criminalization of government criticism, calling it a setback for democracy. He criticized the government's actions, including police investigations into social media posts and the issuing of warning letters to councils. Solih warned that such measures undermine the democratic progress made by the Maldivian people. [the edition 2]

Meanwhile, the MDP plans to hold a rally on December 10, titled "Citizens in Defence of the Constitution," to protest against the government's constitutional amendments, including a provision that mandates MPs lose their seats if they switch parties or if an independent MP joins a party. The rally, set to take place at the Carnival area, coincides with International Human Rights Day and National Fishermen's Day. The MDP has criticized the government's economic policies, which they believe threaten individual freedoms and could harm the tourism and fisheries industries. [the edition 3]

Maldives: MVR 56.6 billion budget approved after omitting provision of project details

(lm) The Maldivian Parliament has approved a budget of MVR 56.6 billion (USD 3.7 billion) for the upcoming year, following the removal of a provision that required the submission of details about planned projects. During the voting session, a proposal by a lawmaker from the People's National Congress (PNC) to remove the committee's recommendation was passed with 68 votes in favor, while 11 members voted against.

The budget represents an increase of MVR 1.6 billion (USD 104.6 million) compared to the current year's budget, which, including supplementary adjustments, totals MVR 55 billion (USD 3.5 billion). The government has projected next year's revenue at MVR 39.8 billion (USD 2.6 billion), with MVR 2.6 billion (USD 169 million) coming from free aid.

Key elements of the budget include MVR 12.4 billion (USD 806 million) allocated for the Public Sector Investment Program (PSIP) and MVR 36 billion (USD 2.3 billion) for recurrent expenses. The budget also includes a deficit of MVR 9.4 billion (USD 612 million), with an anticipated GDP growth of 6.4 percent.

Several recommendations by the Budget Committee, such as submitting quarterly project progress reports and sorting programs based on PSIP criteria, were omitted when the budget was passed. [the edition]

Maldives: Parliament passes Fiscal Responsibility and Debt bills

Maldivian Parliament has passed two key bills: the Fiscal Responsibility Bill and the Public Debt Bill. Both bills were approved without amendments, with 81 members voting in favor.

The Fiscal Responsibility Bill replaces the Public Expenditure Accountability Act. It allows the Maldives Monetary Authority (MMA) to advance up to 2.5 percent of the government's revenue over the past three years to manage cash flow, a significant increase from the previous 1 percent under the old Act. MMA issues these funds at market interest, with repayment required within three months. Upon ratification of the new bill, the Public Expenditure Accountability Act will be voided.

The bill also mandates that the Finance Minister prepare a five-year fiscal responsibility charter, to be published in the government gazette, ensuring transparency and sustainability of fiscal policy. Additionally, the bill requires a feasibility study for

Public Sector Investment Projects (PSIP) before they are included in the budget.

The Public Debt Bill sets guidelines for issuing sovereign guarantees, loans for state-owned enterprises, and local councils. It also mandates that an external auditor assess the government's debt and submit a debt strategy for approval by the President by July 15 each year. The bill further requires the establishment of a separate office to manage these responsibilities. [the edition]

Maldives: Urban Development Act ratified

(lm) President Muizzu has ratified the Urban Development Act, a crucial piece of legislation aimed at regulating the establishment of urban centers and overseeing urban development projects across the Maldives. The Act, which will come into effect in six months, seeks to ensure sustainable growth through the planning, implementation, and monitoring of urban development projects.

The Act proposes the creation of an Urban Development Authority under the Ministry of Housing, Land, and Urban Infrastructure. This authority will be responsible for drafting urban development plans, issuing necessary permissions, and supporting developers. The authority will hold significant control over urban planning decisions, similar to the current role of the Housing Development Corporation (HDC) in Male'.

While the government has already identified key areas for urban development, including islands in Raa, Baa, Lhaviyani, Alif Dhaalu, Faafu, Dhaalu, and Laamu Atolls, concerns have been raised about the potential for conflicts between the new authority and local councils. This issue is compounded by criticism from the Ministry of Local Government and Public Works, which believes the Act undermines the decentralization system and limits the power of local councils. Similar concerns were expressed during the parliamentary debate on the Urban Development Bill, which forms the basis of this Act.

The bill was passed by the Maldivian Parliament with 70 votes in favor, despite opposition from 11 members. Opposition lawmakers and local government authorities argue that the bill would reduce the authority of local councils, as the Urban Development Authority would have exclusive control over planning and development, leaving local councils with only the responsibility of managing municipal

services. Some fear that this could lead to disagreements between the authority and local councils, particularly over the implementation of urban development projects. [the edition 1] [the edition 2]

Maldives: Parliament session extended until December 15

(lm) The third session of the Maldives Parliament for 2024 has been extended until December 15. The extension was approved with 68 votes in favor and 11 votes against. The session, which began later than scheduled due to delays in setting up a new video room for broadcasting, was originally set to run from October 1 to the end of November.

Following this session, Parliament will take a three-month recess, with the first session of 2025 scheduled to begin in February and continue until the end of April. The second session of 2025 will run from June 1 to the end of August. [the edition]

Maldives: PPM Senate passes resolution to dissolve the party

(lm) The Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) Senate has passed a resolution to dissolve the party, a coalition member of the ruling People's National Congress (PNC). During the ongoing Senate meeting, 42 members unanimously voted in favor of the dissolution when the matter was raised. The meeting was chaired by the party's two vice-presidents, Ahmed Shiyam and Mohamed Ghassan Maumoon, both of whom also hold ministerial positions.

This move follows previous attempts to dissolve PPM, including efforts to transfer its members to PNC. The ruling PNC now has approximately 90,000 members. PPM, which held power from 2013 to 2018 under former President Abdulla Yameen, was formed after a split in the Dhivehi Rayyithunge Party (DRP), leading to the establishment of the "Z DRP" faction by Yameen's half-brother, former President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom. However, during Yameen's tenure, Maumoon dissented, leading to a legal battle that resulted in his removal from the party. Since 2016, PPM has been fully controlled by Yameen.

Fearing Maumoon's potential return, Yameen founded the People's National Congress (PNC). A court ruling later upheld Yameen's control over PPM, and both

parties continued to operate under his leadership. However, following Yameen's inability to contest the last presidential election on the PPM ticket, the opportunity was given to a PNC candidate, President Dr Mohamed Muizzu, who won the election.

Since President Muizzu took office, PPM has been in limbo, with efforts focused on strengthening PNC. Yameen resigned from PPM shortly before Muizzu's swearing-in, following his transfer from jail to house arrest. A recent amendment to the Political Parties Act now prohibits the use of a dissolved party's color and symbol for five years. [the edition]

Maldives: Bill to establish Attorney General's Office as a separate entity from civil service

(lm) A bill submitted by a People's National Congress (PNC) lawmaker seeks to remove the Attorney General's Office (AGO) from the Civil Service and establish it as a separate government service provider. The proposed bill aims to address operational challenges faced by the AGO under the current framework, which has hindered the recruitment of skilled legal professionals due to salary limitations.

Under the bill, AGO employees will be divided into legal and administrative services, with salaries determined by the Minister of Finance. It also ensures AGO staff access to health insurance and retirement benefits, including an Honorary Retirement Allowance. This restructuring would align the AGO with other independent institutions like the Prosecutor General's Office, as part of the broader restructuring efforts seen in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The bill's first reading was heard in Parliament on December 2. [the edition]

Maldives: MMA opens for public comment draft bill on forex regulation with changes

(lm) The Maldives Monetary Authority (MMA) has opened a draft bill for public comment, which includes changes to the tourism foreign exchange (forex) regulation. The proposed "Foreign Currency Bill" requires tourism businesses to exchange a set amount at local banks. Resorts, hotels, and tourist vessels (Category A) must exchange USD 500 per guest per

month, while guesthouses (Category B) must exchange USD 25 per guest per month.

Under the bill, Maldivians will not be required to pay in foreign currency for goods or services unless stipulated by law. Additionally, businesses earning a minimum of USD 20 million per year must deposit their revenue in a local bank, with no more than 25 percent of foreign currency income to be exchanged.

Certain exemptions include guests staying less than 24 hours, children under 2 years, and guests on complimentary offers. Tourist hotels on inhabited islands, regardless of size, will now be classified as Category B and required to exchange USD 25 per guest.

Tourist vessels registered abroad are exempt. The bill addresses concerns from the tourism industry, where leaders had previously raised issues with the current forex regulations. Despite this, President Dr Mohamed Muizzu has stated that no changes would be made to the existing regulations. [the edition]

Maldives: Minister of Agriculture and Animal Welfare Dr Aishath Rameela resigns due to health reasons

(lm) Dr Aishath Rameela, the Minister of Agriculture and Animal Welfare, has resigned from her post due to health reasons, a decision accepted by President Muizzu. Dr Rameela had previously announced in November 2023 that she was undergoing treatment for cancer, and after receiving treatment in India, she returned to work in February 2024. [the edition]

Maldives: MATATO supports targeted ban on Israeli officials, opposes blanket ban

(lm) The Maldives Association of Travel Agents and Tour Operators (MATATO) has expressed support for banning only Israeli government leaders and soldiers from traveling to the Maldives, rather than imposing a blanket ban on all Israeli passport holders. MATATO President Abdulla Giyas stated during a Parliament committee discussion that the association favors a selective ban, particularly due to concerns over dual nationality, such as Palestinians and Russians holding Israeli passports. Giyas also noted that the Maldives could face international backlash from countries like the United States.

if a full ban were enacted, citing its impact on the country's credit rating. MATATO and the Guest House Association of Maldives both back a more targeted approach.

President Muizzu has pledged to implement the ban, with the government asking Parliament to amend the Immigration Act. The 241 Committee, evaluating the bill, plans to consult various stakeholders before making a decision, expected by February 2025. [the edition]

Maldives: Penal reforms proposed to support criminals willing to undergo rehabilitation program

(akc) President Muizzu has approved a new prison reform program aimed at offering convicted criminals opportunities for rehabilitation. The reforms, proposed by the Ministry of Homeland Security and discussed during the Cabinet meeting on December 1, introduce measures where time spent in rehabilitation programs will count toward time served. This could make inmates eligible for sentence reductions and even pardons, depending on their participation and completion of specific rehabilitation programs.

The new system focuses on providing inmates with better opportunities for rehabilitation, including employment both inside and outside of prison, community service initiatives, and enhanced integration with parole and sentence reduction processes. However, prisoners convicted of particularly severe crimes, such as murder, rape, and child sexual assault, will not be eligible for participation in the program.

The Ministry of Homeland Security and Maldives Correctional Service have been tasked with monitoring and implementing the reforms, which include clear timelines and objectives. The reforms aim to support the reintegration of offenders who show a commitment to rehabilitation, while also ensuring a more effective correctional system in the country. [Sun] [the edition]

Maldives: 1017 complaints lodged at Immigration Watch

(lm) Since its launch in July 2024, the Maldives Immigration's online complaint portal, Immigration

Watch, has received a total of 1,017 complaints. The majority of these reports concern illegal businesses run by expatriates and work visa violations, with each category receiving 239 complaints. Other reported issues include prostitution (65 reports), missing persons (41), tourist visa violations (14), and criminal activities such as drug abuse and human trafficking. [the edition 1]

In a related development, an investigation has been launched into allegations that some Immigration officers have been accepting bribes in connection with expatriate worker operations. The investigation was triggered by reports claiming that five officers were violating laws and profiting illicitly. While no formal action has been taken against the officers as of yet, police have seized their electronic devices and conducted searches at their homes. [the edition 2]

Maldives: Children's Ombudsperson's Office calls for protecting children's rights in information sharing

(lm) The Children's Ombudsperson's Office has urged for the careful handling of information that could violate children's rights. In a statement, the office highlighted that children are entitled to special protection under the Constitution and international treaties, and it is the state's responsibility to protect them from harm. The office raised concerns over media outlets publishing personal details that violate the Children's Rights Protection Act, potentially compromising the safety and dignity of children. It warned that action would be taken against those who breach guidelines on disclosing information about children, particularly victims of crime or vulnerable individuals. The Ombudsperson's Office called on media and society to prioritize the safety and rights of children. [the edition]

Maldives: Unpaid environmental fines exceed USD 56 million, with only USD 3,380 collected

(lm) As of November 14, unpaid environmental fines in the Maldives have exceeded MVR 825.9 million (USD 56 million), with the state recovering only MVR 50,000 (USD 3,380) from 24 cases. Many of the penalties involve foreign-owned vessels, with six cases attracting the maximum fine of MVR 100 million (USD 6.7 million) for coral reef damage. Notably, the Indian company

AFCONS, which caused reef damage during the construction of the Thilamale' Bridge, has refused to pay its fine of MVR 69 million (USD 4.6 million), filing a civil suit instead. The EPA and Attorney General's Office have faced challenges in recovering fines, particularly due to foreign companies leaving the country without settling their debts. [the edition]

Maldives: STO and FENAKA acquisition discontinued

(lm) State Trading Company (STO) has discontinued efforts to acquire State Electric Company (FENAKA), following an order from the Finance Ministry received on November 24. The decision, finalized in a board meeting, follows the government's August decision to have STO operate as the parent company of FENAKA. However, the government's upcoming budget includes a potential solution to merge both companies instead of STO acquiring FENAKA. A final decision is expected next year.

FENAKA, a state-owned enterprise providing essential utility services like electricity, water, and waste management across most islands in the Maldives, is facing financial difficulties. With a total debt of MVR 4.1 billion (USD 266.5 million), including MVR 2 billion (USD 130 million) owed to STO, it remains one of the country's largest state-owned enterprises with over 7,000 employees. [the edition]

Maldives: Agriculture project with China to be relocated to Fushidhiggaru Falhu

(lm) The government's agriculture project with China, aimed at boosting food security and reducing imports, has been moved from Uthuru Thila Falhu to Fushidhiggaru Falhu. Originally planned for land reclamation to allocate public plots under former President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, the project was shifted by President Dr Mohamed Muizzu after he took office.

The State Trading Organization (STO) confirmed the new location but did not provide reasons for the change. Uthuru Thila Falhu is also being developed as an MNDF dockyard under an agreement with India, which has raised concerns over Chinese involvement in the area.

An agreement with China's Harbour Engineering Company Ltd aims to establish an Agriculture Economic Zone (AEZ) in the Maldives. Fushidhiggaru Falhu, initially planned for housing development as part of President Muizzu's RasMale' project, will now host the agriculture project. The government had previously announced plans to reclaim 200 hectares from Uthuru Thila Falhu for agriculture, but it remains unclear how the land will be used. Significant changes to the RasMale'. [the edition]

Maldives: Finance Minister Zameer highlights risks of Hajj Corporation entering guesthouse industry

(sl) In response to the Hajj Corporation's decision to invest in halal tourism by creating a city hotel in Kaafu atoll Maafushi, Finance Minister Moosa Zameer expressed concerns that the project may not yield favorable results.

Minister Zameer emphasized the importance of focusing on core mandates, stating that the Hajj Corporation should prioritize its primary role of facilitating Hajj pilgrimages. He suggested that any surplus funds should be allocated to specialists with industry expertise for investment, rather than venturing into unfamiliar sectors.

Zameer also cautioned against the diversification of state-owned companies into areas beyond their mandates, describing it as potentially problematic. These concerns, he added, would be addressed at the political level as part of the government's corporate reform program. [the edition]

Maldives: Finance Minister Zameer notes bankruptcy concerns alleviated

(sl) Maldivian Finance Minister Moosa Zameer stated that when the current administration took office, public debt stood at MVR 124 billion (approximately USD 8.03 billion), half of which was accumulated over the previous five years. As a result, 24 percent of government revenues are now allocated to debt servicing.

Debt repayments to individual countries have been deferred. According to the minister, this decisive policy shifted the focus of rating agencies and the IMF from concerns over potential bankruptcy to prioritizing

spending cuts. The Ministry of Finance projects that total debt will rise to MVR 139 billion (around USD 8.99 billion) by the end of 2024 and reach MVR 150 billion (approximately USD 9.71 billion) in 2025.

Direct public debt is expected to remain above 95 percent of GDP through 2026, underscoring the urgent need for fiscal reforms and expenditure reductions to manage the growing debt burden. [the edition]

Maldives: Helicopter services will commence in March, says Minister Ameen

(lm) Helicopter services in the Maldives are set to begin in March 2025, according to Transport Minister Mohamed Ameen. The services will include both national emergency operations and tourism purposes. Expressions of Interest (EOIs) for the expansion of the National Emergency Service and provision of helicopter services were opened last August, with 36 foreign parties expressing interest in providing the services.

The minister acknowledged the historical challenges associated with helicopter operations in the Maldives, particularly following several tragic incidents that occurred 22 years ago. However, he assured that with the support and recommendations from the United Kingdom's Civil Aviation Authority, the new services would be safer and more suitable for the Maldives. The helicopters to be used will meet specific size, type, and safety requirements as determined by the regulator.

The introduction of helicopter services is expected to address logistical challenges, such as the transportation of patients between islands or to Malé, as well as facilitate the movement of tourists at night.

In addition to the planned helicopter services, the Maldives has also made operational several air ambulances, including a Dash 8 and a seaplane. Furthermore, two helicopters and a Dornier aircraft donated by India are also now operational, with Indian civilian crews replacing the previous military personnel. [the edition]

Maldives: MNDF receives firefighting drone as a gift from STELCO

(sl) STELCO donated a firefighting drone and a deep-sea tracker to the Maldives National Defense Force (MNDF) at a special ceremony held at Bandaara Koshi.

The firefighting drone can climb to a height of 200 meters while carrying a water hose, enabling it to extinguish fires effectively. The deep-sea tracker, equipped with a robotic arm, can dive to a depth of 200 meters to assist in underwater searches and retrieve objects. [the edition]

Nepal: By-elections to fill local level vacancies conclude peacefully

(lm/rs) The by-elections to fill 41 vacant local positions across Nepal were held peacefully on December 1, with voter turnout reported at around 62 percent, slightly surpassing the 59 percent recorded during the 2022 local elections. Of the 44 positions initially slated for election, three were filled unopposed before polling day. The elections, conducted in 32 districts, included one mayoral seat, one deputy mayor, and 33 ward chair positions.

While the overall turnout exceeded expectations, youth participation was notably low, especially in Karnali and Sudurpaschim Provinces, attributed to the increasing trend of young people migrating abroad for work. Despite minor code of conduct violations reported by the Informal Sector Service Centre (INSEC), the elections proceeded without major disruptions. However, some criticism was leveled at the accessibility of polling stations, including one in Kathmandu that was not disabled-friendly despite previous commitments from the Election Commission.

In terms of election outcomes, the Nepali Congress (NC), the single-largest party in Parliament's lower House, emerged as the top winner but faced disappointment, securing fewer seats compared to its 2022 performance. The NC won the mayoral seat of Kirtipur Municipality and 16 ward chair positions but had previously won 29 posts in 2022. The party could not retain at least 10 posts, including the mayoral seat of Nalgad Municipality and the Gramthan Rural Municipality chair in Morang, both of which were taken by the main opposition Maoist Centre.

Meanwhile, the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) (Unified Marxist–Leninist) (CPN-UML) of Prime Minister Oli and the Maoist Centre made notable gains. The CPN-UML added three local representatives, while the Maoist Centre gained two. The Maoist Centre secured several vice-chair positions, including in Putha Uttarganga Rural Municipality and Nalgad Rural Municipality. The Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) also made a breakthrough by winning the chairperson post

in Kathmandu's Ward 16, a seat traditionally held by the CPN-UML.

The results underscore the struggles faced by the NC, which contested without alliances, unlike in the 2022 elections when it formed coalitions with the Maoist Centre and CPN (Unified Socialist). Despite some technical victories, political analysts suggest that these by-elections did not significantly strengthen any party's internal position, and the political landscape remains fluid. [The Kathmandu Post 1] [The Kathmandu Post 2]

Nepal: Rabi Lamichhane brought to Chitwan for interrogation in cooperatives fraud case

(lm) Rabi Lamichhane, former home minister and the chair of the Rastriya Swatantra Party, has been brought to Chitwan for questioning regarding the alleged embezzlement of funds from Sahara Chitwan Multipurpose Cooperative. Lamichhane arrived at Bharatpur Airport on December 3 and was escorted to the District Police Office for interrogation. Police are investigating his involvement in the misuse of cooperative funds, with further inquiries taking place in Kaski, Rupandehi, and Kathmandu.

Previously, Chitwan police had questioned former Deputy Inspector General of Police Chhabilal Joshi and suspect Ram Bahadur Khanal in connection with the case. Victims of the Sahara Chitwan Multipurpose Cooperative allege that the cooperative unlawfully invested funds in various companies, including the Gorkha Media Network, founded by Gitendra Bahadur Rai. Lamichhane is currently in custody with Kaski Police for similar investigations. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Transitional justice office bearer candidates' shortlist expected soon

(lm) The committee tasked with nominating office bearers for Nepal's two transitional justice commissions was set to release a shortlist of candidates by December 1. This comes after receiving 156 applications from retired judges, government officials, legal experts, rights defenders, and victims of Nepal's decade-long Maoist insurgency. However, the list includes only 128 names, as 28 individuals were recommended without their consent, according to the committee.

Key figures like former chief justices Kalyan Shrestha and Om Prakash Mishra, as well as former law ministers Agni Kharel and Govinda Sharma Bandi, are among those whose names were included without formal consent. The shortlisted candidates will vie for roles in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Commission of Investigation on Enforced Disappeared Persons.

The nomination process follows three modalities: direct applications from aspirants, nominations by human rights and victims' organizations, and institutional endorsements with candidates' consent. Public feedback and candidate presentations will be integral to the selection process, though stakeholders, including conflict victims and human rights activists, demand mandatory public hearings before final nominations.

The commissions have been non-functional since July 2022, leaving 63,718 complaints with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and 2,400 cases with the Commission on Disappearances unresolved. The recently amended transitional justice law grants the commissions a four-year term, extendable if necessary, to investigate cases and recommend reparations and prosecutions.

The government aims to appoint ten individuals, forming five-member teams for each commission, while avoiding candidates with potential conflicts of interest or prior appointments to these bodies. This will mark the third iteration of these commissions since their inception in 2015, as they work to address cases from Nepal's 1996–2006 conflict. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Supreme Court rejects petition against lawmaker Adhikari

(lm) The Supreme Court has dismissed a writ petition seeking the prosecution of Lilaballabh Adhikari, a provincial assembly member and former minister of Koshi Province, on procedural grounds. Adhikari was accused of human trafficking after allegedly arranging fake identification documents for three men attempting to enter Japan under the guise of attending a cultural event in Tokyo.

Adhikari and the individuals were deported by Japanese authorities on October 30. While the three men were detained upon arrival in Nepal, Adhikari reportedly evaded initial investigation using his

ministerial status. He resigned from his ministerial position in early November following public outcry.

The Kathmandu District Attorney's Office had earlier concluded that there was insufficient evidence to prosecute Adhikari. The Supreme Court Registrar stated that decisions on prosecution fall under the Attorney General's jurisdiction, as per Article 158(2) of Nepal's Constitution, precluding judicial intervention.

The petitioner criticized the ruling, alleging judicial bias and vowing to appeal. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Judicial Council struggles as judge vacancies mount

(lm) Nepal's Judicial Council is facing significant operational challenges following the retirement of senior advocate Ram Prasad Shrestha, a member representing the Nepal Bar Association (NBA), on November 29. This development has exacerbated delays in filling critical judicial vacancies at the Supreme Court and high courts.

Shrestha's departure has reduced the five-member Judicial Council to four, complicating the decision-making process needed to address the judicial shortfall. The council is tasked with appointing around two dozen judges across two tiers of courts, including four justice positions in the Supreme Court and 18 in various high courts.

Efforts to address these vacancies faltered earlier this week when a scheduled meeting to discuss potential appointees was postponed due to the absence of Law Minister Ajay Chaurasiya, who cited a delayed flight as the reason for his non-attendance.

The Judicial Council comprises the chief justice, the senior-most Supreme Court justice, the law minister, and two advocates—one each nominated by the government and the NBA. The NBA must now recommend a replacement for Shrestha, a process that includes parliamentary hearings and is expected to take at least three to four weeks, further delaying judicial appointments.

A contentious amendment to the council's regulation has deepened the impasse between the judiciary and the NBA. The amendment ranks high court judges appointed from the positions of Supreme Court chief registrar or council secretary immediately below the high court's chief judge. The NBA opposes this provision, calling it unconstitutional and

discriminatory, arguing that it undermines judges appointed from among lawyers.

The NBA has stated it will only send a representative to the council if the regulation is rolled back. An NBA office-bearer said, "We might not delay sending our representative, but appointments under the current amendment are unacceptable. Our representative will ensure our stance is heard."

The Judicial Council has struggled to make any new recommendations since Chief Justice Prakash Man Singh Raut assumed office. Despite the September 27 nomination of two high court chief judges, Nripa Dhwoj Niroula and Nityananda Pandey, for the Supreme Court, no further progress has been achieved. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Karnali provincial assembly committees remain leaderless for months

(lm) Key committees in Karnali's provincial assembly have been without leadership for months, undermining oversight of government actions. The Public Accounts, Finance and Natural Resources, and Social Development Committees have been leaderless for up to seven months, delaying bill discussions and weakening accountability. The Finance and Natural Resources Committee has been without a chair since April, while the Social Development and Public Accounts Committees have lacked leadership for the past three months.

Opposition members argue that the leadership vacuum has allowed the government to operate without proper checks, with committee meetings stalled and transparency compromised. Although provincial regulations allow the oldest committee member to serve as interim chief, this provision has not been implemented. Political leaders are now urged to promptly elect new heads to restore the committees' functions and ensure government accountability. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Former security printing executives sentenced to eight years for corruption

(lm) The Special Court has sentenced Bikal Paudel, former executive director of the Security Printing Centre, and Saphal Shrestha, former director of the

centre, to eight years in prison each for corruption in the procurement and printing of excise duty stickers. The court also imposed restitution of NPR 34.22 million (USD 253,228) on each and an equivalent fine.

The full bench delivered the verdict following a detailed investigation into irregularities in the procurement process. The charges included inflated procurement costs and irregular payments, with the Commission for the Investigation of Abuse of Authority (CIAA) alleging embezzlement amounting to NPR 386.71 million (USD 2.86 million).

The case stemmed from plans by the government to establish a security printing press to strengthen domestic capacity for producing sensitive materials, including excise duty stickers. However, allegations of mismanagement and kickback negotiations marred the initiative, ultimately leading to the corruption probe.

While Paudel and Shrestha were found guilty, former chief secretary Baikuntha Aryal and several others named in the case were acquitted due to insufficient evidence. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Former deputy mayor's home raided over suspected customs evasion

(lm) Authorities conducted a raid on the residence of Yasmin Sultan, former deputy mayor of Khadak Municipality in Saptari, uncovering ready-made garments valued at NPR 1.93 million (USD 14,282) allegedly brought into the country without proper customs clearance.

Sultan, who was present during the raid, faces allegations from local residents that attempts are being made to shield her from legal consequences despite the significant value of the seized goods. Customs officials have assured that legal action will follow if evidence of wrongdoing is confirmed. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Lumbini province government seeks smoother GBIA operations with visa, labor permit reforms

(rs) Lumbini Province Chief Minister Chet Narayan Acharya has announced efforts to improve key services such as visa processing, labor permit approvals, and health checkups to support the sustainable operation

of Gautam Buddha International Airport (GBIA). Speaking at an event focused on the airport's potential, Acharya urged the Federal Government to grant procedural rights to the province to ensure more efficient operations.

The Chief Minister emphasized the investment opportunities created by GBIA and reassured investors of a conducive environment, including the possibility of amending laws if necessary. Additionally, the provincial government plans to promote the Lumbini Tourism Circuit to attract more visitors.

Business leaders attending the event expressed optimism about the growth of the tourism industry, particularly following the introduction of international flights at GBIA. [The Rising Nepal]

Nepal: Rewati Raman Bhandari appointed Koshi province minister for internal affairs

(lm) Koshi Province Chief Minister Hikmat Karki has appointed Rewati Raman Bhandari, a Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist) lawmaker, as the new minister for internal affairs and law. This follows the resignation of Lilaballav Adhikari, who stepped down after being implicated in a human trafficking case.

Adhikari was deported from Japan on October 30, along with three individuals, for attempting to enter the country using falsified documents. The former minister initially evaded investigation using his ministerial identification but was later detained. While police recommended charges, the Kathmandu District Attorney's Office dismissed the case. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Home Ministry warns of legal action over divisive social media content

(lm) The Ministry of Home Affairs has announced that individuals spreading hateful or misleading content on social media that undermines social harmony or disrupts public peace will face legal action. In a statement, the ministry expressed concern over the misuse of social media to circulate divisive and false content, emphasizing that such activities are prohibited by law.

The ministry warned that acts damaging inter-ethnic, religious, or communal relations, inciting violence, or violating public decency and morality constitute punishable offenses. It reaffirmed its commitment to legal scrutiny of such cases to preserve social order and harmony. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Foreign spouses face challenges navigating restrictive immigration laws

(lm) Foreign spouses of Nepali citizens face significant legal challenges under Nepal's restrictive immigration policies, with issues ranging from visa insecurity to property ownership restrictions.

The current laws, rooted in outdated provisions, tie the legal stay of foreign spouses entirely to their Nepali partner. For instance, marriage visas must be renewed regularly and automatically lapse upon divorce or the death of the Nepali spouse. Children born to Nepali mothers and foreign fathers face immediate classification as illegal immigrants until they secure foreign passports and visas, highlighting a gender bias in citizenship laws.

Foreign spouses also face restrictions on owning immovable property and difficulties repatriating funds from property sales. Even when allowed inheritance or divorce settlements, foreign spouses must sell their share of immovable assets immediately, and they cannot transfer significant sums abroad under Nepal's foreign exchange regulations.

The ambiguity surrounding the right to work under a marriage visa further exacerbates their challenges. While employment was neither explicitly allowed nor prohibited, a "prohibited from employment" stamp introduced in 2017 caused confusion and resentment among affected families. Although the stamp was later removed, the underlying legal uncertainties remain unresolved.

Activists argue that the lack of secure legal status leaves families vulnerable, particularly in cases of abusive relationships or the death of the Nepali partner. Advocacy groups are calling for residence permits independent of marital status, similar to systems in other countries like India, which offers "Overseas Citizenship of India" with extended rights for foreign spouses.

Despite meeting with politicians and seeking reforms, progress has been slow. Immigration experts emphasize the need for Nepal to modernize its laws to

reflect global standards and provide foreign spouses with security and flexibility. Government officials, however, have stated that changes to the law fall under the jurisdiction of parliament, leaving affected families in a precarious legal situation. [The Kathamndu Post]

Nepal: HIV infections and deaths decline, but stigma persists

(rs) While HIV infection rates and deaths in Nepal have significantly declined, stigma against people living with HIV remains a major challenge. Despite progress in treatment and prevention, many individuals still face discrimination, such as being denied jobs or education, and are reluctant to disclose their HIV status to family or health workers.

In 2023, the HIV infection rate in Nepal dropped by 91 percent compared to 2000, with only 457 new infections and 231 deaths. Improved access to antiretroviral therapy (ART) is credited with these gains, as ART is provided free of charge to those living with HIV. However, the deeply ingrained social stigma continues to impede efforts to fully combat the disease, leaving many individuals unable to seek timely treatment or openly discuss their condition. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Task force urges health screening overhaul for migrant workers

(lm) A government task force has recommended comprehensive reforms in health checks for Nepali migrant workers, including creating a Centralized Digital Repository System (CDRS) to ensure international standards and worker safety.

The task force, led by Health Secretary Dr. Dipendra Raman Singh, found significant gaps in current practices, such as substandard testing and vague documentation of deaths abroad. Nearly 1,000 workers die annually, with key causes including cardiac arrest (19 percent), workplace accidents (7 percent), and suicide (11 percent).

The report calls for stricter regulation of health institutions, decentralizing testing centers to regions like Bhairahawa and Pokhara, and aligning with standards in labor destinations such as Saudi Arabia and Malaysia. Previous inspections revealed severe

negligence, leading to the suspension of 67 health facilities. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Experts question feasibility of Oli's 70 percent SEE pass rate target

(lm) Nepal's Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli has set a goal for a 70 percent pass rate in the Secondary Education Examinations (SEE) by March 2025. This would represent a significant improvement from the 47.87 percent pass rate in 2024. However, experts argue that without substantial reforms, achieving this target is unlikely.

Education researcher point to several challenges, including inadequate budgets, a shortage of qualified teachers in core subjects, and the politicization of education. They stress that systemic reforms in teacher training, curriculum, and school infrastructure are necessary to improve outcomes.

The Ministry of Education has proposed extra online classes and changes to the evaluation system, but critics warn that such short-term measures, including adjustments to the grading system, may artificially inflate pass rates without addressing the underlying issues. [The Kathmandu Post 1]

In response, the Nepali Congress, a key member of the ruling coalition, has begun drafting a comprehensive education policy. Led by party President Sher Bahadur Deuba, the policy will cover early childhood development, school and technical education, higher education, and international best practices. It aims to address funding issues, integrate technology in classrooms, and regulate private schools to prevent commercial exploitation while ensuring constitutional commitments to free education.

The policy builds on recommendations from the 2018 High-Level Education Commission, which suggested converting private schools into trusts to improve oversight. [The Kathmandu Post 2]

Nepal: NEA requests freeze of 34 industries' accounts over unpaid dues

(rs) The Nepal Electricity Authority (NEA) has intensified efforts to recover outstanding electricity dues from 34 industries, requesting Nepal Rastra Bank to freeze the industries' accounts. NEA's Managing Director, Kulman Ghising, formally requested this action in a letter sent

last week. Additionally, NEA has approached the Office of the Company Registrar and the Nepal Stock Exchange, seeking to freeze shares held by the defaulters and block any permissions for new share issues.

This initiative follows the Nepal government's decision on November 10 and a subsequent directive from the Electricity Regulation Commission on November 26, urging strict measures to compel the industries to settle their dues. The list of defaulters includes major companies like Jagdamba Steel, which owes NPR 1.6 billion (USD 11.84 million), Maruti Cement with NPR 574.4 million (USD 4.25 million), Reliance Spinning Mill with NPR 753.6 million (USD 5.57 million), and Arghakhanchi Cement with NPR 448.4 million (USD 3.32 million).

These industries had been utilizing electricity through dedicated feeders and trunk lines, avoiding the widespread power cuts experienced by others. NEA previously severed their electricity supply on October 24. However, following a Cabinet directive on November 10, the supply was restored within 24 hours under the condition that the dues would be cleared within 15 days, based on the Time of Day (ToD) meter system. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Investment board approves major hydropower projects including Budhi Gandaki

(lm) The Investment Board Nepal, chaired by Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli, has granted approval for significant hydropower projects, including the Budhi Gandaki Hydropower Project, aimed at bolstering the country's energy sector.

The Budhi Gandaki Hydropower Project (341 MW) is expected to cost NPR 70 billion (USD 518 million). Other approved projects include the Jagadulla Semi-Reservoir Hydropower Project (106 MW) with an estimated investment of NPR 23.59 billion (USD 175 million) and the Chainpur Seti Hydropower Project (210 MW) at NPR 47.54 billion (USD 351 million). The board also extended deadlines for the Upper Marsyangdi Hydropower Project (327 MW) and Samrat Cement Company Pvt Ltd.

A key decision involved increasing the capacity of the West Seti Hydropower Project from 750 MW to 800 MW while amending the project's licence to redefine its boundary area. Additionally, changes to the shareholding structure and agreement for the Upper

Karnali Hydropower Project were approved. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Butwal-Narayanghat road construction at snail-pace

(rs) The Butwal-Narayanghat road construction has faced backlash due to prolonged delays. Despite starting six years ago with a 36-month deadline, only 53 percent of the work is completed after 66 months.

At a meeting in the District Administration Office, Chief District Officer Arun Pokhrel emphasized mobilizing more resources to speed up progress. Contractor engineer Rakesh Jha acknowledged their repeated promises to work around the clock but admitted no action has been taken yet.

Political leaders have urged the administration to demand accountability from the Chinese contractor, citing local hardships caused by the delay. [The Rising Nepal]

Nepal: Small businesses advocate for circular economy despite challenges

(rs) Small businesses in Nepal are working to implement a circular economy, where products are reused or recycled. Companies like Naturo Earth and ReKriti focus on sustainability but face higher costs and competition from cheaper imports. The Roots of Circularity project, led by Wildlife Conservation Nepal and Impact Hub, aims to support this transition by educating businesses and policymakers.

However, the market for sustainable goods is small, and eco-friendly products are often more expensive. Business owners hope increased consumer awareness and government incentives can make these products more affordable. Sanjeevani Yonzon, director of the Conclave on Circularity, urges the government to support sustainable manufacturing. Despite challenges, advocates believe a circular economy is vital for Nepal's future. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Police seize brown sugar in ambulance, two arrested

(rs) On November 28, police in Bardibas arrested two individuals after seizing 10 grams of brown sugar hidden inside the microphone of an ambulance en route to Sindhuli. The drug was discovered during a search based on a tip-off. Authorities suspect others may be involved, and the investigation is ongoing. [The Rising Nepal]

Pakistan: Imran Khan faces new legal challenges as court orders 14-day remand

(lm/mra/tf) Pakistan's jailed ex-Prime Minister Imran Khan continues to face mounting legal challenges as his main opposition Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party engages in ongoing protests against the current government. On December 2, an anti-terrorism court in Islamabad placed Khan on a 14-day judicial remand in connection with seven cases related to violent protests organized by PTI. These protests, which took place between September 28 and October 5, 2024, as well as the more recent clashes on November 24, have added to the mounting legal issues Khan has faced since his ouster in April 2022, following a no-confidence vote.

The November 24 protests, the largest in Islamabad since the February 2024 national elections, escalated into violent confrontations between PTI supporters and security forces. The protests were originally organized to demand Khan's release from jail, the restoration of PTI's electoral mandate, and the reversal of the 26th Constitutional Amendment. As the sit-in at D-Chowk in Islamabad's Red Zone turned deadly, PTI claimed that 12 of its supporters were killed.

The Supreme Court, however, declined a request from the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) government to take suo motu notice of casualties during the protests, with judges emphasizing the matter's political nature and lack of direct relevance to ongoing cases.[DAWN]

However, the Pakistani government disputes this, reporting the deaths of three paramilitary soldiers and a police officer, with hundreds more injured during the violence. Authorities have also dismissed PTI's casualty claims, with Deputy Prime Minister Ishaq Dar calling them "malicious" and challenging the party to provide concrete evidence, such as "graves and dead bodies." [Arab News 1] [The Hindu]

In addition to the judicial remand for Khan, several other senior PTI leaders, including Khan's wife Bushra Bibi and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Chief Minister Ali Amin Gandapur, were implicated in the unrest. On the same

day, December 2, the Islamabad Anti-Terrorism Court (ATC) issued non-bailable arrest warrants for Khan, his wife, Gandapur, and 93 other individuals involved in the protests. [madhyamam]

In addition to Khan, PTI Vice-Chairman Shah Mahmood Qureshi was transferred to Adiyala jail in Rawalpindi to face charges related to the May 9, 2023, violent protests. Qureshi, like Khan, has been incarcerated since August 2023, also facing multiple legal challenges. PTI leaders claim these arrests are part of a broader effort to suppress dissent and curb political opposition. [Arab News 2]

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif condemned the violence of the protests and vowed to implement tough measures to prevent further unrest. Sharif stressed the severe economic and social consequences of the protests, which included halted businesses, struggling daily wage earners, and a significant drop in the stock market. The government estimated that the unrest caused approximately PKR 192 billion (USD 692 million) in daily indirect losses to the economy. [The Express Tribune]

To address what it called "propaganda against the state," the Pakistani government has established a joint task force tasked with investigating and countering misinformation surrounding the protests. The task force, which includes representatives from the Pakistan Telecommunications Authority, intelligence agencies, police, and the Federal Investigation Agency, is focusing on identifying those spreading fabricated information both within Pakistan and internationally. Prime Minister Sharif's office accused PTI of orchestrating a coordinated social media campaign to spread false claims of casualties and discredit state institutions. The government claims these actions were intended to incite further unrest and create divisions within the country. [Arab News 3] [Arab News 4]

Pakistan: Government proposes 5-year jail, USD 6,840 fine for spreading fake news

(lm) The Pakistani government has proposed amendments to the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016 (PECA), introducing penalties for spreading fake news, including up to five years in prison or a PKR 1 million (USD 6,840) fine. The draft also proposes the creation of a Digital Rights Protection Authority (DRPA) to block or remove harmful online content targeting law enforcement, state institutions, or promoting

religious hatred, terrorism, or violence. The authority's decisions can be challenged in a tribunal. [Geo News]

Pakistan: Journalist arrested after coverage of anti-government protests denies 'fabricated' charges

(lm) Pakistani journalist Matiullah Jan, arrested after covering anti-government protests in Islamabad, denied the "fabricated" charges against him. Jan, a broadcaster with Neo TV, was arrested outside a hospital on November 27 while investigating alleged fatalities during protests in support of imprisoned ex-prime minister Imran Khan.

The charges against Jan included terrorism-related offenses, rash driving, and narcotics-related sections. He was released on November 30 after a court approved his bail with surety bonds of PKR 10,000 (USD 36). [Arab News]

Pakistan: Telecom regulator delays unregistered VPN ban as deadline passes

(lm) Pakistan's Telecommunication Authority (PTA) announced it will not immediately block unregistered Virtual Private Networks (VPNs), despite the expiration of its registration deadline on November 30. The regulator had previously urged businesses, freelancers, and IT companies to register their VPNs to comply with government regulations.

PTA Chairman Major General (Retd) Hafeez Rehman confirmed the decision, stating that a new deadline for registration would be determined by the Ministry of Interior. He assured that VPNs currently in use will remain operational, noting that 25,000 VPNs have already been registered.

The crackdown on unregistered VPNs has raised concerns among businesses, particularly in the IT sector, which relies heavily on unrestricted internet access. Digital rights activists have criticized the move, viewing it as part of broader government measures to control online content and suppress free speech.

In February 2024, Pakistan restricted access to the social media platform X (formerly Twitter) during a period of heightened political tension following general elections, citing national security concerns. The recent

push to regulate VPNs further underscores the government's focus on internet oversight.

PTA acknowledged the critical role of VPNs in the IT industry and emphasized its commitment to maintaining operations for registered users while ensuring compliance with regulations. However, businesses remain apprehensive about potential disruptions as the situation develops. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Free insulin for diabetic children in Punjab

(ja) Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz has launched the Chief Minister Insulin Programme to provide free insulin to Type-1 diabetic children in Punjab. The registration process has begun, with a helpline activated to assist applicants. Families can also reach out to NCD clinics in their districts for support. The program aims to ensure that all Type-1 diabetic children, who require lifelong insulin, receive the necessary treatment through the province's resources. [DAWN]

Pakistan: Afghans will need NOC to stay in Islamabad beyond 2024

(tf) Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi announced that Afghan nationals must obtain a no-objection certificate (NOC) from the deputy commissioner to stay in Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT) beyond December 31, 2024. The move comes after the government claimed that Afghan nationals were involved in a violent protest by the main opposition Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). [DAWN]

This move is part of the broader government policy that aims to regulate the presence of Afghan refugees in the country, as Pakistan continues its plan to deport undocumented Afghan nationals. The Pakistani government has recently intensified efforts to send Afghan refugees back to Afghanistan, a policy that aligns with the broader regional security and diplomatic concerns. The government argues that the presence of a large number of Afghan refugees, many of whom are living without proper documentation, is contributing to security challenges in the country.

The deportation policy has faced criticism from human rights organizations, who warn of the risks faced by refugees if forcibly returned to Afghanistan, which is

still grappling with instability following the Taliban's return to power in 2021.

Pakistan: Solar surge sparks both hope and grid challenges

(tf) Pakistan is experiencing one of the fastest solar energy expansions globally, driven by affordable solar technology imports, particularly from China. In 2024, the country is set to add an estimated 17 GW of solar capacity, more than a third of its total power generation. This rapid growth has positioned Pakistan among the world's top solar installers, alongside major economies like China, the United States, and Germany.

The surge comes as many Pakistanis seek an alternative to the unreliable, fossil-fuel-based national grid, which has been plagued by blackouts, high energy prices, and poor infrastructure. For many households, solar power has been a lifesaver, particularly during heatwaves when power outages are most dangerous. Families have seen significant reductions in energy costs and no further blackouts since installing solar panels

While the boom in solar power is a positive step toward achieving Pakistan's renewable energy target of 60 percent by 2030, it has led to disruptions in the national grid. The sudden drop in demand during the day as people use solar power has left grid operators struggling to balance supply and demand, making electricity more expensive for those still dependent on the grid. This shift has sparked concerns that the government might intervene to curb the consumer-driven solar expansion.

The affordability of solar technology, thanks to a 90 percent drop in solar panel costs over the past 15 years, has made the revolution possible. However, further advances in battery storage are seen as the next key step in enabling households to store solar energy for use at night. [DW.com]

Pakistan: Government denies 'hiccups' in IMF program, reaffirms commitment to reforms agenda

(lm) Pakistan's finance ministry has dismissed claims of "hiccups" in the implementation of its USD 7 billion International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout program, asserting that the program is progressing smoothly

and the government remains fully committed to the associated macroeconomic reforms. The statement came in response to local media reports citing Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb, who had suggested that there were issues in the program's execution during a briefing to the National Assembly Standing Committee on Finance.

The IMF bailout, approved in September 2024, is contingent upon Pakistan adopting prudent fiscal and monetary policies, and expanding its tax base. The finance ministry emphasized that the government's commitment to meeting the program's conditionalities remains steadfast, and any speculation about disruptions lacks credible evidence. Pakistan has faced chronic economic challenges, requiring 23 IMF bailouts since 1958.

The IMF has highlighted that while Pakistan has made progress, including a rebound in growth to 2.4 percent and a reduction in inflation, significant structural challenges remain, particularly in expanding the tax base. The IMF also noted that Pakistan's vulnerabilities persist, and continued policy implementation is essential for restoring long-term stability. Despite these challenges, the finance ministry reassured the public that Pakistan is focused on achieving sustainable, inclusive growth while fulfilling its obligations under the IMF program.

As of July 2024, Pakistan owes the IMF USD 6.28 billion and remains the Fund's fifth-largest debtor. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Finance Minister chairs meeting with the ECC; concerned over policy delays

(sn) A special meeting has been chaired for the Economic Coordination Committee (ECC) by Senator Muhammad Aurandzeb, Pakistan's Minister for Finance and Revenue, as Aurandzeb shared concerns about policy implementation delays. Various ministers reviewed previous policy implementations concerning housing, food security and research, finance, health services, and production. The ECC noted the problematic delays in policy implementation, as Aurandzeb urged all ministers to improve their coordination and compliance with the decisions of the ECC. [Business Recorder] [Pakistan Today]

Pakistan: Stock market cruises past 103,000 points on upbeat inflation data

(sn) The Pakistan Stock Exchange (PSX) set a new record on December 2, crossing 103,000 points during intraday trading, analysts reported. The benchmark KSE-100 index reached 103,036 points, marking a 1.66 percent increase from last week's close of 101,357 points.

The surge in stock prices came after Pakistan's statistics bureau announced that annual consumer inflation had slowed to 4.9 percent in November, lower than the government's forecast. This decline was attributed to a high base from the previous year. Analysts noted that the bullish market was also driven by strong economic data and surging foreign exchange reserves, which reached USD 11.42 billion as of November 22.

Consumer inflation cooled significantly from 7.2 percent in October, following a dramatic drop from a multi-decade high of nearly 40 percent in May 2023. The PSX had already breached the 100,000-point mark on November 26, closing at 100,082 points. The government had also slashed interest rates by 250 basis points earlier in November to stimulate the economy.

Analysts believe the stock market rally is partly due to Pakistan's USD 7 billion loan agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which has boosted investor confidence. The first tranche of approximately USD 1 billion was disbursed in September, alongside fiscal and monetary reforms.

However, some analysts cautioned against overly optimistic long-term expectations. He attributed the market surge to lower interest rates and corrections in a market that had been undervalued for years. Khan speculated that the market might rise to 110,000 points in the short term before another correction. He expressed skepticism about the broader economic indicators, noting that large-scale manufacturing, exports, and other key sectors remain weak. [Arab News] [The News International] [Business Recorder]

The gains have been attributed to various factors, including a recovery from previous undervaluations, domestic investment increases, a decrease in national inflation, and the recent USD 7 billion-dollar bailout package provided by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Pakistan's stock exchange has outgrown almost all international markets in 2024, with the index only trailing Argentina. It is unclear whether the exchange will maintain this momentum. [NDTV]

Pakistan: Government considers lowering retirement age to 55

(sn) The Pakistani government is considering implementing a reduced retirement age, which would see pensions released at 55 rather than 60. Government officials discussed the policy with the Economic Coordination Committee (ECC) last week, including Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb, as the cabinet expressed concerns over delays in the potential implementation of the pension scheme. No official changes have been made to the current policy, as both parties consider the potential for the government's reduced liability expense if it were implemented. Following their approved bailout package, this proposal was initially suggested by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and followed a proposed increase of the retirement age to 62 years. [Firstpost]

Pakistan: November consumer inflation slows to 4.9 percent year on year

(lm) Pakistan's annual consumer inflation slowed to 4.9 percent in November, largely due to a high base from the previous year, the statistics bureau reported on December 2. This was lower than the government's forecast, which had projected inflation to slow to 5.8 percent - 6.8 percent in November and ease further to 5.6 percent - 6.5 percent in December.

The finance ministry had previously indicated that inflation would slow, with the country also slashing interest rates by 250 basis points in November to help revive the sluggish economy. The inflation rate dropped from 7.2 percent in October and marked a significant decline from nearly 40 percent in May 2023.

Consumer prices in November rose by 0.5 percent compared to October, according to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Second ceasefire brokered in Kurram as sectarian violence toll surpasses 130

(lm) Pakistani authorities, supported by tribal elders, have brokered a second ceasefire between Sunni and Shiite Muslim communities in Kurram district, Khyber

Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province, following deadly clashes that have claimed at least 133 lives and injured 177 since November 21. Kurram, located near the Afghanistan border, has long been a hotspot for sectarian violence exacerbated by land disputes and deep-rooted animosities.

The violence erupted on November 21 when gunmen ambushed a convoy carrying mostly Shiite Muslims in Lower Kurram, killing 52 people. Retaliatory attacks by Shiite groups led to widespread clashes, further escalating tensions and resulting in over 78 additional deaths. The conflict has caused significant disruptions, including road blockages and mobile service outages, worsening the humanitarian situation. Local business owners report severe shortages of food and medical supplies, and hospitals are struggling to treat the injured due to blocked roads. [Arab News 1]

An initial ceasefire attempt on November 24 failed when violence resumed. However, on December 1, the provincial government formed a grand jirga, a council of elders, to negotiate a second ceasefire. The jirga comprises former lawmakers from tribal districts, with representatives from both Sunni and Shiite sects. The new council has already held meetings with key provincial leaders, including KP Chief Minister Ali Amin Gandapur and Governor Faisal Karim Kundi. The jirga is also set to meet with the prime minister, president, and army chief to discuss the broader security situation.

Ex-senator Saleh Shah, a member of the jirga, expressed optimism about the council's efforts, citing positive signals for a breakthrough. Despite the deployment of security forces and the ceasefire agreement, sporadic clashes continue, especially in two villages. The jirga will travel to Kurram after a critical apex committee meeting, scheduled for December 5, to discuss long-term peace measures. [Arab News 2]

Chief Minister Gandapur has emphasized the need to dismantle the trenches dug by warring tribes and seize heavy weapons. He has also urged the deployment of Frontier Constabulary troops to support peacekeeping efforts. Gandapur has promised funding for the repatriation of displaced families and emphasized the provincial government's commitment to their safe return. [Arab News 3]

Kurram, once part of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) before its merger with KP in 2018, has a history of sectarian violence. Shiites, who make up around 15 percent of Pakistan's population, are a significant minority in the district. While there have

been periods of coexistence, sectarian tensions have escalated in recent months. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan reported 79 deaths in sectarian clashes in Kurram between July and October 2024. [Arab News 4]

Pakistan: Military intensifies operations in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa amid rising violence

(mra/ja/lm) The Pakistani military has escalated operations, killing eight militants in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa over the weekend. This follows a surge in violent attacks, including a deadly bombing in Quetta on November 9, which killed 26 people. The Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), a separatist group seeking independence for the resource-rich Balochistan province, claimed responsibility for the attack. The BLA has long waged an armed struggle against the Pakistani government, accusing it of exploiting Balochistan's natural resources. [tribune.com.pk] [ispr.gov.pk]

The Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (PICSS) reports that November alone saw at least 71 attacks, primarily in KP and Balochistan. These attacks have already surpassed the total number of attacks in 2023, with over 1,000 fatalities, including both civilians and security personnel. One of the deadliest incidents was a bombing in Quetta on November 9, which killed 26 people, an attack claimed by the Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA), a separatist group fighting for the independence of Balochistan.

The rise in militancy has prompted Pakistan's Interior Ministry to intensify counterterrorism efforts. Between January and October 2024, Pakistan's security forces conducted nearly 8,000 intelligence-based operations, killing 206 militants. These operations have largely targeted groups such as the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the BLA, both of which have launched increasingly violent attacks. The government has also approved a "comprehensive military operation" against separatist groups in Balochistan, though no specifics have been provided on its execution.

The military's ongoing operations in Balochistan are particularly critical, as the province is home to key infrastructure projects like the Gwadar Port, part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which has been targeted by insurgent groups. Last month, the BLA claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing at Karachi's international airport, killing two Chinese

engineers. The military has been working to curb such attacks, but experts warn that a more strategic approach is needed to achieve lasting peace and stability in these volatile regions. [Arab News]

Despite these efforts, analysts argue that Pakistan's military response has been inadequate due to challenges such as financial constraints, lack of local support, and ongoing political instability. Analysts stress the need for a more comprehensive strategy, combining military action with political stability and civilian engagement, to effectively address the growing violence. [Al Jazeera]

Pakistan: 5.2 magnitude earthquake hits Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

(sn) A 5.2 magnitude earthquake occurred at Pakistan's border with Afghanistan; no casualties or property damage has been reported. The Seismological Centre reported that the earthquake occurred 212 kilometers below ground level, with tremors reported in various regions in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa district, leaving residents in a panic. This event marks the second earthquake reported in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in a month. Pakistan lies in an earthquake-prone area, with an earthquake in 2005 killing more than 74,000 people. [The Indian Express]

Seychelles: Farm of Hope Drug rehabilitation center set to open in August 2025

(akc) The "Farm of Hope," a Roman Catholic Church-led rehabilitation project for substance abusers, will open in Port Glaud by August 2025. The government has allocated USD 305,502 to support the project, which will offer a year-long program focusing on work, community, and spirituality. Initially, it will house 20 men, with the aim of reintegrating them into society. The project is part of broader efforts to address substance abuse in Seychelles, supported by the Church and local authorities. [Seychelles News Agency]

Sri Lanka: Parliament begins key policy debates

(lm) Sri Lanka's newly-elected Parliament has commenced its first significant debates. From

December 3 to 4, lawmakers are discussing the government's policy statement, presented by President Anura Kumara Dissanayake. This marks the first debate under the National People's Power (NPP) government following its landslide victory in the November elections. A second debate will take place on December 5 and 6, focusing on the interim budget for the first four months of 2025, ahead of the formal budget presentation on February 17. [The Hindu]

Sri Lanka: Election Commission deliberates on local government election dates

(raa) The Election Commission of Sri Lanka is actively working to finalize dates for the upcoming local government elections, aiming to avoid disrupting scheduled examinations. At a meeting chaired by Commission Chairman R.M.A.L. Ratnayake, members discussed potential timelines but did not settle on a specific date. The Commission plans to reconvene in the coming days to make a final decision.

Chairman Ratnayake emphasized that the elections must be conducted promptly in compliance with a Supreme directive. Preparations for the electoral process are already underway to ensure timely execution. [ADA derana]

Sri Lanka: Government moves to cut benefits for MPs, scraps pensions and duty-free permits

(lm) The Sri Lankan government has decided to curtail privileges for parliamentarians in line with its election manifesto. Key decisions include halting the assignment of state bungalows to ministers and eliminating the practice of granting duty-free vehicle permits to MPs. Public Security Minister Ananda Wijepala confirmed that no state bungalows would be allocated to current ministers, and cost-effective, fuel-efficient vehicles will be provided to MPs instead of duty-free permits for importing luxury vehicles.

The government has also scrapped pension benefits for MPs, marking a shift in policy. Additionally, it has identified 344 luxury vehicles used by former ministers and presidents, with plans to auction or repurpose them. President Anura Kumara Dissanayake is expected to present a Cabinet paper for approval of the vehicle auctions, which include high-end models

like V8 vehicles. This move is aimed at reducing state expenditure and addressing previous concerns about MPs misusing vehicle permits for financial gain. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Election Commission issues ultimatum to candidates over expense reports

(lm) The Election Commission of Sri Lanka has set a deadline for all candidates, including those on the National Lists, party secretaries, and leaders of independent groups, to submit their income and expenditure reports by midnight on December 6, 2024. Failure to meet this deadline will result in a breach of the Regulation of Election Expenditure Act, leading to legal consequences for violators.

Candidates must prepare separate reports for each district where they contested and submit them to the respective District Returning Officers. [Daily Mirror 1] [Daily Mirror 2]

Sri Lanka: Bureaucratic delay threatens retirement of over 200 specialists

(lm) A delay in issuing an official circular has put over 200 specialist doctors in Sri Lanka at risk of premature retirement, jeopardizing the country's public health service. Despite a Court of Appeal ruling in June 2024 that extended the retirement age for specialist doctors in state hospitals to 63 years, the Ministry of Public Administration has yet to implement the decision through an official circular or Gazette.

The issue began when a general circular from the Ministry of Public Administration mandated retirement at 60, prompting specialist doctors to seek legal action. As a result, the court ruling raised the retirement age for doctors to 63, and the Ministry of Health issued a circular in line with the ruling. However, the Ministry of Public Administration has not yet formalized the decision, leaving specialists nearing 60 years old uncertain about their future. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Petitions challenging business transactions Involving LTL Holdings dismissed

(sl) On November 28, the Supreme Court dismissed three Fundamental Rights (FR) petitions challenging business transactions involving LTL Holdings (Private) Limited. The petitions contested the Initial Public Offering (IPO) of LTL Holdings and the transfer of 28 percent of the Ceylon Electricity Board's (CEB) shares in LTL Holdings to West Coast Power (Private) Limited.

The petitioners, including SJB Parliamentarian Mujibur Rahaman and others, sought to quash the share transfer, arguing it diluted or unlawfully appropriated CEB's shareholding in LTL Holdings. After a detailed hearing, the two-judge bench, comprising Justices Murdu Fernando and Gamini Amarasekara, concluded that the petitions did not merit further consideration and dismissed the case. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: New Chief Justice sworn in

(lm) Supreme Court Justice Murdu Nirupa Bidushinie Fernando was officially sworn in as the 48th Chief Justice of Sri Lanka on December 2 before President Anura Kumara Dissanayake at the Presidential Secretariat. She succeeds Chief Justice Jayantha Jayasuriya, who recently retired from the position. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Wijesundera criticizes government for insufficient measures in response to Cyclone Fengal

(sl) Chamit Wijesundera, the National Youth Organizer of Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), criticized the government for its inadequate preparations before Cyclone Fengal and the delayed response afterward. He highlighted that relief supplies had yet to reach many affected regions and urged the government to prioritize financial assistance for the victims. Despite this criticism, Wijesundera commended the army for their exemplary work in the aftermath of the cyclone. [Chamit Wijesundera on X]

Sri Lanka: Former minister Senaratne acquitted and released from white van press conference case

(sl) On November 29, Colombo High Court Judge Sujeewa Nissanka acquitted and released former Health Minister Rajitha Senaratne and former SPC

Chairman Rumi Mohammed in the White Van press conference case.

The case stems from a 2019 press conference where Senaratne and Mohammed alleged that white vans were used in abductions, accusing then-presidential candidate Gotabaya Rajapaksa of being linked to these crimes.

They claimed Rajapaksa orchestrated abductions, a term associated with enforced disappearances from Sri Lanka's civil conflict. Senaratne and Mohammed faced fourteen charges, including making false statements intended to damage Rajapaksa's reputation during the election campaign. [Ada Derana] [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: HIV cases hit record high in a single quarter

(lm) Sri Lanka has witnessed a significant surge in HIV/AIDS cases during the second half of 2024, recording the highest number of cases in a single quarter since 2009. According to the National STD/AIDS Control Programme, 214 new HIV cases were reported in the second quarter (April to June), an 18 percent increase compared to the previous quarter in 2023, which had 181 cases.

Among the new cases, 28 males were aged 15-24, while the rest were over 25 years old. The male-to-female ratio of reported cases in 2023 stood at 7:1. The second quarter also saw 11 HIV/AIDS-related deaths.

In total, 448 HIV cases have been reported in 2024, marking a clear rise from the 346 cases reported during the same period last year. Since 2009, 4,643 males and 1,472 females have contracted HIV in Sri Lanka. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Government approves vehicle import resumption after 5-year ban

(lm) The Sri Lankan government has authorized the resumption of vehicle imports starting February 2025, ending a five-year ban. Indika Sampath Merinchige, President of the Vehicle Importers' Association of Lanka (VIAL), confirmed the decision, noting that the Central Bank of Sri Lanka (CBSL) will allocate the necessary funds for the imports, with approval from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). [Daily Mirror]

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

Brunei: Digital education for autistic children launched

(dql) Brunei has launched a digital education initiative tailored for autistic children, aimed at enhancing their academic, social, and communication skills. The platform also provides tools for parents and teachers to better support the development of these children, as reported by the Borneo Bulletin.

The initiative aligns with Brunei's Digital Economy Masterplan 2025, which emphasizes inclusivity and fostering a digital society, according to Mohammad Nazri Mohammad Yusof, Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Transport and Infocommunications.

Brunei, a wealthy nation with a population of 340,000, is situated on the northern part of Borneo Island and is known for its strong social welfare system. [Borneo Bulletin]

Cambodia: Government to streamline civil service

(mfr) Cambodia’s government is implementing key measures to modernize public administration, focusing on enhancing efficiency and addressing overlapping functions without impacting civil servants’ rights or benefits. Speaking at a November 26 press conference, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Civil Service Hun Many emphasized that the reforms aim to

improve governance and capacity across ministries and institutions.

To support modernization, the reform focuses on three pillars: improving recruitment systems, enhancing performance, and implementing incentive systems. Since May, the ministry has overseen nine recruitment examinations and guided ministries through restructuring processes. Future recruitment for 2024 and 2025 depends on the completion of functional analyses.

The reforms include aligning institutional structures with current policy needs, with some requiring adjustments, mergers, or eliminations. The Ministry of Rural Development has already completed its review, addressed inefficiencies and overlapped roles.

At a November 25 workshop, many urged officials to see the reform as an opportunity to strengthen institutions, ensuring Cambodia's public administration evolves into a high-capacity, efficient system with integrity. [The Phnom Penh Post] [Khmer Times]

Cambodia: Government to tackle AI and misinformation challenges

(mfr) Government officials, experts, and regional leaders convened to address the role of artificial intelligence (AI) and misinformation in societal stability at recent forums in Cambodia. Discussions spanned AI's potential in media, its misuse in uprisings, and strategies to counter fake news.

The Third Phnom Penh Forum on November 27 highlighted AI's role in mobilizing non-violent movements, including uprisings in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, where social media platforms played pivotal roles. [The Phnom Penh Post 1]

Meanwhile, Cambodia launched TranslateKh, an AI tool for Khmer–English translations, showcasing the country's AI advancements. However, at the Cambodia AI Forum, experts and officials cautioned against over-reliance on AI in journalism, emphasizing ethical practices and the need for human verification. [The Phnom Penh Post 2]

Minister of Information Neth Pheaktra, speaking at the 59th ASEAN-COCI (Committee on Culture and Information) meeting on November 28, emphasized combating misinformation through media credibility, ethics, and campaigns like "Say No to Fake News." The meeting also reinforced regional collaboration in

cultural diplomacy, journalism safety, and addressing digital-age challenges.

ASEAN-COCI, which facilitates cultural and informational projects, underscored Cambodia's commitment to regional cooperation, media professionalism, and ethical AI use. [The Phnom Penh Post 3]

Cambodia: Prime Minister announces new city plans and land title distribution timeline

(mfr) Prime Minister Hun Manet has outlined plans for a new city with designated zones for commercial, residential, and recreational use, aimed at minimizing disruptions and enhancing urban living. This announcement was made during the 2024 annual meeting of the Ministry of Land Management, Urban Planning, and Construction. The new city will feature distinct boundaries between different areas to prevent conflicts and improve the quality of life for residents. The Ministry of Land Management is tasked with drafting a master plan for the city's zoning. [Khmer Times 1]

In addition, Hun Manet expressed his hope that the distribution of land title certificates will be completed by 2027, marking the 40th anniversary of the country's transition to private land ownership. He called on provincial and municipal governors to speed up the process and ensure responsible management. The Prime Minister emphasized the importance of completing land registration by 2025 and resolving remaining land disputes to boost investor confidence, strengthen the economy, and maintain social harmony.

Approximately 1 million parcels of land have already been surveyed and demarcated, with another million remaining. Kampong Cham is the first province to complete its land survey. The Prime Minister also urged continued efforts to develop the Tonle Sap area as a key economic center and find solutions for ongoing issues in the Angkor region. [Khmer Times 2]

Cambodia: Financial sector to be strengthened with new client protection framework

(ma) Cambodia's financial sector is advancing client protection with the rollout of the "Banking and Financial Institutions (BFI) Code of Conduct and Client Protection Harmonisation Assessment" tools. Launched during a workshop organized by the Association of Banks in Cambodia (ABC) and the Cambodia Microfinance Association (CMA), the tools enable independent assessments of financial institutions. The first round of evaluations will cover the country's 30 largest financial institutions, offering actionable insights to improve client services and operational practices.

Key challenges discussed at the workshop included managing non-performing loan (NPL) rates, over-indebtedness, and the rapid expansion of lending. Stakeholders voiced concerns over aggressive sales tactics and rising customer debt, emphasizing the need for stronger client protection frameworks. These measures aim to align Cambodia's financial sector with global standards, fostering sustainable growth and boosting investor confidence while safeguarding consumer well-being. [Phnom Penh post]

Cambodia: Digital platform to boost investment launched

(ma) The Cambodia Investment Project Management System (cdcIPM), officially launched on November 27, is expected to significantly enhance the country's ability to attract foreign and local investments. Developed by the Council for the Development of Cambodia (CDC), the digital platform allows investors to submit and track applications online, reducing delays and enhancing transparency. The system aligns with Cambodia's broader digital economy and e-government goals.

Cambodia's investment approvals have surged in 2024, with 379 projects totaling USD 6 billion approved as of November 22, surpassing 2023 figures. [Phnom Penh Post]

Cambodia: Two women face court over USD 300,000 bribe to impersonate customs officers

(mfr) The Anti-Corruption Unit (ACU) arrested two women for allegedly accepting around USD 300,000 in bribes to impersonate customs officers in Battambang

province. The women are now facing charges and have been sent to Phnom Penh court.

The arrests came shortly after the detention of Muong Khim, who was charged with passive influence peddling on November 10. Khim, an advisor to the Ministry of Justice, was later removed from his position by the King just days after his arrest. [Khmer Times]

Cambodia: Lab fire uncovers drug haul

(mfr) Authorities in Kandal province uncovered a large drug production operation after responding to a fire at a laboratory in Kphob Veng village, Takhmao town, on November 27. Over one ton of illicit substances, including 1,424.15 kilograms of MDMA pills and 114 kilograms of MDMA powder, were seized alongside production equipment.

A December 1 press release from the Kandal Provincial Court confirmed the arrest of a 38-year-old Indian national, Sarabjit, at the scene. He has been charged with manufacturing, storing, trafficking, and using illegal substances under Articles 39, 40, and 45 of Cambodia's Law on Drug Control. The court ordered his pre-trial detention.

Two other suspects, Indian national Sewak Singh, 22, and Pakistani national Monchi, 24, remain at large. They are charged with drug manufacturing, storage, and trafficking under Articles 39 and 40. Authorities are actively pursuing their arrest.

In a separate case, ten Thai nationals were detained in Banteay Meanchey province after a raid in Poipet town on November 30 uncovered over 10,000 suspected drug pills and white powder.

The Ministry of Justice reported that from November 1 to 30, Cambodian courts handled 354 drug-related cases involving 991 suspects, 749 of whom were placed in detention. [Khmer Times]

Indonesia: Regional elections held

(ft/mu) On November 27, Indonesia conducted simultaneous Regional Head Elections (Pilkada) to elect governors, mayors, and district heads across 37 provinces, 415 districts, and 93 cities. A total of 1,557 candidates contested these elections. [Antara]

The Association for Elections and Democracy (Perludem) has reported serious allegations of widespread vote-buying during the campaign period and the quiet phase of the 2024 regional elections in North Sumatra, Central Java, and Jakarta.

Perludem did not disclose specific amounts but stated that the organization had documented various methods of influencing voters in each region. It highlighted several instances: in Central Java, religious organizations mobilized their substantial followings to vote for particular candidates in exchange for gifts and rewards, while in Jakarta, transportation and meal allowances were distributed during large-scale campaign events. [CNN Indonesia] [Tempo.co 1]

In Jakarta specifically, voter turnout hit a record low, with 42.07 percent abstaining. This reflects a disconnect between public aspirations and the candidates endorsed by political parties. Notably, two of the most popular figures, Anies Baswedan and Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, failed to secure support from any political party.

According to Perludem, the proximity of the national elections in February and the regional elections may have contributed to voter "election fatigue." [Kompas, in Indonesian] [Tempo 2]

Indonesia: Minister to draft specific law on prisoner transfers

(mu) Indonesia's Minister of Immigration and Corrections, Agus Andrianto, announced in a press statement at the Attorney General's Office in Jakarta on November 25 plans to draft a specific law to regulate prisoner transfers, as current legislation lacks clear provisions on this matter. The existing Law on Corrections (mentions prisoner transfers but does not provide detailed regulations.

The government is currently reviewing requests for prisoner transfers, including one from the Philippines for Mary Jane Veloso, a death-row inmate, as well as requests from France and Australia for other prisoners. This week, Indonesia will receive a visit from an Australian offiicial to discuss the transfer of five drug smugglers, part of Bali Nine, next week. [Antara 1]

The government aims to ensure mutual agreements with other countries for these transfers and is also considering similar arrangements for Indonesian citizens abroad. Discussions are ongoing, with potential legislation on prisoner exchanges being

considered by the Indonesian legislature. [Antara 2] [detiknews, in Indonesia] [Kompas, in Indonesia]

Indonesia: Corruption Eradication Commission authorized to probe corruption within military

(mu) The Indonesian Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) is now authorized to investigate corruption cases involving the Indonesian Armed Forces (TNI), provided the anti-corruption agency initiates the investigation.

This authorization follows a ruling by the Constitutional Court, which partially granted a petition challenging Article 42 of the KPK Law. The Court noted that differing interpretations of Article 42 have arisen among law enforcement agencies due to the interconnected nature of corruption cases involving both civilian and military personnel.

The ruling aims to clarify the KPK's authority in addressing corruption cases that involve joint actions by civilian and military officers, as long as the investigative process is initiated by the anti-corruption agency. [Tempo.co]

Indonesia: Restorative justice helps solve 1,809 cases

(gk) Prosecutor's offices across Indonesia have resolved 1,809 cases through restorative justice, in the period from January to November 2024. The total number of cases from 2020 to November 2024 is pegged to 6,306.

Harli Siregar, Head of the Legal Information Center of the Attorney General's Office of Indonesia, informed that East Java Higher Prosecutor's Office stood first, with 331 cases being resolved through restorative justice, followed by South Sulawesi Higher Prosecutor's Office with 111 cases and West Java Higher Prosecutor's Office with 99 cases.

Of the total number of cases resolved, 1693 cases related to persons and property disputes, 31 cases involved state security, public order and other general crimes, and 85 cases were narcotics cases. [Antara]

Indonesia: Ministry of Social Affairs presents four programs to improve lives of people with disabilities

(gk) Indonesia's Ministry of Social Affairs has presented four program plans to improve the social condition and security of people with disabilities.

The first program aims to provide free nutritious meals twice a day to 43 thousand disabled people. Minister of Social Affairs Saifullah Yusuf, while announcing the programs, said that community groups will be involved to bring about better implementation of the programs.

The second program will consider 428 thousand people with disabilities as beneficiaries of social assistance in the Family Hope Program, a flagship program that aims to reduce poverty and improve the welfare of vulnerable families.

The third program involves providing benefits to 588 thousand people with disabilities as part of the non-cash food assistance program.

The fourth program plans to provide social assistance through the Social Assistance and Rehabilitation Program. It includes providing various equipment such as hearing aids, wheelchairs, and other assistive devices to 69 thousand people. [Antara]

Indonesia: Prabowo secures USD billion in investment agreements

{ft) President Prabowo Subianto's recent first international tour has secured USD 18.5 billion in foreign investment commitments across sectors like energy, mining, and education. These investments are expected to create jobs, promote regional development, reduce economic disparities, and support Indonesia's industrialization and modernization goals.

Major agreements include USD 10 billion from China for renewable energy and mining and USD 8.5 billion from the UK, with BP committing USD 7 billion for a gas recovery project in West Papua. [Jakarta Globe]

Indonesia: Government announces rebate on year-end holiday flights

(ft) The Indonesian Transportation Ministry announced a 10 percent discount on domestic flight tickets during the 2024 Christmas and 2025 New Year holiday period (December 19, 2024 – January 3, 2025). This initiative, endorsed by President Prabowo Subianto, aims to boost domestic tourism and the economy.

Passengers who pre-purchased tickets may receive incentives from airlines. Airlines will lower jet fuel surcharges, supported by 7.5-10 percent jet fuel discounts at 19 airports, while airport operators may reduce service fees, pending further approvals for major hubs like Jakarta and Bali. [Antara]

Indonesia: Incentives to be offered ahead of VAT increase implementation

(ft) Indonesia is likely to delay its planned VAT increase to 12percent originally set for January 1, 2025, as confirmed by National Economic Council Chair Luhut Binsar Pandjaitan. To prepare, the government will introduce economic incentives targeting the middle class, primarily through electricity subsidies rather than direct cash aid, to ensure effective support and prevent misuse.

The distribution mechanism for these subsidies is being finalized, with funding sourced from the state budget. While the VAT hike aligns with the Tax Regulation Harmonization Law (UU HPP) passed in 2021, Finance Minister Sri Mulyani emphasized that tax policies consider current economic and sectoral conditions. [Antara]

Indonesia: National minimum wage to be raised in 2025

(gk) President Prabowo Subianto announced that the national minimum wage will be increased by 6.5 percent in 2025. The decision was made after a meeting held to discuss minimum wage as a social safety net for workers and aims to increase workers' purchasing power while also maintaining business competitiveness.

Meanwhile, the sectoral minimum wages will be determined by the Wage Council at the provincial, city, and district levels. [Antara]

Indonesia: All villages to be digitalized by 2025

(gk) The Ministry of Villages and Development of Disadvantaged Regions (PDT) has set an ambitious technological target of transforming all 75,265 Indonesian villages into digitally empowered communities by 2025. This target is in line with the 2025 state budget that stipulates the use of village funds, among others, for the use of information technology in building digitized villages.

While speaking at the Smart Village Exit Strategy Workshop in Bandung, West Java, the Head of the Village, Disadvantaged Regions, and Transmigration Development and Information Agency (BPI) of the PDT Ministry, Ivanovich Agusta, admitted that village digitalization has been carried out since the era of former President Joko Widodo but only around 14 thousand villages had used their funds for digitalization programs so far.

The new vision for 2025 involves empowering villages to harness their financial resources for implementing technology-based solutions and propel themselves in the path of development and empowerment, keeping in mind inclusivity and sustainability. He hoped that the digital empowerment of villages will accelerate digitalization in whole of Indonesia. [Antara]

Indonesia: 6.6 million tons of subsidized fertilizer distributed ahead of planting season

(gk) State-owned fertilizer company of Indonesia-Pupuk Indonesia's Marketing Director Tri Saleh announced that the company has distributed 6.6 million tons of subsidized fertilizer to registered farmers across Indonesia, following the government's increased allocation for 2024. The initial allocation for 2024 was only 4.7 million tons, but the government increased it to 9.5 million tons in April 2024 to boost agriculture productivity and enhance national food security.

Saleh further added that the company has so far delivered 3.36 million tons of urea fertilizer, 3.21 million tons of NPK, and 38,419 tons of Petroganik organic fertilizer; the total targets are 3.62 million tons for urea and 3.42 million tons for NPK. [Jakarta Globe]

Indonesia: National Food Agency reaffirms commitment to strengthening food security system

(gk) The National Food Agency (Bapanas), in a statement on December 1, reaffirmed its commitment to continue maintaining and strengthening food system management to ensure sufficient, safe and nutritious food availability.

The Agency highlighted that it has taken various strategic initiatives at central and regional levels to ensure there is no food insecurity, through food alert activities coordinated with various related parties. These were carried out in three priority activities: firstly, the preparation of food and nutrition insecurity early warning system to determine the basis for food and nutrition policies; secondly promoting Food Safety Movement to reduce loss and waste in collaboration with stakeholders across 15 provinces; thirdly, conducting food alert initiative supporting the vision Golden Indonesia 2045, that benefits 17,000 students across 10 provinces and 30 districts. [Antara]

Indonesia: Fishermen rescue 116 Rohingya refugees

(gk) 116 Rohingya refugees were rescued from the shores off West Aceh, by Indonesian fishermen on November 30. The group of refugees had sailed from the Cox Bazar refugee camp in Bangladesh, in a rickety boat, hoping to reach Indonesia or Malaysia in search of a better life, when it became stranded on an island in Indonesia's northern province of Aceh. [Jakarta Globe]

Laos: Ministry of Health announces new ethics guidelines for medical staff

(cc) The Lao Ministry of Health has announced plans to introduce new ethical and moral guidelines for medical staff in response to growing concerns about patient mistreatment, including rude behavior, requests for money, and other unprofessional conduct.

Minister of Health Bounpheng Phommalaysith addressed these issues during the National Assembly session on November 26, outlining the ministry's plans to strengthen ethical standards within the healthcare system.

The new regulations will focus on ensuring medical staff treat patients with respect and dignity. The focus areas likely include: respecting the right of patients to make informed decisions about their own medical care, including the right to refuse treatment; avoiding causing harm to patients, ensuring all medical interventions are necessary and performed with due care; acting in the best interests of the patient and aiming to improve their health and well-being; and ensuring fair and equitable access to healthcare for all citizens, regardless of background or ability to pay. [The Laotian Times]

Laos: Campaign against gender-based violence kicks off

(cc) Vientiane's iconic Patuxay Monument was illuminated in vibrant orange on November 25, serving as the centerpiece for the official launch of the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence campaign. This global initiative aims to raise awareness and inspire action to combat this widespread societal issue.

The Laotian government, in collaboration with the United Nations and a coalition of 40 partners, organized this symbolic event.

The campaign, running from November 25 – the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women – to December 10 – International Human Rights Day – features a range of activities, including seminars, media campaigns, and public discussions. Key topics include the importance of mental health support for survivors of gender-based violence, HIV/AIDS awareness, and the rights of people with disabilities. [The Laotian Times] [The Star]

Laos: Alluvial gold mining permanently halted

(cc) Lao Prime Minister Sonexay Siphandone has announced the permanent suspension of alluvial gold mining to protect the environment and local communities. Speaking at the National Assembly, he outlined measures to restrict concessions in protected forests, enforce stricter environmental assessments for projects near sensitive areas, and require robust management and closure plans from developers.

To prevent deforestation and support livelihoods, agricultural and forestry concessions will be limited,

with investors mandated to collaborate directly with local communities through contract farming. Non-compliance will result in penalties, including suspension or revocation of concessions.

The government also aims to improve mineral transportation, repair infrastructure affected by mining, and promote local mineral processing to create jobs and add value. [The Laotian Times] [The Star]

Malaysia: PAS and Bersatu's alliance nearing collapse

(ga) The relationship between the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) and Malaysian United Indigenous Party (Bersatu), key members of the opposition Perikatan Nasional (PN) coalition, is on the verge of breaking down due to internal disputes, according to the Communications Director of Pakatan Harapan (PH) Fahmi Fadzil.

Fahmi pointed to ongoing tensions over the Prime Minister candidate issue within PN, as well as the recent removal of Bersatu representatives from the Perlis State Cabinet, as signs of a fractured alliance. Additionally, he criticized the opposition's performance in Parliament, highlighting their inability to present an alternative budget for two consecutive years.

Fahmi's remarks followed the removal of two Bersatu assemblymen from the Perlis State Executive Council, which was reportedly driven more by political reasons than performance-based factors. The disagreement within Perikatan Nasional (PN) became even more apparent when PAS rejected Bersatu’s proposal to make Muhyiddin Yassin the sole candidate for Prime Minister. [Bernama] [The Vibes]

Malaysia: Two bills tabled in parliament aiming to tackle cybercrime

(oc) The government has tabled two bills in the House of Representatives aimed at combating cybercrime and promoting online safety: the Communications and Multimedia (Amendment) Bill 2024 and the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission Bill 2024.

Communications Minister Fahmi Fadzil stated that the bills would include improvements to network facilities to prevent misuse. Additionally, the changes will focus

on enhancing social media and network security. [Bernama]

Malaysia: Government aims to boost police conduct with launch of commission on police conduct

(oc) Home Minister Saifuddin Nasution Ismail has announced that the government has launched the Independent Police Conduct Commission (IPCC) to enhance public trust in the Royal Malaysian Police (PDRM) and improve its accountability, ensuring that the force operates more effectively.

He reported that the Commission has received 529 complaints so far and has already made recommendations to improve the police force, such as reviewing officer assignments to align roles with individual strengths. Additionally, the IPCC has emphasized that officers' welfare is a key priority, with future engagement sessions planned to ensure their well-being.

The IPCC was established alongside the Complaint and Investigation Management System to simplify the complaint process and make it more efficient. [Malay Mail]

Malaysia: Charges against ex-PM Najib in 1MDB linked case dropped

(oc) The Kuala Lumpur High Court has dropped corruption charges related to the 1MDB scandal against former Prime Minister Najib Razak, citing procedural delays and the failure of the prosecution to disclose key documents.

Najib faces charges linked to the misappropriation of funds from 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB), with an estimated $4.5 billion stolen from the state fund. He was found guilty of corruption and money laundering in connection with the fund and sentenced to 12 years in prison in 2022, though the sentence was later reduced by half.

Najib and former Treasury Secretary-General Irwan Serigar Abdullah are being investigated over a settlement agreement between 1MDB and Abu Dhabi's state-owned fund, International Petroleum Investment Company. [Channel News Asia] [Reuters]

Malaysia: Court upholds 30-month sentence for ex-police inspector

(ga) The Court of Appeal has upheld the 30-month prison sentence and MYR 225,000 (USD 48,000) fine imposed on former police inspector Hafizzuddin Hassan for soliciting and receiving bribes. The three-judge panel unanimously dismissed his appeal to overturn the decision, affirming his conviction for two bribery charges committed in 2015.

Hafizzuddin had accepted MYR 15,000 (YSD 3,555) in bribes in exchange for facilitating the resolution of a Prevention of Crime Act (POCA) case, and attempted to solicit an additional MYR 30,000 (USD 6,311). The Court of Appeal found the conviction to be justified after reviewing the evidence. Hafizzuddin is required to begin serving his sentence immediately. [Bernama]

Malaysia: Policeman sentenced to three years and fines for accepting bribes

(ga) A corporal from the Royal Malaysian Police was sentenced to three years in prison and fined MYR 80,000 (USD 17,000) for accepting a bribe of MYR 6,000 (USD 1,342) two years ago. The Sessions Court in Shah Alam found Azrol Khalil guilty of soliciting the bribe in exchange for helping to close a commercial criminal case. Azrol had threatened the victim, using his position as a police officer to demand the payment.

In addition to the prison sentence, Azrol faces an additional year in jail if he fails to pay the fine. The defense requested a minimum sentence, citing Azrol's first offense and personal hardships, while the prosecution urged a significant penalty to deter similar crimes. [Bernama]

Malaysia: Ulu Tiram attacker's sister charged for failing to report violent ideology

(ga) Mariah Radin Imran, the sister of the Ulu Tiram Police Station attacker, was charged on November 27 in the High Court for failing to report violent ideology. Mariah is accused of withholding information related to crimes connected to violent ideology between April 2017 and May 17, 2024, at a house in Kampung Sungai Tiram, Johor Bahru.

The charge carries a penalty of up to seven years in prison, a fine, or both, upon conviction. Mariah pleaded not guilty and was granted case management on January 9, 2025. This follows the Johor Bahru Sessions Court's September decision to transfer cases involving five family members of the attacker to the High Court, who face nine terrorism-related charges.

The charges stem from a fatal assault on the Ulu Tiram Police Station in Johor, which resulted in the deaths of two police officers and left another injured. [Bernama] [The Star]

Malaysia: Prime minister to announce USD 2.9 billion housing project

(oc) Housing and Local Government Minister Nga Kor Ming announced that Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim is set to unveil a housing project worth USD 2.9 billion this month. Nga stated that this investment represents the largest such initiative in the nation's history.

While Nga did not disclose key details about the project, he mentioned that Prime Minister Ibrahim would provide further information in due course.

688,663 out of 1.3 million civil servants do not own homes. [Bernama]

Malaysia: Three dead in worst floods in decade

(oc) The Malaysian government has reported that three people have died, and more than 80,000 have been evacuated across the country due to severe flooding. These figures were confirmed by the National Disaster Command Centre, which stated that Kelantan and Terengganu were the hardest-hit states.

On November 28, Deputy Prime Minister and National Disaster Management Committee chairman Zahid Hamidi warned that the flooding was expected to be worse than in 2014. In response, he announced that more than 80,000 security personnel had been deployed to assist with rescue operations, using boats, cars, and helicopters.

Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim confirmed that all federal ministers would have their leave revoked to ensure the government operates at maximum capacity in response to the flooding. [Bernama] [Channel News Asia] [Malay Mail]

Malaysia: Illegal immigrants arrested in a joint immigration raid in Selangor

(ga) In a joint security operation on November 26 in Selangor, the Immigration Department, Ampang Jaya Municipal Council (MPAJ), Royal Malaysian Police, and National Registration Department arrested 119 illegal immigrants. The operation involved checking 400 foreign nationals.

The arrested individuals included 89 Myanmar nationals, 14 Bangladeshis, 8 Nepalis, 4 Indonesians, and 4 Indians, aged between 18 and 50.

Additionally, five premises were inspected, and two were sealed for employing foreign workers without legal permits. [Bernama]

Myanmar: Pregnant women in Karenni State struggle with access to healthcare

(anl) The Women and Children's Affairs Department of the Karenni State Interim Executive Council (IEC) reported on November 25 that approximately 3,000 pregnant women in Karenni State are facing critical challenges in accessing childbirth and postnatal healthcare. Of these, 740 reside in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps.

The main issues include inadequate nutrition, limited access to healthcare, transportation difficulties, and security concerns due to ongoing conflict. Many women also lack awareness of vaccinations, contraception, and reproductive health, which further exacerbates the situation.

While revolutionary forces and the IEC Health Department are providing healthcare services, the support remains insufficient to meet the region's needs. Additionally, around 20,000 displaced women across Karenni State are facing reproductive health issues, including early marriage, poor access to hygiene products, and financial constraints. The Women and Children's Affairs Department has called for collaboration among stakeholders to address these urgent needs. [Mizzima]

Myanmar: Junta tightens import and fuel restrictions in Northern Shan State

(anl) Locals in Muse, northern Shan State, reported that the military junta has tightened import and fuel restrictions.

On November 27, import restrictions were imposed at the Sinphyu Gate on the Muse border, followed by fuel purchase limits on November 28. The Department of Land Transport is now requiring permits for the purchase of restricted fuel at designated stations, while unregistered vehicles are prohibited from obtaining fuel. Even essential generators used by banks, hospitals, schools, and businesses are subject to fuel rationing, exacerbating shortages and driving up costs in the area.

Some residents suspect these restrictions are part of the junta's efforts to cut off supplies to resistance-controlled townships in northern Shan State. [Mizzima]

Myanmar: Junta airstrike kills civilians, damages properties in Northern Shan State

(anl) The Ethnic Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) reported that a junta airstrike killed around ten civilians, including women and children, in Kyaukme Township, northern Shan State, on November 30. The attack also caused significant damage, with over 20 houses destroyed.

Despite the TNLA's offer of peace talks, the regime continues its airstrikes on TNLA-controlled territories. TNLA spokeswoman Lwei Yay Oo stated that the regime specifically targeted residential areas, resulting in widespread casualties and destruction. [The Irrawaddy]

Myanmar: Arakan Army seizes Taungup in Rakhine State

(anl) The Arakan Army (AA) took control of Taungup town in southern Rakhine State on November 24 after a 17-day battle. According to local media, the AA encircled the town, blocked military access routes, and evacuated most residents before launching the offensive.

The AA has accused regime forces of looting homes and reported that some houses were destroyed by junta airstrikes. In response, the AA detained several looters.

The AA is also attempting to capture Gwa and Ann, where the regime's Western Military Command Headquarters is located. To date, the AA has seized control of 12 of Rakhine's 17 townships, as well as Paletwa Township in neighboring Chin State. [The Irrawaddy]

Philippines: Impeachment complaint filed against Vice President Duterte

(lm) An impeachment complaint was filed on December 2 against Philippine Vice President Sara Duterte, accusing her of a range of crimes including issuing death threats against President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., his wife, and Speaker Martin Romualdez, as well as allegations of graft, incompetence, and amassing ill-gotten wealth while in office. The complaint was submitted by civil society, religious leaders, and former government officials critical of her father, ex-President Rodrigo Duterte. The charges cite 24 violations, including culpable violation of the constitution, corruption, bribery, and betrayal of public trust. [Associated Press] [TIME] [Reuters]

The impeachment complaint follows Duterte's controversial statements on November 23, in which she claimed she had contracted an assassin to kill Marcos, his wife, and Romualdez if she were killed. She later clarified that her comments had been misunderstood, stating they were meant to express concerns about her own safety.

The impeachment filing also ties into an ongoing investigation into Duterte's office, which has been embroiled in allegations of financial mismanagement. A key issue concerns the allocation of PHP 125 million (USD 2.125 million) in confidential funds to the Vice President's office in 2022. Investigations have uncovered suspicious transactions, including the involvement of "Mary Grace Piattos," a name that does not appear in the Philippine Statistics Authority's records. Piattos is allegedly one of the recipients of the funds, leading to concerns about potential fraud. Additionally, some of the names on receipts associated with the funds have raised further questions about the legitimacy of the transactions.

Furthermore, the Commission on Audit disallowed PHP 73 million (USD 1.24 million) of the confidential funds due to the lack of proper documentation for activities like surveillance and information gathering. These findings have ignited alarm in both Congress and civil society, raising broader concerns about the misuse of public resources. [Rappler]

Despite the filing, there are concerns about the impeachment proceedings' timeline, as Congress has limited session days before its break on December 18. Former Senator Leila de Lima, who serves as the spokesperson for the groups filing the impeachment, has suggested that the House of Representatives could expedite the process if it chooses to prioritize the matter. While acknowledging time constraints, particularly with the upcoming 2025 midterm elections, de Lima emphasized that the House can fast-track the proceedings. She pointed out that the House does not need to wait the full 10-session-day period to refer the complaint to the appropriate committees.

De Lima also proposed an alternative approach, suggesting that the House could pass its own resolution of impeachment directly, bypassing the committee review process, if one-third of its members approve it. This method could potentially speed up the impeachment process further. [Inquirer.net 1] [Inquirer.net 2]

The impeachment complaint adds another layer to the ongoing political struggle between Duterte and President Marcos, who have had a strained relationship since the collapse of a powerful alliance between their families following Marcos' landslide victory in the 2022 elections. Political analysts view the impeachment as a significant test of Congress' willingness to address these serious allegations.

While President Marcos has downplayed the significance of the impeachment complaint, his office has emphasized that the Office of the President is not involved in the impeachment process, distancing him from the controversy. Nevertheless, the complaint has become a critical point of contention, and if the impeachment passes the lower house, it will move to a Senate trial, potentially deepening the political rift and reshaping the country's leadership. [Inquirer.net 3]

Philippines: ICC may be preparing for ex-President Duterte trial, lawyer for drug war victims says

Neri Colmenares, former Bayan Muna representative and a lawyer for drug war victims, has suggested that the International Criminal Court (ICC) is nearing the trial phase for former President Rodrigo Duterte's alleged crimes against humanity. Colmenares, who is also an accredited counsel of the ICC, indicated that the court is encouraging police and other potential insiders to testify as witnesses. He stated that the initial set of witnesses was already sufficient for the

case, but the call for more testimonies signals a new phase in holding Duterte accountable.

Colmenares also welcomed the ICC's launch of a new witness platform aimed at gathering credible information about the drug war, which led to thousands of deaths during Duterte's administration from 2016 to 2022. He believes that this initiative could indicate that the ICC has concluded its investigation and is preparing for trial. He further expressed hope that the ICC would issue an arrest warrant to ensure Duterte's presence at the proceedings.

While the ICC has not formally announced the progress of Duterte's case, Colmenares' comments suggest that the investigation may be nearing its conclusion. In January, former Senator Antonio Trillanes predicted an arrest warrant for Duterte by mid-2024. However, the Philippine House of Representatives has been holding its own hearings on the drug war, but has refused to provide transcripts to the ICC, stating that investigators can access them online.

Despite President Marcos's refusal to cooperate with the ICC, Colmenares urged the Marcos administration to reconsider its stance and help facilitate the investigation. He emphasized the importance of achieving justice for the victims, many of whom have waited years for accountability.

Duterte, who initially rejected the ICC investigation and withdrew the Philippines from the Rome Statute in 2019, recently expressed willingness to assume responsibility for the drug war killings. In a House hearing, he challenged the ICC to begin its investigation, stating that if found guilty, he would face prison.

The ICC's jurisdiction remains valid due to the timing of the alleged crimes, which occurred while the Philippines was still a member of the court. [Inquirer.net]

Philippines: Coercion, abuse disguised as 'rehabilitation' at drug detention centers, Amnesty report alleges

(rv) A Amnesty International's latest report reveals that thousands of individuals in the Philippines are arbitrarily detained in drug treatment and rehabilitation centers, where they endure significant human rights violations. These include forced drug abstinence, coerced confessions, and corporal punishment.

The report highlights that many individuals who plead guilty to drug-related offenses are spared imprisonment but are subjected to mandatory rehabilitation. However, these centers, rather than offering true rehabilitative treatment, function more like detention camps, where detainees face harsh treatment and torture, including being forced to confess to drug use or involvement in drug activities.

The abuse disproportionately affects vulnerable groups, particularly the poor and children as young as 15. Those detained typically face sentences lasting between six months to a year. Even after their release, individuals are subjected to invasive monitoring programs, including mandatory reporting to authorities for up to 18 months and repeated drug tests. Without government support for reintegration, individuals also face stigmatization, making it difficult for them to re-enter society.

Amnesty International calls for a shift in drug policies away from punitive measures towards approaches focused on harm reduction, treatment, and social support. The organization also demands that facilities failing to meet international standards be shut down. [Amnesty International]

Philippines: After terrorist designation, Igorot activist faces terrorism financing charge

Cordillera activist Sarah Abellon-Alikes, previously designated as a terrorist by the government, is now facing charges under the Terrorism Financing and Suppression Act of 2012 (RA 10168). She is accused of providing financial and logistical support to the New People's Army (NPA), the armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), which has been waging an insurgency against the Philippine government since 1969. The charges are linked to an alleged attack on Philex Mining Corporation trucks in February 2017, in which the NPA is believed to have been involved.

Alikes, who has already faced five criminal charges, now faces a potential 20-40 years in prison and a fine of PHP 500,000 to PHP 1,000,000 (approximately USD 8,700 to USD 17,400). The case is based on testimony from a former rebel who claims to have direct knowledge of the attack. James Capuyan, a transient house owner allegedly involved, is also implicated.

Human rights group Cordillera Human Rights Alliance (CHRA) has criticized the lack of due process, pointing

out that Alikes was allegedly notified of the charges at an address she has never resided at. [Rappler]

Philippines: Economic growth in Q4 expected to be 'better than Q3'

(rv) Philippine economic growth in the fourth quarter of 2024 is expected to outperform the third quarter, despite challenges from a series of cyclones. National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) Secretary Arsenio Balisacan expressed optimism at a year-end press conference, citing robust macroeconomic fundamentals as key to the positive outlook.

The country's economy grew by 5.8 percent in the first three quarters of 2024, slightly below the target range of 6 percent to 7 percent. Balisacan maintained confidence that the full-year growth target remains achievable, supported by factors like increased holiday spending, stable commodity prices, strong remittance inflows, and a robust labor market.

However, Balisacan acknowledged the negative impact of the cyclones on the agriculture sector, which remains a significant part of the economy, contributing nearly 10 percent to GDP. Despite this, he believes that the positive factors will outweigh the losses in agriculture, with declining interest rates, inflation within target range at 3.3 percent, and stable prices boosting growth.

Balisacan also highlighted the strength of the labor market, with an increase in the labor force participation rate to 65.7 percent and a drop in the unemployment rate to 3.7 percent. He noted that the Philippine central bank's decision to cut policy rates and reduce reserve requirements is expected to further support growth, particularly in private spending and investments in infrastructure. [GMA News]

Philippines: Fluctuating oil prices

(rv) In the first week of December, oil companies announced another round of revisions to pump prices. Shell, Petrogazz and Cleanfuel increased gasoline prices and decreased diesel prices. Other oil companies are expected to follow suit.

The Department of Energy has explained that for the rest of 2024, oil prices are likely to decrease due to

lower demand. It also projected a global oversupply of fuel for the first quarter 2025, citing low demand. [ABS-CBN News]

Singapore: Dual citizen executed in fourth execution this month

(fi) Singapore executed 35-year-old Singaporean-Iranian Masoud Rahimi Mehrzad on November 29 for drug trafficking, marking the country's fourth execution in just three weeks. Convicted in 2013 for trafficking 31.14 grams of heroin—more than double the 15-gram threshold that mandates the death penalty—Mehrzad's appeals and clemency petitions were all rejected.

Despite numerous appeals, including a final request denied by the Court of Appeal a day before his execution, the sentence was upheld. Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi had urged Singapore to reconsider the execution on humanitarian grounds, but the city-state proceeded with the penalty.

This execution brings the total for 2024 to nine, with eight for drug offenses and one for murder. Since resuming executions in March 2022 after a COVID hiatus, Singapore has executed 25 individuals, maintaining its firm stance on capital punishment despite global criticism. The United Nations and human rights organizations have called for the abolition of the death penalty, arguing it serves as an ineffective deterrent. However, Singapore continues to defend its strict drug laws as a key element in maintaining public safety. [France24]

Singapore: Central bank fines JPMorgan USD 1.8 million over misconduct by relationship managers

(lm) Singapore's central bank, the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS), has fined JPMorgan Chase & Co. USD 1.79 million for failing to prevent misconduct by its relationship managers. The fine stems from 24 instances where relationship managers provided inaccurate or incomplete information to clients during over-the-counter bond transactions, charging them spreads above the agreed rates.

MAS stated that JPMorgan lacked adequate controls to ensure adherence to pre-agreed spreads. The bank admitted liability and paid the civil penalty. It has

refunded the overcharged fees to affected clients and implemented enhanced pricing frameworks and internal controls to prevent future misconduct.

MAS is also investigating the individual relationship managers involved in the misconduct. [Reuters]

Singapore: Authorities may impose harsher property curbs if buying frenzy continues

(lm) Singapore may need to implement more "aggressive" measures to cool its private property market if the ongoing buying frenzy isn't addressed soon, according to Barclays Plc analysts. A surge in private property sales, particularly in November, has raised concerns that property prices could start rising again, reminiscent of the 2017-2019 period when buyers ignored previous cooling measures.

More than 2,400 new private homes were sold in November, setting the stage for the best month in over a decade, according to preliminary data from the Urban Redevelopment Authority. Singapore's central bank noted that the easing of domestic lending rates has boosted market sentiment, while assuring that authorities will remain vigilant.

Since 2021, authorities have taken steps to cool the market, including raising stamp duty for foreigners to 60 percent in 2023, one of the highest rates globally. The government's 2025 property tax rebate for owner-occupied homes, aimed at easing the cost of living, could inadvertently encourage property investors and fuel the market frenzy, Barclays warned.

Analysts suggest that if authorities fail to take stronger action soon, it could signal to the market that cooling measures are being eased, further stoking investor sentiment. [yahoo!news]

Singapore: Decommissioning of Challenger-Class Submarines and Launch of Submarine Training School

(fi) The Republic of Singapore Navy (RSN) officially decommissioned its final two Challenger-class submarines, RSS Conqueror and RSS Chieftain, on November 25, at RSS Singapura – Changi Naval Base. This milestone marked the transition from the Challenger-class to the Invincible-class submarines.

Commissioned in 2000 and 2002, these submarines played a crucial role in developing Singapore's submarine capabilities and fostering defense collaborations through joint exercises.

During the ceremony, Fleet Commander RADM Kwon Hon Chung commended the submarines and their crew for pioneering contributions to RSN's growth as a world-class force.

On the sideline of the ceremony, the RSN inaugurated the Submarine Training School (STS), named after RSS Challenger, to advance local submarine training. Equipped with state-of-the-art simulators, the STS aims to enhance training realism and efficiency, ensuring operational excellence in evolving maritime challenges. [Mindef Singapore]

Singapore: Deepfake email scam targets officials

(fi) A sophisticated deepfake email scam recently targeted over 100 Singapore officials, including five ministers. Over 30 government agencies have reported to GovTech that they received extortionary emails since November 26, raising cybersecurity concerns. The scam leveraged artificial intelligence to mimic officials' speech and communication styles, aiming to deceive recipients and asking for USD 50,000 in return for not disclosing and publishing compromising videos.

The Singapore government has reiterated its zero-tolerance stance on cybercrime, emphasizing the importance of vigilance. Efforts are underway to enhance cybersecurity protocols, with agencies urging public and private sectors to adopt advanced measures to counter evolving threats. [Malay Mail] [MDDI Singapore]

Thailand: Political tensions rise over Thailand-Cambodia MoU and resource-sharing negotiations

(bk/msz/lm) The 2001 memorandum of understanding (MoU) between Thailand and Cambodia regarding joint resource development in the Gulf of Thailand has reignited political tensions, with competing calls for debate, opposition protests, and warnings of potential unrest. The agreement, originally signed during the administration of Thaksin Shinawatra – father of current Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra and de

facto leader of the ruling Pheu Thai Party – outlines frameworks for resolving overlapping maritime claims and resource sharing but remains deeply contentious.

The Thai government, led by Prime Minister Paetongtarn, has emphasized that the MoU will not compromise Thailand's territorial integrity and has called for calm amidst speculation of mass protests. The government recently formed a Joint Technical Committee (JTC) to negotiate energy resource-sharing agreements with Cambodia under the MoU. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Department of Treaties and Legal Affairs clarified that resource sharing would focus on the lower overlapping claims area, with negotiations for the upper region ongoing. [Bangkok Post 1] [Bangkok Post 2]

Deputy Prime Minister and Energy Minister Anutin Charnvirakul affirmed the coalition's commitment to protecting national interests, rejecting fears of concessions for financial gain. He welcomed the proposal from Pheu Thai MP Noppadon Pattama to hold a parliamentary debate under Section 152 of the constitution to address public concerns and prevent demonstrations. [Bangkok Post 3]

While the Bhumjaithai Party, a key coalition member, supports a debate to foster transparency, critics argue that the MoU was flawed from the outset. Legal expert Paisal Puechmongkol and Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP) member Thirachai Phuvanatnaranubala questioned the agreement's legitimacy, noting it bypassed parliamentary review and potentially risks territorial losses. Thirachai added that the MoU reversed standard negotiation procedures by defining resource-sharing areas before addressing boundary disputes.

Deputy committee chairman Supachot Chaiyasat from the main opposition People's Party also highlighted the potential long-term consequences of extending energy concessions for 25 years, suggesting Thailand prioritize transitioning to renewable energy.

Despite governmental assurances, the MoU faces criticism. Former protest leader Sondhi Limthongkul has announced plans for anti-government demonstrations next year, accusing the administration of risking national sovereignty under the MoU. Sondhi, a media mogul and co-founder of the now-defunct People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), previously led mass protests against Thaksin Shinawatra and his successors.

Sondhi’s threats to mobilize protests against Paetongtarn's administration echo his earlier

movements. In 2005, Sondhi accused Thaksin of corruption and undermining the monarchy, leading the PAD to stage large-scale protests that culminated in the 2006 military coup ousting Thaksin. In 2008, Sondhi and the PAD organized further protests against Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej, accusing him of being Thaksin's proxy. These protests escalated into the occupation of Government House and Bangkok's airports, forcing Samak's resignation.

Against this backdrop, Nattawut Saikuar, a former leader of the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD), known as the "Red Shirts," and current adviser to Prime Minister Paetongtarn, warned that such demonstrations could destabilize the country, drawing parallels to the coups of 2006 and 2014. Nattawut urged caution against inflaming nationalist sentiments, emphasizing the importance of dialogue and political stability. [Bangkok Post 4]

The People's Party, Thailand's main opposition, announced it would not join Sondhi's protests, choosing instead to work through parliamentary mechanisms to address issues related to the MoU and other public concerns. Party spokesman Parit Wacharasindhu reiterated their focus on legislative reforms and holding the government accountable. [Bangkok Post 5]

Thailand: Boonsong released on parole amid speculation about Yingluck's return

(hrs\lm) Former commerce minister Boonsong Teriyapirom, convicted for his role in corruption linked to the rice-pledging scheme, was released on parole after serving part of his 48-year sentence. The Department of Corrections (DoC) granted Boonsong parole after he had served two-thirds of his sentence, and he will now be under probation for three years and five months, wearing an electronic tag. His release, set for 2028 after royal clemency, follows his involvement in fraudulent government-to-government rice deals during the Yingluck Shinawatra administration. [Bangkok Post 1]

Boonsong's release has triggered speculation about the possible return of Yingluck, who has been in self-imposed exile since 2017 after failing to appear before the Supreme Court. Yingluck was sentenced in absentia to five years in prison for negligence in the rice-pledging program, which caused significant financial losses. Political observers suggest that her return could be imminent, possibly around the Songkran festival in April, following public comments

from her brother, former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Thaksin has indicated that preparations for Yingluck's return are in place, and with the recent adjustments in regulations allowing for detention outside prison, it is believed that Yingluck may not serve jail time upon her return.

Boonsong's release, along with the cessation of certain corruption investigations against Yingluck's administration, has further fueled the speculation. Political analysts point out that Thaksin's influence, combined with the timing, could pave the way for Yingluck's return without significant legal consequences, following the path taken by her brother. [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: Phumtham downplays MP's House dissolution warning

(lm/msz) Deputy Prime Minister Phumtham Wechayachai downplayed a warning from Pheu Thai MP Cherdchai Tantisirin, who suggested that disagreements over the majority required for a charter referendum could lead to the dissolution of the House. Phumtham described the warning as a personal opinion and emphasized that such differences between the ruling Pheu Thai Party and coalition partner Bhumjaithai Party would not disrupt their alliance. He reassured that disagreements would be resolved within parliament and reiterated that only Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra has the authority to dissolve the House, which she has not indicated any intention of doing. [Bangkok Post 1]

The debate over the charter amendment process revolves around a key disagreement between the House and Senate on the size of the majority needed for a referendum to amend the constitution. The House insists on a simple majority, while the Senate supports a double majority rule: over 50 percent voter participation and a majority among those who vote. A joint committee has been set up to reconcile the differences, with the Senate recently winning a vote to retain the double majority requirement.

On the other side, opposition MP Parit Wacharasindhu, who has been active in advocating for charter reforms, argues that only two referendums are necessary, based on recent discussions with Parliament President Wan Muhammad Noor Matha. Parit plans to propose a revised charter amendment bill, arguing that the 2021 ruling only requires an initial referendum before drafting a new constitution, but does not explicitly mandate three rounds. He also asserts that two

referendums would be sufficient, aligning with his view that the process can move forward with fewer public votes.

Meanwhile, opposition People's Party (PP) leader Natthaphong Ruengpanyawut distanced his party from the ongoing debate, asserting that the PP supports charter amendments and two rounds of referendums, unlike the government's push for three rounds. He also expressed readiness for elections if the House were dissolved. [Bangkok Post 2]

In the backdrop of these debates, House Speaker Wan Muhamad Noor Matha revealed that 14 charter amendment bills are pending for deliberation when the House reconvenes on December 12. However, he noted that the chances of these bills passing into law remain uncertain, particularly due to the ongoing role of the House-Senate committee, which must reach a compromise on the referendum bill. The Speaker confirmed that the bills do not contradict the Constitutional Court's 2021 ruling on constitutional amendments, as they propose changes to individual sections rather than the entire charter. The court ruling requires public approval for any attempt to amend the entire constitution, followed by additional referendums for approval of the new content.

The opposition PP continues to push for amendments, with MP Parit Wacharasindhu's bill to amend Section 256 also set to be deliberated, although its passage remains uncertain. Parit, who chairs the House committee on political development, previously had a similar attempt to amend Section 256 rejected. [Bangkok Post 3]

Thailand: Thaksin supports Pheu Thai candidates in key provincial elections

(lm) Former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra – father of current Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra and de facto leader of the ruling Pheu Thai Party – is set to assist Pheu Thai candidates in upcoming Provincial Administrative Organization (PAO) chairman elections in Ubon Ratchathani, Chiang Mai, and Si Sa Ket provinces, following the party's recent victory in Udon Thani.

Thaksin will begin his campaign efforts in Ubon Ratchathani on December 11, meeting with local party supporters. He is expected to promote Pheu Thai's candidate, Kan Kaltinan, a former PAO chairman. Later, he will travel to Chiang Mai on December 23 and Si Sa Ket to bolster Pheu Thai's chances in those regions.

In Udon Thani, Thaksin supported Sarawut Petchpanomporn, who won the PAO chairmanship on November 24 with 327,487 votes, defeating the People's Party candidate Kanisorn Khurirang. Pheu Thai party figures have expressed confidence in their ability to secure victories in upcoming races, particularly in Chiang Mai, a stronghold where they face competition from the Move Forward Party (MFP).

The nationwide PAO elections, scheduled for February 1, will see new candidates replacing incumbents whose terms end on December 19. Pheu Thai plans to field candidates in multiple provinces, aiming to consolidate its base following its recent electoral success. Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra will not participate in the campaigns to avoid criticism of power misuse. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: SRT-DoL Khao Kradong land dispute complicated by political entanglements; NACC to probe DoL's failure to enforce court ruling

(bk) The Khao Kradong land dispute in Buri Ram, a province in northeastern Thailand, has become a significant issue affecting more than 900 long-time residents, following a court ruling in favor of the State Railway of Thailand (SRT), said Deputy Interior Minister Songsak Thongsri during a meeting with the House Committee on Land, Natural Resources, and the Environment on November 27.

The dispute centers around 5,083 rai (819 hectares) of land in Muang district of Buri Ram province, which the SRT claims as its property. In 2021, the SRT filed a lawsuit with the Administrative Court in 2021, accusing the Department of Lands (DoL) of wrongfully issuing land title deeds to occupants over 15 years ago. The SRT seeks to revoke the land titles issued by the DoL and evict the residents, with the Supreme Court confirming the land's ownership under the SRT.

This legal battle has taken on significant political relevance due to its complex ties to political interests. The DoL, a part of the Interior Ministry, is overseen by the Bhumjaithai Party, which is closely associated with the influential Chidchob political family in Buri Ram. In 2022, it was revealed that members of the Chidchob family held rights to about 180 rai (29 hectares) of land in Khao Kradong, where major developments like Chang Arena and the Chang International Circuit are located. Chang Arena is a multi-purpose stadium, primarily used for football, and is home to Buriram

United Football Club, known for its modern facilities and vibrant atmosphere. Chang International Circuit is a world-class motorsport racetrack, recognized for hosting international events like the MotoGP and Superbike World Championship. Both Chang Arena and Chang International Circuit are run by Newin Chidchob, who is widely identified as the driving force behind the Bhumjaithai Party.

Despite the court ruling, the DoL has chosen not to revoke the titles, a decision which the SRT is appealing. This has raised concerns about the legal uncertainty in the country and the accountability of state officials in handling the issue, especially given the political and economic stakes involved. [Bangkok Post]

Meanwhile, on November 28, the Thai Social Democratic Party (TSDP) submitted a petition to the the National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC), urging an investigation into government officials and relevant agencies, including the minister in charge, the DoL director-general, and the inquiry committee appointed by the DoL, for their failure to enforce the court ruling. The TSDP asked the NACC to determine whether this failure constitutes corruption, misconduct, or neglect of duty, leading to compromised state interests. [The Nation] [Bangkokbiznews, in Thai]

The TSDP, originally founded as the New Politics Party in June 2009, was established by members of the now-defunct People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), following their unanimous decision to solidify their movement by transforming it into a political party. This decision was reached on May 25, 2009, marking the anniversary of their large-scale protests. However, in 2011, the party faced internal conflict as the PAD faction within the party disagreed with the party leadership's stance, calling for a boycott of the elections. This led to a split between the PAD members and the party's executive committee. In 2013, the party changed its name to the Thai Social Democratic Party.

Thailand: Fraud suspect Samart hospitalized amid hunger strike and investigation

(hrs) Samart Janechaijittawanich, a Thai politician and former deputy spokesman for the Palang Pracharath Party who has been implicated in the high-profile The iCon Group scandal, was hospitalized after nearly four days of a hunger strike. Samart, who faces allegations of money laundering, was arrested in Chiang Rai and later transferred to the Department of Corrections

Hospital due to fatigue and stress, though he continued drinking water throughout.

The iCon Group scandal involves accusations of the company operating a large-scale pyramid scheme, promising high returns to investors while leveraging celebrity endorsements. The scheme reportedly defrauded over 2,000 victims of more than THB 841 million (USD 24.4 million), leading to the arrests of 18 individuals, including the group's CEO, Warathaphon "Boss Paul" Waratyaworrakul.

During a search of Samart's mother's home in Bangkok, investigators uncovered a document, allegedly signed by Warathaphon from jail, claiming that Samart had repaid loans linked to the fraud. Authorities suspect the document was fabricated to clear Samart of wrongdoing as investigations into the multi-million-dollar financial scandal continue. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Minister vows impartiality in agricultural land probe

(lm) Agriculture and Cooperatives Minister Narumon Pinyosinwat has pledged to ensure the fair investigation of alleged encroachment on agricultural reform land managed by the Agricultural Land Reform Office (ALRO) in Saraburi province. The allegations involve a resort linked to a romantic partner of a former deputy prime minister, reportedly Gen Prawit Wongsuwon, though the minister emphasized the law would apply equally to all parties.

The resort in question is accused of illegal use of Sor Por Kor land, which is intended for redistribution to farmers rather than commercial purposes. Investigations are being carried out by ALRO, led by Secretary-General Sedthakiat Krajangwongs, in collaboration with Minister Narumon's team.

The controversy surfaced following media reports about potential asset seizures involving influential political and business figures. Narumon reaffirmed her commitment to fighting land misuse and ensuring compliance with regulations, despite potential political pressures. Inspections of the site, Phu Nabdao Farm in Muak Lek district, are ongoing. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Thousands protest against conservation decrees impacting forest

communities

(lm) Around 5,000 members of the assembly of people living in community forests gathered at Chiang Mai City Hall to protest two royal decrees related to conservation in national parks and wildlife reserves. Protesters argue these laws threaten the traditional way of life for highland communities with centuries-old roots and undermine their land rights in over 4,000 forest villages.

The decrees, enacted under the National Parks Act of 2019 and the Wildlife Conservation and Protection Act of 2019, were approved earlier this month by the cabinet. Protesters claim the decrees lack community involvement and impose long-term instability on indigenous populations.

Deputy Prime Minister Prasert Jantararuangtong acknowledged the group's demands, which include halting implementation of the decrees until amendments are made, ensuring public participation in revising the laws through Parliament, and forming a task force to complete the amendments within three months.

Representatives from the affected communities emphasized their historical presence predating legislative frameworks and called for their rights to be recognized. The government is under pressure to address potential conflicts between conservation efforts and the traditional rights of local communities. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Deportation of Cambodian activities raises international human rights concerns

(bk) Thai authorities deported six Cambodian political opposition activists and a child on November 25 after being arrested one day earlier by Thai immigration officers in Pathum Thani for staying in Thailand without proper documentation.

The six activists are facing charges in Cambodia for "plotting" under Article 453 of the Cambodian criminal code, which carries a potential sentence of up to 10 years in prison. The charges stem from their involvement in protests against a trade agreement between Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam in August 2024. All six are supporters of the opposition Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP), which was dissolved in 2017, and had fled to Thailand seeking refuge in 2022.

Five of them were recognized as refugees by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), while the sixth was awaiting refugee status when they were deported.

Upon returning, the Cambodian authorities detained the six activists in separate prisons under arrest warrants issued by the Phnom Penh Municipal Court. The 5-year-old child was released to family members in Cambodia.

HRW: Forced deportation of refugees violates both international and domestic laws

According to the Human Rights Watch (HRW), Thai authorities used immigration charges as a pretext for deporting Cambodian refugees without court review, in flagrant breach of international refugee protection principles. This deportation also violates Thailand's own Act on Prevention and Suppression of Torture and Enforced Disappearances, which prohibits the expulsion of individuals to countries where they may face torture or other forms of ill-treatment.

In a broader context, HRW's recent report, "'We Thought We Were Safe': Repression and Refoulement of Refugees in Thailand," reveals a troubling pattern of transnational repression, where Thai authorities allegedly cooperate with neighboring governments – including Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam – to target dissidents living in exile. This collaboration, described as a "swap" system, allows Thailand to receive individuals from these countries in return for its deportation of political refugees. This practice undermines refugee protections, exposes those fleeing repression to greater risks, and enables governments to silence dissidents living abroad.

By deporting the individuals without regard for the dangers they may face in Cambodia, HRW argues that Thailand also compromised its credibility as a member of the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), to which it was recently elected for a three-year term beginning in January 2025. [Bangkok Post] [Thai PBS World] [Human Rights Watch]

APHR: The deportation breaches non-refoulement and challenges ASEAN's credibility

The ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights (APHR) issued a statement on November 29, echoing the condemnation of the deportation, which is seen as a severe breach of international law, particularly the principle of non-refoulement, and a direct challenge to ASEAN's credibility. Kasit Piromya, APHR Board Member and former Thai Parliament Member, added

that this deportation represents a failure of ASEAN's human rights commitments.

As transnational repression grows across Southeast Asia, APHR urges ASEAN leaders to take decisive action to protect activists and human rights defenders, calling for stronger measures to uphold democracy and justice in the region. [ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights]

Thailand: Influencers, activists, and lawyers face legal challenges under lèse majesté laws

(bk) Multiple individuals in Thailand have faced legal actions under the country's stringent royal defamation laws, which prohibit defamation of the monarchy.

On November 27, a 33-year-old online influencer, Warunee, was released from prison a month before her 18-month sentence for lèse majesté was due to conclude. Warunee had been sentenced in June 2023 to three years in prison for posting an edited image online, which depicted King Vajiralongkorn changing the seasonal attire of the Emerald Buddha. She was charged with royal defamation, violations of the Computer Crimes Act, and insulting an object of religious veneration.

Warunee's sentence was reduced to 18 months after she admitted to the crime. During her imprisonment, she staged a 46-day hunger strike in protest of multiple bail denials and filed an appeal. In April 2024, Warunee withdrew her appeal, and the Appeal Court approved her request on November 21. As a result, she became eligible for early release under the Royal Clemency Decree, which applies to individuals who have served a third of their sentence. Although she qualified for early release as early as August, her appeal withdrawal delayed her release. The case has now been officially closed. [Prachatai English]

Meanwhile, prominent human rights lawyer Arnon Nampa, known for his activism and vocal criticisms of the Thai government, has been sentenced to an additional two years in prison on December 3 for lèse majesté and computer crime offenses. This new sentence adds to his already lengthy prison term, bringing his total sentence to 16 years and 2 months. Arnon's conviction relates to an open letter he posted online in November 2020, addressed to King Vajiralongkorn. The court ruled that the letter contained “untruthful statements,” leading to a sentence reduction from three years to two years due

to his provision of useful information during proceedings.

Arnon faces a total of 14 cases related to lèse majesté, and this is the fifth conviction. In addition, four other activists are facing charges under Section 112, the royal defamation law, for their participation in the “People’s Letters” campaign organized by the pro-democracy group Free People. The letters criticized the royal prerogative, as outlined in the 2017 constitution. Arnon has been in detention since September 26, 2023, and has been denied bail 31 times. [Bangkok Post 1]

In another case, South Korean influencer Ji Gamin is facing a lèse majesté complaint after a royalist group accused her of making "certain gestures" deemed offensive to the Thai monarchy during her visit in November 2024. Ji, a popular social media personality with over one million followers on TikTok and 292,000 on Instagram, allegedly violated the lèse majesté law during her stay in Thailand. The group, People United to Protect the Monarchy, has called for an investigation into whether Ji had the necessary permits to work in Thailand and whether she engaged in income-generating activities during her visit, including promoting products. [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: Government prepares for implementation of Marriage Equality Law

(lm) Thailand is preparing to implement the Marriage Equality Bill, which is set to become law on January 22, 2025. The bill, endorsed by the king and published in the Royal Gazette on September 24, will make Thailand the third Asian country, after Taiwan and Nepal, to recognize same-sex marriage.

The Bangkok Metropolitan Administration, along with several ministries and the Bangkok Pride organization, recently held "Marriage Equality Day" to provide updates on the country's readiness. A committee has been formed to adjust the marriage registration system to accommodate same-sex couples, including changes to regulations and wording, such as replacing gender-specific terms with "individuals" and "married couples." Once the amendments are approved by the Interior Minister, the system will undergo a trial run and staff will be retrained.

The new law allows same-sex couples to register their marriages at district offices across the country. To register, individuals must be at least 18 years old, with parental consent required for those under 20. The

Justice Ministry will also review other bills to ensure same-sex couples have the same rights as heterosexual couples in areas such as surrogacy, nationality, and gender recognition. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Police arrest three suspects linked to online pornography ring

(lm) Thai authorities have arrested three individuals involved in producing and distributing pornographic content featuring over 2,000 victims, including students, internet idols, and celebrities. The suspects, apprehended in Kanchanaburi, Ratchaburi, and Trang, operated several pornographic platforms and websites, generating over THB 100,000 (USD 2,900) monthly from more than 20,000 subscribers.

The investigation, led by the Department of Special Investigation (DSI) in collaboration with the Personal Data Protection Committee (PDPC) and cybercrime agencies, uncovered nearly 100,000 explicit video clips. Victims' personal information was disclosed without consent, and subscription fees ranged from THB 300 to 1,000 (USD 8.7 to 29).

The suspects face charges including possession of child pornography, facilitating obscene acts by minors, and using bank accounts for illegal purposes. Authorities urge victims of pornographic crimes to report to the Office of Technology and Information Technology Cases or the PDPC for assistance in legal proceedings. The arrests align with government efforts to provide justice for victims without requiring them to come forward publicly. [Bangkok Post 1]

In another disturbing case, a 10-year-old child was rescued by Thai authorities after being held on a fishing boat off the coast of Rayong province and sexually assaulted over the course of a month. The Thailand Internet Crimes Against Children (TICAC) unit uncovered the case through reports of violent pornographic videos involving a minor being sold on the Telegram app.

The 23-year-old suspect was arrested on the boat, where evidence of child pornography intended for distribution was found. Investigators revealed that the suspect's wife, a relative of the victim, facilitated the abuse and filmed the assaults. The child has been placed under the care of a local orphanage, and legal proceedings are underway. [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: Severe flooding persists in South, affecting more than 130 000 households

(hrs/msz/lm) Severe flooding in southern Thailand continues to cause widespread devastation. As of December 3, the flooding has claimed 25 lives and affected over 660,000 households across 10 provinces. The disaster, triggered by heavy rains from November 23, has led to inundation in areas such as Chumphon, Surat Thani, Nakhon Si Thammarat, Phatthalung, Trang, Satun, Songkhla, Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat. Six provinces remain severely flooded, with substantial damage to infrastructure and ongoing evacuation efforts. The government has proposed an initial budget of THB 5 billion (USD 140 million) to assist flood-affected residents in the south.

The rain has also caused significant disruption in transport, particularly rail services, which have been halted between Pattani and Yala due to flooded tracks. Train services have been rerouted to Hat Yai, Songkhla. Despite the challenges, authorities are continuing their rescue operations and relief efforts, with SMS flood warnings sent to high-risk areas. [Bangkok Post 1] [Bangkok Post 2]

Meanwhile, the northern provinces of Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai have also been severely affected by flooding, with the government approving THB 19 billion (USD 530 million) for flood recovery. The budget will focus on repairing damaged infrastructure such as roads, water supplies, and utilities, and implementing long-term flood mitigation measures. Short-term recovery efforts, including urgent projects to restore transportation and riverbank protection, are already underway, with a THB 641 million (USD 17.8 million) budget allocated from the 2025 fiscal year. These efforts are aimed at restoring normalcy and preparing for future floods, while boosting tourism in the region through the upcoming "Winter Festival 2024." [Bangkok Post 3]

Thailand: Government raises allowances for elderly, children, and disabled

(lm) The Thai cabinet has approved increases in monthly allowances for senior citizens and adjustments to financial support for children and disabled individuals. Elderly citizens will receive higher monthly allowances based on their age group. Those aged 60 to 69 will see an increase from THB 600, equivalent to USD 17.4, to THB 700, equivalent to USD

20.3. For individuals aged 70 to 79, the allowance will rise from THB 700, equivalent to USD 20.3, to THB 850, equivalent to USD 24.7. Citizens aged 80 to 89 will receive an increase from THB 800, equivalent to USD 23.2, to THB 1,000, equivalent to USD 29, while those aged 90 and older will see their allowance increase from THB 1,000, equivalent to USD 29, to THB 1,250, equivalent to USD 36.3.

Financial support for children up to six years old will now be set at THB 600, equivalent to USD 17.4, per month, starting from four months into pregnancy. Previously, this benefit was limited to families earning an annual income below THB 100,000, equivalent to USD 2,900, and began at birth. The allowance for disabled individuals will be standardized at THB 1,000, equivalent to USD 29, per month, replacing the previous range of THB 800 to 1,000, equivalent to USD 23.2 to 29.

These adjustments were proposed by the Social Development and Human Security Ministry during a mobile cabinet meeting in Chiang Mai. However, the implementation date has not yet been announced. The Ministry of Finance is also considering a one-time cash payment of THB 10,000, equivalent to USD 290, for elderly citizens. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Truck operators urged to register ahead of low emission zone restrictions

(lm) The Department of Land Transport (DLT) has called on operators of six-wheeled and larger trucks to register their vehicles in preparation for Bangkok's upcoming Low Emission Zone air pollution control program. Set to begin next year, the program will restrict medium- and large-sized trucks from entering nine central Bangkok districts during specific hours to reduce levels of hazardous particulate matter (PM2.5).

DLT director-general Jirut Wisanjit emphasized that only registered trucks, those maintaining regular engine oil and air filter changes, as well as electric and NGV-powered vehicles, will be permitted entry into these zones, which are prone to high traffic and pollution levels. The program aims to mitigate air quality issues in the capital. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Transport Minister to order contractor ban after crane collapse on

Rama II Road kills six

(bk) A fatal accident occurred on November 29 at a construction site for an elevated highway on Rama II Road in Samut Sakhon province, resulting in the deaths of six workers – two Thai nationals and four from Myanmar – and injuries to nine others. The accident took place around 4 a.m. on the outbound side of the road at the Ekkachai-Ban Phaeo Intercity Motorway 82 (M82) construction site, near Mahachai Muang Mai Market, at kilometer 21+100. A launching crane carrying a concrete beam collapsed, trapping several workers beneath the debris.

In response, Transport Minister Suriya Jungrungreangkit announced on November 30 that the contractor responsible for the crane collapse will face a temporary ban of two to four years from being awarded future construction contracts. The minister stated he would consult with the Comptroller-General's Department to finalize the decision.

On December 2, the Department of Highways (DoH) stated that the Engineering Institute of Thailand had surveyed the site using drones and planned to install monitoring devices along the stretch to detect potential future structural issues. The affected outbound lanes on Rama II Road are expected to reopen within 14 days after debris removal from the crane collapse site is completed. In the meantime, the DoH has opened a contraflow lane on the one-kilometer section of Rama II Road near the incident site to alleviate traffic congestion. The contraflow lane will operate from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m.

Rama II Road, a major route connecting Bangkok with southern Thailand, including the resort town of Hua Hin, is often plagued by heavy congestion. While the construction of an expressway aims to reduce travel time, the prolonged construction timeline has exacerbated the traffic problems, particularly during weekends and public holidays. This latest incident adds to a series of previous construction-related accidents, including a crane accident in January that killed one worker, another in May when a falling concrete slab caused a fatality, and a factory crane collapse in Rayong in March that resulted in seven deaths. [The Nation 1] [The Nation 2] [Bangkok Post 1] [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: New border pass to reopen in Kanchanaburi expected

(acs) The chief of the Kanchanaburi provincial office, Bandit Promthong, expressed his expectations regarding the reopening of the Ban Phu Nam Ron border pass, which connects Thailand and Myanmar, at the beginning of the new year. He emphasized its essential role in enhancing trade and cooperation between the two countries.

Promthong and other provincial officials stated that the region no longer faces conflicts or uncertainties that could pose safety risks. Additionally, provincial authorities held a meeting with relevant agencies, immigration officials, and military representatives to discuss issues facilitating the border pass's reopening. Promthong highlighted the border pass's vital role in bolstering cross-border trade, investment, and tourism by creating an economic zone. He underscored the region's strategic significance for Thailand's economic development through enhanced cooperation with Myanmar. He also mentioned that a formal proposal had been sent to the Interior Ministry, the National Security Council, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to initiate negotiations with Myanmar on this matter.

Illegal Gold Excavation

Meanwhile, Thong Pha Phum National Park authorities in Kanchanaburi discovered illegal mining activities in protected areas. During carefully conducted operations, they detected the illegal excavation of gold in the area. Surveillance identified 20 individuals involved in the activity; three were arrested, while the others fled to Myanmar. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Thaioil considers backup measures for Clean Fuel Project delays

(lm) Thaioil Plc, Thailand's largest oil refinery and a subsidiary of PTT Group, is ready to invoke parent guarantee agreements to address delays in its USD 5.37 billion Clean Fuel Project (CFP). The project has been delayed due to disputes between the main contractor consortium, UJV, and its subcontractors over unpaid wages. Workers have staged protests, further disrupting progress.

Thaioil CEO Bandhit Thamprajamchit confirmed that the company has prepared contingency measures, including calling on UJV's parent companies—Samsung Engineering (South Korea), Petrofac (UK), and Saipem (Italy)—to ensure accountability if negotiations fail. The CFP aims to elevate Thaioil to a world-class refinery but is now expected to miss its 2024 operational launch.

Thaioil has fully paid the UJV consortium and extended project timelines and budgets to address challenges, including impacts from COVID-19. While Thaioil asserts that wage issues fall under the contractors' responsibilities, it remains committed to resolving disputes to safeguard all stakeholders. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Government increases stake in Thai Airways without regaining state control

(lm) The Thai government has approved a plan to increase its stake in Thai Airways International (THAI) as part of the carrier's debt restructuring efforts. However, the move will not return the airline to state enterprise status.

The Finance Ministry, which currently holds 47.9 percent of THAI shares, aims to remain the largest shareholder while ensuring the company retains its status as the national flag carrier. The recapitalization, approved by the Council of State, will see the government collectively hold approximately 40 percent of the airline's shares after debt-to-equity conversions and new capital injections.

As part of the restructuring, creditors have agreed to convert THB 53 billion (USD 1.54 billion) in debt into equity. The airline also raised THB 44 billion (USD 1.28 billion) through a rights offering of 9.82 billion new shares priced at THB 4.48 (USD 0.13) each.

Thai Airways expects to exit court-supervised rehabilitation by February 2025 and resume trading on the stock exchange by May 2025. The move aligns with broader efforts to stabilize the airline's operations without direct government control. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Regional education hub aimed by ministry

(acs) The Minister of Higher Education, Science, Research, and Innovation, Supamas Isarabhakdi, announced that the Ministry aims to invite prominent, prestigious universities from across the globe to open campuses in Thailand to help the country become a regional education hub. She stated that some renowned universities based in the UK and Singapore could be given opportunities to expand their campuses in Thailand, accommodating more students. At this juncture, Thailand is also preparing new partnerships

with universities in China, Australia, and the UK for the coming year. According to the minister, Thailand offers significant advantages for hosting students, including healthy and affordable living conditions.

Meanwhile, she outlined the government's plan to increase the number of international schools by converting demonstration schools into international ones. The rationale behind this decision is to provide opportunities for families who want to send their children to international schools but cannot afford the current costs. In this respect, the minister emphasized that educational development has become one of the main priorities on the government's agenda. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Authorities uncover illegal transmission cables aiding call scammers

(lm) On December 3, Thai authorities uncovered a large-scale illegal transmission network in Tak's Mae Sot district, used by call centre scam gangs operating from Myanmar. The National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission (NBTC) and the Action Taskforce for Information Technology Crime Suppression (Tactics) announced the discovery of 16 high-capacity cables, including two 216-core cables and two 96-core cables, capable of transmitting internet and telephone signals across the Thai-Myanmar border. This marks the largest seizure of illegal cables to date.

The illegal cables were found crossing the first Thai-Myanmar Friendship Bridge in Mae Sot district, linking Ban Rim Moei in Thailand with Myawaddy in Myanmar. Authorities traced the cables several kilometers into Myanmar, where they connected to regions housing large-scale scam operations. The cutting of these connections has disrupted the internet access of these criminal groups. This follows similar findings along the Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge in Mukdahan province.

The illegal use of transmission infrastructure violates Thailand's Telecommunications Business Operation Act, with offenders facing penalties of up to five years in prison and/or fines of up to THB 10 million (approximately USD 290,000). Additionally, authorities seized over 101,000 Thai-registered SIM cards, SIM boxes, and related devices linked to fraudulent activities. [Bangkok Post 1] [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: Major criminal operations uncovered in Pattaya, Chiang Mai, and Sa Kaeo

(lm/bk) Thai authorities have made significant arrests in two major criminal operations, uncovering illegal activities involving call scams and loan sharking.

On December 2, Demin Wen, a 35-year-old Chinese man, was arrested near the Cambodian border in Sa Kaeo. He is suspected of running Thailand's largest call scam operation, where he oversaw a network of SIM boxes and related equipment used to facilitate scam activities across rented houses in Chiang Mai. A prior raid uncovered 642 SIM boxes, 590,000 SIM cards, 72 computers, and 1,455 mobile phones. Wen had fled Chiang Mai after his Thai wife, who managed the houses, was arrested. He traveled through Nakhon Sawan and Bangkok before being apprehended in Sa Kaeo. Wen's wife was arrested at Suvarnabhumi airport. [Bangkok Post 1]

In Chiang Mai, police conducted sweeping raids across 11 rented houses in Muang, San Sai, and San Kamphaeng districts, seizing a vast array of call scam equipment, including 642 SIM boxes, 590,000 SIM cards, 72 computers, 1,455 mobile phones, and 47 SIM card readers. Fifteen suspects were arrested, including two Thais, five Chinese nationals, and eight Myanmar nationals. Pol Lt Gen Jirabhop Bhuridej, commissioner of the Central Investigation Bureau (CIB), hailed the operation as the most significant crackdown on call scams in the country. The SIM boxes were used to generate fake social media accounts, which were sold to other call scam and online crime groups. Authorities believe the operation served as a major hub for enabling scams. [Bangkok Post 2]

Meanwhile, in South Pattaya, police arrested 17 Chinese nationals involved in an illegal loan shark operation targeting fellow Chinese citizens. The group operated from two luxury houses in the Khao Phra Tamnak area, where police seized laptops, mobile phones, and detailed customer records from over 2,000 transactions, with a turnover exceeding THB 400 million (USD 11.6 million). The suspects advertised their services on the WeChat platform, offering loans with a 5 percent monthly interest rate. If borrowers failed to repay, another group of individuals acted as debt collectors, using intimidation tactics. The arrests followed a two-week investigation by Provincial Police Region 2, and authorities are continuing to investigate the full scope of the operation.[Bangkok Post 3]

Thailand: Highway checkpoint set up to halt foreigners working illegally in Myanmar

(msz) On November 27, commander of the Thai Anti-Trafficking in Persons Division Pol Maj Gen Saruti Kwaengsopa announced that a checkpoint was set up on Highway 12 in Mae Sot district to prevent foreigners from doing illicit work in Myanmar. The location serves as a common route for foreigners intending to leave Thailand for the neighboring country via both official channels and natural crossings. According to Saruti, the chokepoint will emphasize on scanning foreign travelers, especially those from China. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Cameroonian-Thai duo arrested for fraudulent export scheme

(lm) A Cameroonian national and a Thai citizen have been arrested for running a fraudulent company that deceived buyers into believing it was associated with a major Thai agribusiness conglomerate, resulting in losses exceeding THB 3.5 million (USD 101,500).

The duo operated under the company name "CP Processing," misleading clients into thinking it was affiliated with the well-known CP Group, authorized to export raw livestock to Malaysia. The company accepted orders for raw chicken worth THB 3.58 million (USD 103,820) but failed to deliver the goods. The scheme not only caused financial losses to Thai and Malaysian import-export businesses but also tarnished the reputation of the legitimate conglomerate.

The arrests were carried out by the Cyber Crime Investigation Bureau (CCIB) in Bangkok. Authorities seized THB 70,500 (USD 2,045) in cash, communication devices, multiple bank passbooks, credit cards, and froze bank accounts containing THB 2 million (USD 58,000).

Both suspects have denied the charges, but police claim to have gathered substantial evidence to proceed with legal action. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: More than 4 million Thai youths lured into online gambling

(msz) More than four million young Thais are engaged in online gambling, raising concerns about addiction

and its impact on mental health and social stability. Experts warn that gambling addiction, likened to substance dependency, affects families and communities.

A 2023 survey found over one million youths aged 15–18 and 3.92 million aged 19–25 gambled last year, with rising numbers compared to 2021. Around six million gamblers are at high risk of long-term addiction, but mental health support remains inadequate. [Bangkok Post]

This alarming trend coincides with Thailand's efforts to legalize casino complexes as part of large-scale entertainment hubs aimed at boosting tourism and economic growth. The proposed legislation would allow casinos to operate alongside hotels and other attractions, with potential sites in Bangkok, Pattaya, Chiang Mai, and Phuket. Analysts project that the initiative could generate up to USD 9.1 billion annually, positioning Thailand as a leading global gaming market. However, strong public opposition persists due to fears of heightened gambling addiction and organized crime, despite government pledges to implement strict regulatory measures.

Thailand: Government plans to establish national disaster management agency

(acs) The government has planned to establish a new agency to address national disasters in response to the devastating impacts of floods in the southern parts of the country.

Jirayu Houngsub, the government spokesman, announced the plan to establish a National Disaster Management Centre to primarily tackle floods affecting the southern provinces. In this regard, a national commission will be created to formulate strategies for addressing the issue. He also emphasized that Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra aims to develop a disaster management model. This model will use the approaches employed to combat floods in the north as a foundation for addressing floods in the south.

Furthermore, Defence Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Phumtham Wechayachai stated that roads and other transport facilities damaged by the floods have been repaired and reopened for use as the Prime Minister had implemented an emergency policy, which includes a 70-million-baht emergency budget for the southern provinces. [Bangkok Post]

Timor-Leste: President enacts 2025 state budget with focus on sustainable development, citizen well-being

(mu) On November 25, President José Ramos-Horta enacted Law No. 8/2024, approving the 2025 General State Budget, totaling USD 2.617 billion. Prime Minister Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão described the budget as a bold vision for the future, aiming to benefit all citizens, regardless of their location or social status. He emphasized that the budget reflects the government's strategy to create a prosperous, just, and sustainable society.

The budget allocates funds to key areas: USD 2.07 billion for the Central Administration, USD 482 million for Social Security, and USD 62 million for the Oe-Cusse Ambeno region. Priority is given to infrastructure investments, including USD 227.3 million for road and bridge construction, disaster protection, and the expansion of the fiber-optic network to provide high-speed internet nationwide. The budget also supports energy initiatives, with increased subsidies for electricity services, particularly in rural areas.

In the natural resources sector, USD 40 million is allocated for industrial and extraction zone improvements. A USD 5 million investment will strengthen the Central Bank's financial stability.

Significant funds are earmarked for social development, including USD 145.8 million for education, USD 99.2 million for healthcare, and USD 406 million for civil society and social services. Additionally, the Bolsa da Mãe program will receive increased funding, supporting maternal and child health, while the Social Security Fund will see a USD 124.1 million transfer to expand coverage and pensions. [Government of Timor-Leste] [Tatoli]

Vietnam: Major overhaul of ministries and state agencies to enhance administrative effectiveness

(lm/hn) A national conference held on December 1, in Hanoi, attended by over 1.3 million delegates, officially outlined plans to implement key reforms in Vietnam's political and administrative systems, in line with Resolution No. 18-NQ/TW, issued by the 12th Party Central Committee in October 2017. [Vietnamnews]

What is Resolution No. 18-NQ/TW?

Resolution No. 18-NQ/TW, adopted by the 12th Party Central Committee in October 2017, is a comprehensive policy aimed at restructuring and streamlining Vietnam's political and administrative apparatus. The resolution's primary goal is to improve the efficiency, effectiveness, and transparency of the state's governance system. It advocates for reducing administrative overhead, improving coordination between state agencies, and optimizing the management of public resources. The resolution is considered a key part of Vietnam's broader efforts to modernize its government structures, promote innovation, and enhance the delivery of public services. Its implementation is central to the country's long-term development strategy, as it aligns with national goals outlined by the Communist Party of Vietnam, particularly those set at the 13th National Party Congress.

Prime Minister Chinh chairs steering committee meeting on government apparatus reorganization

Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh chaired the first meeting of the government steering committee, which is tasked with reviewing and implementing Resolution No. 18-NQ/TW. The resolution seeks to streamline Vietnam's political structure for greater efficiency and effectiveness.

The meeting focused on assessing the organizational structure of government ministries and agencies, as well as developing plans for the 16th-tenure Government (2026–2031). Key discussions included evaluating two decades of structural changes, sharing successful models, and improving coordination across ministries and government bodies. The main goals are to streamline operations, restructure the workforce, and enhance the effectiveness of civil servants and public employees.

Prime Minister Chinh emphasized that restructuring is a sensitive, but necessary, task requiring urgent attention, scientific planning, and objectivity. He urged ministries and agencies to establish dedicated steering committees to draft restructuring plans, redefine roles and responsibilities, and review legal frameworks to ensure smooth transitions. The Prime Minister also stressed that the reorganization should not disrupt ongoing tasks or hinder the goals for 2024, the 2021–2025 term, or preparations for the 14th National Party Congress.

The Ministry of Home Affairs, with support from the Government Office, will oversee the drafting of a comprehensive plan and ensure the smooth implementation of the resolution across ministries,

allowing for continuous operations during the restructuring process. The Prime Minister also advocated for the development of large economic groups while delegating smaller, specialized enterprises to ministries for more efficient management. [Viet Nam News]

Party leader calls for decisive reforms to achieve development goals

At a second meeting, Party General Secretary To Lam called for significant reforms to remove obstacles within the political and administrative systems, creating a development-friendly environment. Speaking at a national conference reviewing Resolution No. 18-NQ/TW's implementation, Lam emphasized the need for innovative thinking and decisive action to meet the targets set by the 13th National Party Congress.

Lam acknowledged the strengthened functioning of the political system, which has contributed to socio-economic progress and improved the quality of life for citizens. Key focus areas for reform include transportation infrastructure, energy systems, human resources, and administrative reform, which he sees as essential for the country's growth. Lam urged localities and agencies to align their goals with national priorities and foster a culture of initiative and creativity.

In terms of restructuring, Lam emphasized that the aim should be qualitative improvements in operations, not just reductions in size or numbers. He stressed that restructuring must be well-planned and implemented at all government levels, calling on leaders to act promptly and lead by example. [Viet Nam News]

Ministries and state agencies set for mergers in political system overhaul

Both meetings agreed on several key mergers in the political system overhaul. The Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI) will merge with the Ministry of Finance (MoF), while the Ministry of Transport (MoT) will combine with the Ministry of Construction (MoC). The Ministry of Information and Communications (MIC) will merge with the Ministry of Science and Technology (MoST), focusing on science, technology, and digital transformation. Key responsibilities will be reassigned to other ministries, including the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism (MoCST) and the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET).

The Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MoNRE) will merge with the Ministry of Agriculture

and Rural Development, and the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs will be dissolved, with its functions redistributed among the Ministry of Home Affairs (MoHA), MoET, and the Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs.

Other key agencies, including the Commission for the Management of State Capital at Enterprises (CMSC) and the National Financial Supervisory Commission (NFSC), will be dissolved, with their responsibilities reassigned to the MoF, the State Bank of Vietnam (SBV), and other departments. The Government Committee for Religious Affairs will be integrated into the National Committee on Ethnic Minority and Religious Affairs.

Academic institutions will also undergo restructuring, with the National Academy of Public Administration merging into the Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics. Press and broadcasting agencies, including the Vietnam News Agency and the Voice of Vietnam, will consolidate under Vietnam Television (VTV). [Viet Nam News]

Vietnam: New leadership for finance and transport ministries

(hn) On November 28, the National Assembly of Vietnam approved Nguyen Van Thang as the new Minister of Finance for the 2021-2026 term, with unanimous support. Nguyen, 51, holds a PhD in Monetary Finance and has held key roles, including CEO and Chairman of VietinBank, as well as leadership positions in Quang Ninh and Dien Bien Provinces. He succeeds Ho Duc Phoc, now Deputy Prime Minister. The Ministry of Finance oversees public finances, taxation, customs, and more. [VnExpress 1, in Vietnamese]

Tran Hong Minh was also appointed Minister of Transport for the same term, with 100 percent approval. A 57-year-old engineer, Tran has extensive experience in defense infrastructure and transportation. He succeeds Nguyen Van Thang, now Minister of Finance. The Ministry of Transport manages Vietnam's road, rail, maritime, and aviation sectors. Tran will be assisted by four Deputy Ministers. [VnExpress 2, in Vietnamese]

Vietnam: Prime Minister Chinh urges expedited land-related budget collection

(lm) Vietnam's Prime Minister Phạm Minh Chính has issued an official dispatch emphasizing the need to accelerate state budget collection from land-related sources by the end of 2024. This initiative aims to maximize state revenue and establish a solid foundation for socio-economic tasks for 2025 and the 2026–2030 period.

The Ministry of Finance has been tasked with improving revenue management, ensuring full compliance with tax laws, and preventing budget losses. Concurrently, the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MoNRE) will oversee the dissemination and implementation of the Land Law, resolve obstacles, and enforce new land price lists to facilitate auctions and allocations.

The Ministry of Construction is focused on addressing challenges in real estate projects, particularly those with strong market potential, to stimulate the property market and increase state revenues. The Ministry of Planning and Investment will push for the completion of critical infrastructure projects, while the State Bank of Việt Nam will streamline credit access for real estate businesses and homebuyers.

Provincial and city leaders are directed to expedite planning processes to support balanced and effective real estate development. Ministries and local authorities are expected to cooperate closely in fulfilling these directives, ensuring robust socio-economic progress and sustainable property market growth. Deputy Prime Minister Hồ Đức Phớc has been assigned to oversee and report on the implementation of these measures. [Viet Nam News]

Vietnam: National Assembly approves laws on data and electricity

(lm) Vietnam's 15th National Assembly (NA) has adopted two significant pieces of legislation during its eighth session, reflecting the country's efforts to modernize its legal framework in data governance and energy.

The newly passed Law on Data, approved by 94.15 percent of deputies, provides a comprehensive framework for managing digital data, including its development, protection, and cross-border transfer, alongside the creation of a national data center. The law will take effect on July 1, 2025.

The revised Law on Electricity, approved by 439 deputies, includes nine chapters and 130 articles. The

law focuses on promoting renewable energy and new energy sources, reforming electricity pricing and trading, and establishing a competitive electricity market. It also addresses the responsibilities of individuals and organizations in power supply and consumption, as well as the safety and protection of electricity facilities. The revisions aim to support Vietnam's energy transition and ensure the sustainable management of its electricity sector. [Viet Nam News]

Vietnam: National Target Programme on Cultural Development (2025-2035)

(hn) Vietnam's National Assembly has approved a USD 15.7 million investment to preserve and restore the country's cultural heritage sites over the next decade. The programme aims to protect and promote the value of national relics, with a focus on restoring those that are severely degraded. This initiative also seeks to enhance cultural institutions, such as museums and libraries, many of which are currently insufficient across provinces. By 2030, the programme targets the digital transformation of all cultural and arts units, integrating Fourth Industrial Revolution technologies.

Funding for the programme will be drawn from both central and local budgets, with USD 5.9 million from the central government and USD 9.8 million from local budgets. Deputies highlighted the need for flexibility in local counterpart contributions, particularly for economically disadvantaged regions. External funding, set at an average of 12.4 percent, will come from enterprises, organizations, and voluntary contributions from the public, though some legislators expressed concerns about the feasibility of this target. [Vietnamnews]

Vietnam: Comprehensive ban on e-cigarettes and heated tobacco products from 2025

(hn) Vietnam's National Assembly has officially endorsed a ban on the production, trade, import, storage, transport, and use of e-cigarettes and heated tobacco products, set to take effect in 2025. This decision, outlined in a resolution passed on November 30, highlights concerns over public health, particularly the impact on youth. The Ministry of Health emphasized the health risks, including cancer, cardiovascular disease, and respiratory issues,

associated with these products due to high nicotine levels and other toxic chemicals.

The government has been tasked with enforcing this ban, raising public awareness, and strengthening regulatory measures. Authorities will crack down on illegal sales and implement stricter controls over advertising that misrepresents the safety of these products. This includes enhanced monitoring of marketing practices on social media and e-commerce platforms.

Additionally, the government will accelerate the development of Vietnam's pharmaceutical industry through 2045 and address misleading advertising in the health supplement sector. Efforts will also focus on revising the Press Law to improve media quality and ensure compliance with national laws by international digital platforms. [VnExpress]

Vietnam: Court upholds death sentence for tycoon in USD 12 billion fraud case

(lm) Vietnam's High People's Court upheld the death sentence of real estate tycoon Truong My Lan, chairwoman of Van Thinh Phat Holdings Group, after rejecting her appeal against convictions for embezzlement and bribery in a high-profile USD 12 billion fraud case. Lan was sentenced to death in April for her role in what is considered Vietnam's largest financial fraud.

The court in Ho Chi Minh City stated there was no basis to reduce Lan's sentence. If Lan can return three-quarters of the embezzled funds while on death row, her sentence could potentially be commuted to life imprisonment. Lan's case is part of Vietnam's ongoing anti-corruption campaign, "Blazing Furnace," and is one of the highest-profile cases of business and government officials being jailed.

Despite her lawyer citing mitigating factors such as remorse and partial restitution, prosecutors argued that the unprecedented scale of the embezzlement, which has had a significant impact on the financial sector, warrants the original sentence. Lan, arrested in 2022, was involved in a fraud centered around the Saigon Joint Stock Commercial Bank (SCB), where she controlled much of the bank through proxies. The Vietnamese central bank injected USD 24 billion in special loans to stabilize SCB.

In addition to the death sentence, Lan was sentenced to life imprisonment in a separate trial in October for

money laundering, fraud, and illegal cross-border money transfers. [Reuters]

Vietnam: State Bank increases credit growth limit for banks for second time in 2024

(hn) On November 29, the State Bank of Vietnam announced it would raise the credit growth target for credit institutions for the second time this year. Initially set at 15 percent for 2024, total credit in the system had increased by 11.12 percent by November 22, still falling short of expectations.

This proactive measure aims to provide timely capital to the economy, support business development, and maintain stable inflation. The State Bank will also focus on reducing lending rates and simplifying procedures to encourage more accessible credit. Credit institutions are encouraged to align with the Government's directives to support businesses and stabilize the monetary market.

This is the second adjustment to the credit growth target, following an earlier increase in August. [Viet Nam News]

Vietnam: New tax regulations target e-commerce platforms and low-cost imports

(hn) On November 26, 2024, Vietnam's parliament approved changes to tax laws targeting foreign e-commerce platforms. From July 1, 2025, local operators of platforms like Shopee, Lazada, and Shein will be required to pay a 10 percent VAT. The changes also end a tax exemption on low-cost imports under VND 1 million (USD 40). The decision follows concerns about unfair competition and increasing imports from China. The amendments aim to ensure proper tax collection while introducing a new VAT on fertilizers, potentially impacting farmers. [Tuoi tre news, in Vietnamese]

Vietnam: VAT reduction extended through June to stimulate economy

(lm) The National Assembly of Vietnam has extended the current reduction in value-added tax (VAT) from 10

percent to 8 percent until the end of June 2025. This measure, aimed at boosting consumption and supporting business recovery, applies to most goods and services except real estate, banking, securities, telecommunications, and other sectors subject to special consumption taxes.

Economic experts predict that this extension will lower costs for consumers and bolster domestic production. The Ministry of Finance estimates that the tax cut will reduce state budget revenue by approximately VND 26.1 trillion (USD 1.02 billion) in the first half of 2025. However, increased economic activity is expected to offset some revenue losses by generating additional tax income.

Since its introduction in 2022, the VAT reduction has significantly stimulated domestic consumption. In 2022 alone, it saved consumers VND 51.4 trillion (USD 2 billion) and led to a 19.8 percent increase in retail sales compared to 2021. Similar impacts were noted in 2023 and 2024, underscoring the measure's role in economic recovery post-COVID-19. [Viet Nam News]

Vietnam: Wage reforms needed to attract top talent in state-owned enterprises

(lm) Vietnam's Finance Minister Nguyễn Văn Thắng has emphasized the need for changes to the salary structure in state-owned enterprises (SOEs) to attract and retain talent, highlighting the limitations of the current graded pay scale system. Speaking at a parliamentary session discussing the draft Law on State Capital Management and Investment in Enterprises, Minister Thắng stressed that top professionals are unlikely to commit fully under the existing compensation framework, which lags far behind private sector practices.

The draft law aims to separate the state's role as an investor and owner from administrative functions, fostering a competitive market environment for SOEs. It proposes that SOEs operate under principles akin to private enterprises, with transparent oversight to ensure efficient use of public capital. Critics argue, however, that the proposed legislation still imposes excessive administrative controls, stifling SOE autonomy and innovation.

The reforms also target the role of state capital representatives in SOEs. Minister Thắng called for objective, transparent evaluation systems linked to performance metrics and adequate compensation. He cited the private sector as a model, where higher

salaries ensure accountability and better negotiation outcomes. Other officials proposed consolidating oversight responsibilities into a unified body to streamline governance.

The law also introduces guidelines for profit distribution, emphasizing equity among shareholders and balancing state dividends with retained earnings for reinvestment. Parliament members highlighted the need to differentiate management approaches for enterprises based on scale and strategic importance, especially in defense, security, and critical infrastructure sectors.

The proposed changes are part of broader efforts to modernize Vietnam's SOEs, ensuring they align with market-driven principles while preserving national interests. The law is expected to undergo further revisions based on parliamentary feedback before being finalized. [Vietnamese government, in Vietnamese]

Vietnam: Long Thanh Airport phase one completion delayed to end of 2026

(hn) Vietnam's National Assembly has approved a delay for the completion of phase one of Long Thanh International Airport, extending the deadline to the end of 2026. The project, which includes a second runway and passenger terminal, aims to handle 25 million passengers and 1.2 million tons of cargo annually.

The total investment is estimated at VND 336,630 billion (USD 13.7 billion), with construction progressing on the control tower and terminal. The delay is due to extended bidding processes, pandemic impacts on designs, and contractor selection delays. [VnExpress]

Vietnam: Investment policy for North-South high-speed railway project approved

(lm) The National Assembly of Vietnam has approved the investment policy for the North-South high-speed railway project, with 443 out of 454 deputies voting in favor. This decision aligns with Party policies to modernize transport infrastructure and drive socio-economic development.

Chairman of the National Assembly's Economic Committee, Lê Hồng Thanh, emphasized that after 18 years of preparation and referencing global high-speed rail models, the project is now deemed feasible for Vietnam's current context. While the railway is expected to generate significant economic benefits, revenue in the initial four years will only cover operational and maintenance costs, necessitating state support for infrastructure upkeep.

The project, spanning three medium-term budget cycles, will require VNĐ 538 billion (USD 21.22 million) for preparatory work from 2021 to 2025, VNĐ 841.7 trillion for 2026 to 2030, and VNĐ 871.3 trillion for 2031 to 2035. Budget allocations will align with project progress, and the initiative will be exempt from financial feasibility assessments under the 2019 Public Investment Law. [Viet Nam News]

International Relations, Geopolitics and Security in Asia

U.S. imposes tariffs on Southeast Asian solar imports

(ma) The U.S. Commerce Department announced new tariffs on solar panel imports from Cambodia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam, following complaints from American manufacturers about unfairly low prices. The move is part of an ongoing trade case brought by companies including Hanwha Qcells and First Solar, aiming to protect billions in U.S. solar manufacturing investments.

Preliminary dumping duties range from 21.31 percent to 271.2 percent, depending on the company. Notably,

Jinko Solar faces duties of 21.31 percent for Malaysian products and 56.51 percent for Vietnamese ones, while Trina Solar's products from Thailand and Vietnam were hit with margins of 77.85 percent and 54.46 percent, respectively.

The Biden administration's action reflects concerns over China's dominance in clean energy manufacturing and the impact on global pricing. The Inflation Reduction Act, aimed at boosting U.S. clean energy production, has spurred plans for new domestic solar factories. The American Alliance for Solar Manufacturing, representing U.S. producers, welcomed the tariffs, emphasizing the need to address years of unfair trade practices. Final determinations from the Commerce Department are expected by mid-2025.

The solar industry remains heavily reliant on imports, with about 80 percent of U.S. solar panels coming from the four targeted nations. While the tariffs aim to bolster domestic production, they also raise concerns about potential cost increases for solar projects. [Reuters]

EU to impose anti-dumping duties on Chinese imports of titanium dioxide

(alk) The European Union (EU) will impose definitive anti-dumping duties on titanium dioxide imports from China starting January 11, following approval by member states on November 27. The duties, which will remain in place for five years, aim to address allegations of unfairly cheap Chinese imports harming EU producers. Rates will range from EUR 0.25 (USD 0.26) to EUR 0.74 (USD 0.78) per kilogram depending on the exporter, replacing provisional duties of 14.4 percent to 39.7 percent.

The decision stems from an EU investigation initiated after a complaint from European producers who argued that Chinese imports, which hold a 22 percent market share, were undercutting prices and threatening profitability. They also stated that EU producers, supported by imports from countries like Britain, Mexico, and the United States, could meet 90 percent of the region's demand. Major EU producers include Cinkarna, Kronos, Tronox, and Venator.

The European Paints and Printing Ink Association (CEPE) opposed the duties, warning of potential harm to the USD 33 billion EU paints sector, where TiO_2 accounts for about 20 percent of production costs. Despite this, an exemption has been granted for imports used in producing white graphic inks. Chinese

TiO_2 imports in 2023 were valued at over EUR 500 million (USD 524 million). [Reuters 1]

Meanwhile France, Germany, and Sweden have urged the EU to strengthen domestic battery production to reduce reliance on China. In a joint paper released ahead of an EU competitiveness meeting, the three countries called for streamlined regulations, faster project approvals, and increased funding to support European battery manufacturers.

This push comes as China dominates global battery cell production, controlling 85 percent of the market, while Europe, the United States and South Korea each hold 10 percent or less of the supply chain for some battery metals and cells. The issue has gained urgency following Swedish Northvolt's filing for bankruptcy protection in the US, raising concerns about Europe's ability to compete in the electric vehicle battery sector. [International Energy Agency] [euronews]

Swedish Industry Minister Ebba Busch emphasized the need to avoid overreliance on China, likening it to Europe's past dependency on Russian gas. She warned that the green transition could become a "Chinese transition" in Europe unless decisive action is taken. German State Secretary Berhard Kluttig highlighted the importance of sourcing raw materials for batteries from alternative suppliers, such as Australia, Canada, and European projects.

The incoming European Commission, which takes office on December 1, plans to focus on improving economic competitiveness while meeting climate goals, with a strategy to strengthen the EU's green industry to be outlined within its first 100 days. [Reuters 2]

EU parliament seeks Hong Kong's loss of of special trade status

(to) The European Parliament has passed a resolution asking the European Union to revoke Hong Kong's special trading status. The non-binding resolution was overwhelmingly supported, with 473 votes in favor and 23 against. The resolution follows the recent jailing of 45 opposition politicians under Hong Kong's national security law (see AiR No. 47, November/2024, 3).

The resolution also called for the EU to review the role of Hong Kong's economic and trade office in Brussels. While the resolution is not legally binding, the move shows a growing European concern over Beijing's

crackdown on dissent in Hong Kong and could lead to stricter economic policies. [South China Morning Post]

China, Interpol agree to strengthen cooperation

(alk) Chinese State Councilor and Minister of Public Security Wang Xiaohong met with Interpol President Ahmed Nasser Al-Raisi on November 28 in Lyon, where the international police cooperation organization is headquartered, to discuss strengthening law-enforcement cooperation.

Wang reaffirmed China's support for Interpol and expressed a commitment to deepen collaboration in areas such as combating telecom fraud, cross-border gambling, counter-terrorism, fugitive repatriation, and asset recovery. He also emphasized enhancing joint law-enforcement training and capacity building to support the Global Security Initiative and global public security governance.

Al-Raisi thanked China for its longstanding support and reiterated Interpol's commitment to the one-China principle. He expressed readiness to work with China on security initiatives and to ensure the success of the 94th Interpol General Assembly in Hong Kong in 2026.

During the visit, Wang and recently elected Interpol Secretary General Valdecy Urquiza signed cooperation agreements, including a "Declaration of Intent" to enhance operational collaboration and capacity building. Wang's delegation, which included senior Chinese officials, was briefed on Interpol's tools to combat transnational organized crime.

China's Ministry of Public Security has actively supported various Interpol operations, such as Trigger Salvo (targeting illicit firearms), First Light (addressing telecom fraud), and Golden Strike (focusing on environmental crime). Additionally, China funds Interpol's I-FASP program, which promotes diversity by supporting secondments from underrepresented member countries. [Interpol] [The State Council, China]

China conducts naval patrols around contested South China Sea shoal

(alk) On November 28, China announced that it is conducting air and naval patrols around the contested Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea to "resolutely defend" its sovereignty. The Chinese

military's Southern Theatre Command described these "combat readiness patrols" as a measure to enhance vigilance in the waters and airspace surrounding the shoal, referred to by China as Huangyan Dao. The patrols have reportedly been ongoing throughout November. [China Military Online]

China claims the waters around Scarborough Shoal, a triangular chain of reefs and rocks located 240 kilometers west of the Philippines' Luzon island and nearly 900 kilometers from China's Hainan province. Beijing seized the shoal from the Philippines in 2012, and the area has since been a flashpoint for maritime tensions. [CNA]

In the past year, clashes between Philippine and Chinese vessels near the shoal have resulted in injuries and damages. Tensions further escalated in November when Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos signed two laws defining the country's maritime boundaries and establishing fixed lanes for foreign ships (see AiR No. 46, November/2024, 2).

China warns US ahead of Taiwanese President's Pacific tour

(alk) China has urged the United States to exercise "utmost caution" regarding Taiwan, as Taiwanese President Lai Ching-te embarks on a Pacific tour that includes stopovers in Hawaii and Guam.

Beijing, which claims Taiwan as its territory, opposes any foreign interactions with the island's leaders, particularly involving the U.S. The US State Department defended Lai's transits as routine and in line with long-standing policy, emphasizing their unofficial nature and rejecting them as a pretext for provocation.

Lai's weeklong trip includes visits to the Marshall Islands, Tuvalu, and Palau, three of Taiwan's 12 formal diplomatic allies, as well as stopovers in Hawaii and Guam (see article in this edition). China is expected to respond with military drills near Taiwan, a move analysts believe is intended to protest Lai's US transits and broader international engagements. Taiwan's Foreign Minister Lin Chia-lung acknowledged the possibility of such drills.

The Chinese foreign ministry reiterated President Xi Jinping's stance against "separatist acts" in the Taiwan Strait, urging the US to oppose Taiwan independence and support peaceful reunification. Beijing condemned any US engagement with Taiwan's leaders and reaffirmed its commitment to defending its

sovereignty and territorial integrity. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China]

The US noted that previous Taiwanese presidents, including Tsai Ing-wen and Ma Ying-jeou, had made multiple transits through the US, underscoring the routine nature of such visits. During his trip, Lai emphasized strengthening Taiwan's partnerships and increasing its global presence, though his office avoided mentioning the US stopovers explicitly.

Tensions have been further strained by recent China and US naval and air operations in the Taiwan Strait. On November 26, China's military said it deployed naval and air forces to monitor and warn a US Navy P-8A Poseidon aircraft that flew through the Taiwan strait, in what the US described as a demonstration of commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific. China criticized the flight as provocative, claiming jurisdiction over the strait, while Taiwan and the US maintain it is an international waterway. [Reuters 1] [Reuters 2]

China faces strong condemnation after sentencing journalist to jail

(alk) Chinese journalist Dong Yuyu, 62, has been sentenced to seven years in prison on espionage charges. Dong, a senior journalist at the *Guangming Daily*, was detained in February 2022 while having lunch with a Japanese diplomat in Beijing. Although the diplomat was released after protests from Japan, Dong was accused of engaging with foreign agents, including Japanese diplomats identified by Chinese authorities as linked to an "espionage organization."

Dong had long been active in international journalism and academic circles, serving as a Nieman Fellow at Harvard University and a visiting professor at Japanese universities. A pro-reform voice within *Guangming Daily*, Dong contributed to the *New York Times* and participated in the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, for which he previously faced hard labor punishment.

Dong's family decried the charges as baseless, stating, "This verdict is a grave injustice not only to Dong but also to every journalist and ordinary Chinese citizen committed to global engagement." [BBC]

His sentencing has drawn sharp criticism from rights groups and international bodies. Among them are Reporters Without Borders (RSF) and the Committee to Protect Journalists calling for Dong's immediate release. [RSF] [CPJ]

The US condemned the verdict as unjust and inconsistent with China's obligations under international law and its own constitutional protections for free speech and press freedom. [US Department of State]

Japan-led anti-nuclear resolutions adopted by UN General Assembly

(dql) The UN General Assembly has adopted two Japan-led resolutions, reinforcing global commitments to disarmament and the abolition of nuclear weapons. The first resolution, supported by 152 countries including the U.S. and Britain, called for the abolition of nuclear weapons and emphasized engaging with atomic bomb survivors (hibakusha) to build awareness of the realities of nuclear warfare.

Opposing the resolution were China, Russia, North Korea, Iran, Nicaragua, and Syria, while 28 nations, including France, India, and Israel, abstained.

The second resolution, supported by 167 countries, called for a prohibition on deploying nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction in space. This initiative was also backed by Japan and the U.S. but faced opposition from Russia, North Korea, Iran, and Syria. [The Japan Times]

Japan seeks nonpermanent seat in UN Security Council 2043

(dql) Japan has announced its candidacy for a nonpermanent seat on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in 2043. Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary Keiichiro Tachibana emphasized the need for thorough preparation, as competition for the seat is expected to be intense.

Japan is currently serving its 12th nonpermanent term, which ends this month, and has already submitted its bid for the 2032 term as well. [Nippon.com]

Japan, UK, Italy in talks with Saudi Arabia on partnership in joint fighter jet development

(dql) Japan, the United Kingdom, and Italy are considering inviting Saudi Arabia to join the Global

Combat Air Programme (GCAP), a joint initiative to develop a sixth-generation fighter jet by 2035. The program, launched in December 2022, seeks to incorporate advanced technologies, surpassing current models like the F-35, while strengthening the defense industries of the participating nations.

The GCAP, estimated to cost tens of billions of dollars and create thousands of jobs, represents a strategic shift in global defense collaboration. By pooling resources and expertise, the initiative not only seeks to produce cutting-edge fighter jets but also aims to forge strategic alliances amid rising geopolitical tensions. This underscores the growing importance of international cooperation in advancing military capabilities and ensuring national security.

Saudi Arabia's potential role was discussed at a November 19 summit in Brazil (see AiR No. 48, November/2024, 4), where Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba and his British and Italian counterpart Keir Starmer and Giorgia Meloni explored London's financial contributions and efforts to develop its domestic defense sector.

While Saudi involvement could bolster the program, challenges such as its limited manufacturing capabilities and concerns over protecting sensitive technology must be addressed. Initial efforts will focus on enhancing Saudi Arabia's information security and industrial capacity. [The Rios Times]

The United Kingdom strongly supports Saudi inclusion, reflecting its longstanding defense ties with the kingdom. Japan, however, has taken a more cautious stance due to its limited history of defense cooperation with Saudi Arabia and concerns over technology leaks. [Kyodo News]

Djibouti, Indonesia, Mongolia, and Philippines to receive Japanese defense equipment

(dql/rv) Japan plans to provide defense equipment to the Philippines, Indonesia, Mongolia, and Djibouti under its Official Security Assistance (OSA) program, a government source revealed.

The initiative, launched in April 2023, is part of Tokyo's strategy to address regional security concerns, including China's increasing military assertiveness in the Asia-Pacific. For fiscal 2024, Japan has allocated JPY 5 billion (USD 33 million) in OSA grant aid, with these

four countries designated as recipients. [The Japan News]

The Philippines is expected to receive radar systems to counter China's aggressive actions in the South China Sea, where territorial disputes persist. Last year, Japan also provided the Philippines with a coastal surveillance radar under the OSA program. [Kyodo News]

In particular, the inclusion of Mongolia and Djibouti in this year's assistance plan is seen by analysts as an attempt to extend its geopolitical influence across more regions.

Mongolia, strategically positioned between China and Russia, has traditionally relied on its neighbors for security. However, it is increasingly adopting a "third nation strategy" to strengthen ties with countries like the United States and Japan. This approach reflects Mongolia's efforts to reduce dependency on its powerful neighbors while navigating delicate geopolitical dynamics.

Despite its aspirations for greater autonomy, Mongolia remains cautious about straining relations with Russia, particularly after it refrained from arresting Russian President Vladimir Putin during his visit to Ulaanbaatar in September (see AiR No. 37, September/2024, 2), defying an International Criminal Court warrant for alleged war crimes related to Ukraine. Japan has expressed interest in supporting Mongolia's autonomy by alleviating pressure from Russia and China. Analysts suggest this cooperation aligns with Japan's broader strategic efforts to counterbalance Chinese and Russian influence in the region.

Additionally, Japan's overseas strategic interests extend to Djibouti, where it operates its sole foreign Self-Defense Force base. This facility underscores Djibouti's strategic importance in maritime security and combating piracy. Japan aims to ensure the country remains a neutral player in the region amid China's growing presence. [South China Morning Post]

Special adviser to Japan's prime minister elected next Asian Development Bank chief

(dql) Masato Kanda, former top Japanese currency diplomat and current special adviser to Japan's prime minister, has been appointed as the next president of the Asian Development Bank (ADB). He will assume office on February 24, 2025, succeeding Masatsugu

Asakawa, another former senior official from Japan's Finance Ministry. [Asian Development Bank]

Japan, a key ADB shareholder alongside the United States, has traditionally held the bank's presidency since its founding in 1966. In his remarks, Kanda expressed his commitment to addressing a broad range of issues, including infrastructure development, poverty eradication, climate change, and global economic concerns.

Previously, as Japan's vice finance minister for international affairs, Kanda played a pivotal role in market interventions to stabilize the yen. He left the position in July 2024 after three years of service. [Kyodo News]

EU and Mongolia collaborate on gender equality in peacekeeping

(fs) The European Union and the Mongolian Armed Forces are jointly advancing gender equality in peacekeeping during the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence.

Twenty-two Mongolian peacekeepers are attending specialized training at the Peace Operations Training Centre in Slovenia, supported by the European Commission's Service for Foreign Policy Instruments.

This initiative, commemorating 35 years of EU-Mongolia diplomatic relations, highlights Mongolia's efforts in gender policy, including a sectoral gender equality policy introduced in 2020. The policy includes gender councils, "gender officer" roles in missions, and training over 150 personnel on gender sensitivity. [Ak Press]

North Korean diplomat sidesteps question on troop deployment to Russia at UN

(bw) Kim Song, North Korea's permanent representative to the U.N., avoided directly addressing a question about the country's alleged troop deployment to Russia during a U.N. meeting. Instead, he reiterated that North Korea would continue to strengthen its relations with Russia.

The question was posed by Robert Wood, the United States' alternate representative, during a U.N. Security

Council (UNSC) meeting on November 27 in New York. Wood asked, "It's a very simple question ... Has the DPRK deployed troops to Russia?"

Song deflected by responding, "The treaty on comprehensive strategic partnership between the DPRK and the Russian Federation fully conforms to international law and the U.N. Charter." He further stated that his country "remains faithful to its obligations under that treaty," a remark widely interpreted as an indirect acknowledgment of North Korea's troop deployment to Russia.

Wood also issued a warning, stating, "The deployment of DPRK troops to assist Russia in its illegal war of aggression against Ukraine ... has fundamentally changed the nature of this war, posing ... an increasing threat to broader European security." [The Korea Times] [NK News]

South Korea and G7 members voice concerns over North Korea's involvement in war in Ukraine

(ac) South Korean Minister of Foreign Affairs Cho Tae-yul and the diplomats from Canada, France, and Italy expressed their worries about North Korean's deployment to Russia against Ukraine during the G7 meetings in Italy last week.

Cho shared details about the situation, noting that North Korea has sent over 10,000 soldiers to Russia, some of whom are reportedly involved in combat. Cho further explained plans for a phased response to the security threats posed by the military collaboration between Russia and North Korea.

Cho also held a separate meeting with Canadian Foreign Minister Mélanie Joly and French Foreign Minister Jean-Noël Barrot. Both counterparts expressed serious concerns and committed to collaborating for a unified response, emphasizing its significance for both Europe and Indo-Pacific security. [Yonhap News Agency]

Chinese, Russian military aircraft enter South Korea's air defense zone, prompting fighter jet response

(mc) According to the South Korean General Staff, on November 29, five Chinese and six Russian military

aircraft entered South Korea's Air Defence Identification Zone (KADIZ) without prior notice, prompting South Korean warplanes to deploy.

The warplanes of the two countries entered the KADIZ from 9:35 to 13:53 on November 29 over the East Sea and southern waters near Ieodo Island. Although they did not violate South Korean airspace, their presence caused the reaction of the South Korean Air Force.

The South Korean Ministry of Defence strongly criticized the flight, lodging a complaint with both countries and demanding measures to prevent similar incidents.

Since 2019, these joint air patrols between the two countries, which took place on November 29, have occurred once or twice a year. The last previous Sino-Russian joint air patrol took place in December 2023. [Yonhap News Agency]

South Korean government and UN ESCAP explore enhanced cooperation for Asia-Pacific Development

(mc) South Korea and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UN ESCAP) held talks in Bangkok to strengthen cooperation in regional economic and social development.

During the talks, joint projects to promote sustainable growth in the Asia-Pacific region were discussed, and pledges were made to develop new projects that will benefit the area. [Yonhap News Agency]

Taiwan's suffers setback in CPTPP membership bid

(dql) Taiwan expressed disappointment on November 29 that the Trans-Pacific trade pact's members did not establish a working group to consider its Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) membership application.

Facing the diplomatic setback, the Taiwanese government emphasized that political considerations should not affect the decision-making process. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Taiwan, in Chinese]

This comes after a meeting in Vancouver last week where members agreed to form a working group for Costa Rica's entry, but not for Taiwan or China, both of which have applied for membership.

Taiwan, facing diplomatic isolation due to China's opposition, has few international trade agreements and insists it has the right to engage with global organizations independently. Taiwan and China, despite their political differences, are both members of the World Trade Organization. [Reuters] [Politico]

Bangladesh's interim leader calls for more intensive work to revitalize SAARC

(lm) Bangladesh's inteirm leader, Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus, has called on the SAARC Secretariat to intensify efforts to revitalize the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) for the benefit of the region. Yunus emphasized that SAARC had become a "forgotten" body, and urged the Secretariat to work towards its functional revival, highlighting the potential benefits for the people of South Asia.

Golam Sarwar, Secretary General of SAARC, expressed gratitude for Yunus's strong support of the organization and his recent call for South Asian leaders to revive the multilateral body. During their meeting, Sarwar briefed Yunus on ongoing Saarc activities at the working level, such as efforts on climate change, SDGs, regional integration, and customs cooperation. Sarwar also noted that the lack of high-level meetings had hindered the effectiveness of these initiatives.

The two leaders discussed the need for regular meetings of foreign secretaries, ministers, and even a summit of leaders to strengthen SAARC's functions. Yunus also urged Sarwar to explore multilateral issues, including the export of hydroelectric power from Nepal to Bangladesh, India, and Bhutan. [Dhaka Tribune]

SAARC has been largely inactive in recent years due to political tensions between member states, particularly between India and Pakistan. The organization's inability to hold high-level summits and meetings has limited its effectiveness in addressing key regional issues, including climate change, trade cooperation, and conflict resolution.

India’s Navy chief Dinesh Tripathi discusses security concerns, acquisitions, and regional challenges

Ahead of India's Navy Day on December 4, Navy Chief Admiral Dinesh K. Tripathi addressed ongoing security concerns, military acquisitions, and regional geopolitical developments. Tripathi highlighted that, despite recent negotiations between India and China over the Ladakh border, there has been no shift in China's approach in the Indo-Pacific region, which remains a cause for concern. He stated that the situation in the South China Sea, where China is increasing its presence, continues to be worrying, although he noted that China has not sent any submarines to the Indian Ocean region since 2023.

The Navy chief also pointed to a growing military nexus between China and Pakistan, citing the expansion of Pakistan's naval capabilities with Chinese support. Pakistan's goal of a 50-ship navy by the next decade, including submarines built with Chinese assistance, has prompted India to adjust its own naval strategies to counter any threats.

Regarding military acquisitions, Tripathi confirmed that India is close to finalizing deals for 26 Rafale marine aircraft and additional Scorpene submarines, with contracts expected to be signed by next month. These acquisitions will significantly enhance the Navy's combat capabilities. Tripathi also shared details of a successful test fire of a 3,500 km-range ballistic missile from India's nuclear submarine, INS Arighaat, signaling progress in India’s strategic defense.

On broader defense developments, Tripathi revealed that India is set to receive 96 new ships and submarines over the next decade, with 31 currently under construction in India. Additionally, the Navy will soon induct two nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs) as part of its expanding capabilities. He also discussed India's role in combating piracy in the Gulf of Aden, where Navy efforts have successfully reduced piracy incidents. [The Indian Express]

US Assistant Secretary of State Donald Lu on tour to India, Sri Lanka, Nepal

(lm) US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, Donald Lu, is visiting India, Sri Lanka, and Nepal from December 3 to 10, with a focus on strengthening regional cooperation in South Asia.

Lu's visit will begin in India, where he will join Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Daniel Kritenbrink, to lead US participation in the US-India East Asia Consultations. These consultations, along with separate meetings with senior Indian officials, will allow for exchanges on global and regional issues.

The diplomat will then travel to Sri Lanka to advance US-Sri Lankan cooperation, focusing on sustainable economic growth, combating corruption, and strengthening people-to-people ties. He will meet with senior government officials and civil society representatives to discuss how the US can support Sri Lanka's governance and economic reform agenda through technical assistance and development programs. [The Tribune India] [U.S. Embassy in Sri Lanka]

Lu will conclude his tour in Nepal, where he will meet with senior leaders to promote cooperation on environmental protection, women's empowerment, and sustainable development. His visit will also include discussions with youth leaders to gain insights into their vision for the future of US-Nepal relations. A key aspect of the visit will be the recognition of Nepal's rich cultural heritage as a cornerstone of its identity and a driver of its tourism and economy. [The Kathmandu Post]

Pakistan signs ECO clean energy charter at Iran summit

Pakistan's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, Ishaq Dar, signed the Economic Cooperation Organization's (ECO) charter on clean energy during the 28th meeting of the ECO Council of Ministers in Mashhad, Iran, on December 3, 2024. The signing marks a commitment to enhance regional cooperation for a sustainable energy transition.

The ECO, an intergovernmental organization founded in 1985 by Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey, aims to foster economic, technical, and cultural cooperation among member states. The clean energy charter is a key initiative under the ECO's energy sector, focusing on research and development of renewable energy sources and combating climate change. The charter also aligns with the UN's Sustainable Energy for All Initiative, promoting regional sustainable energy efforts.

In addition to the signing, Dar met with Iranian Foreign Minister Seyed Abbas Araghchi to discuss bilateral

cooperation and regional issues, agreeing to deepen ties in various sectors. Dar also held separate discussions with ECO Secretary General Dr. Asad Majeed and Kazakhstan's Deputy Prime Minister Murat Nurtleu to explore ways to strengthen inter-regional connectivity and trade within the ECO framework. [Arab News 1]

The visit comes amid ongoing challenges in Pakistan-Iran relations, including the long-delayed USD 7 billion Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline, which remains incomplete due to the need for a United States sanctions waiver. Despite these challenges, both nations have worked to strengthen ties, with former Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi's visit to Pakistan in April aimed at enhancing cooperation in trade, security, and other sectors.

Dar's visit also follows Iranian Foreign Minister Araghchi's recent consultations in Islamabad regarding Middle East tensions, further demonstrating the growing regional diplomacy within the ECO framework. [Arab News 2]

Asian Development Bank to help Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, in climate-smart urban development

(ja) The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has agreed to provide technical assistance to Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, and Uzbekistan supporting the advancement of climate-smart urban development. The initiative, valued at USD 2 million, will focus on climate-informed urban planning, identifying climate change investments, and exploring innovative climate financing solutions to scale up urban climate actions.

The assistance will help cities in these countries develop climate change action plans (CCCAP) based on city-wide climate risk assessments and greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions profiling. The initiative will harness geographic information systems (GIS) solutions to assess localized climate impacts on urban residents and propose appropriate climate actions.

This project aligns with ADB's role as the climate bank of Asia and the Pacific, promoting climate-smart urban development. The assistance will build on ADB's previous technical and strategic progress and contribute to operationalizing the urban priorities outlined in its Climate Change Action Plan (CCAP).

The ADB report highlights that many cities in the three countries face challenges such as weak governance, limited financial resources, and inadequate expertise

in implementing climate change measures. The technical assistance will address gaps in climate planning and financing, and will also aim to develop inclusive, gender-mainstreamed climate action plans. [DAWN]

UNESCO mobilizes funds to preserve Sindh's heritage sites

(ja) UNESCO has allocated USD 150,000 from the World Heritage Fund to help the government of Pakistan's Sindh province assess damage and protect UNESCO World Heritage Sites like Mohenjodaro and Makli from future rainfall. An additional USD 50,000 was dedicated to restoring tombs at Makli damaged by the 2022 monsoon floods.

The floods caused an estimated USD 6 million in damage to cultural sites, including Mohenjodaro and Makli. In response, UNESCO, in collaboration with Sindh's Directorate of Antiquities, organized a workshop on disaster risk reduction at Mohenjodaro. The workshop aimed to build long-term capacity for safeguarding Pakistan's cultural heritage from future disasters. [DAWN]

European flight ban lifted for Pakistan's national airline, paving way for financial revival

(sn/ja) Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) is set to resume flights to Europe and potentially the United Kingdom after the European Union Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) lifted a four-year suspension. The ban, imposed in June 2020 following concerns over pilot licensing and aviation safety standards after a crash that killed 97 people, had severely restricted PIA's operations and cost the airline an estimated PKR 40 billion (USD 144 million) annually in lost revenue.

EASA's decision, announced on November 29, comes after comprehensive reforms undertaken by the Pakistan Civil Aviation Authority (PCAA) and PIA to address deficiencies. These included strengthening compliance with International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) standards, separating regulatory and service functions under the PCAA Act, and appointing professional leadership to enhance oversight capabilities. A key turning point was an on-site assessment by EASA in November 2023, which

verified substantial improvements in aviation governance.

The lifting of the ban enables PIA to tap into the profitable European market, starting with direct flights to Paris within three to four weeks. The airline has also signaled plans to approach the UK Department for Transport to secure approval for flights to London, Manchester, and Birmingham. These developments are expected to restore PIA's international reputation and financial stability, especially as the government prepares to privatize a 60 percent stake in the airline.

The suspension's end also benefits Pakistan's private carriers, with Airblue Limited regaining Third Country Operator (TCO) authorization for European operations. This marks a broader revival for Pakistan's aviation industry, enhancing confidence in its regulatory framework and governance.

PIA's return to European routes offers convenience to millions of expatriate Pakistanis and improves connectivity, a critical factor for a carrier with agreements in 87 countries but limited competitiveness against Middle Eastern airlines. Its 34-plane fleet currently holds a 23 percent share of Pakistan's domestic aviation market, while regional competitors dominate with a 60 percent share. [Informa Markets] [DVV Media] [www.thenews.com.pk] [Arab News]

Sri Lanka, World Bank discuss development priorities

(raa) In a virtual meeting on November 27, Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Dissanayake and World Bank Group President Ajay Banga outlined key priorities for Sri Lanka's development. The discussion focused on financial and technical assistance in critical sectors, including education, healthcare, social protection, and economic growth.

President Banga emphasized the World Bank's commitment to job creation and addressing development challenges through targeted investments. He highlighted support for economic policy, finance, competitiveness, institutional reforms, and poverty reduction. Other areas of collaboration include agriculture, water management, climate resilience, social inclusion, infrastructure, and digital transformation.

President Dissanayake reiterated the government's focus on poverty alleviation, particularly in rural

communities, and stressed the importance of boosting government revenue through digitalization. Key sectors, including tourism, the maritime industry, energy, and state-owned enterprises, were prioritized for reform and private investment, particularly in power generation.

President Banga announced Sri Lanka's selection as one of 20 countries to host an integrated South Asia office, set to open on July 25, 2025. This office will streamline operations across the World Bank Group's four institutions, the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), the International Development Association (IDA), the International Finance Corporation (IFC), and the Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency (MIGA), to enhance regional collaboration and project delivery. [Daily News]

Cambodia rejects European Parliament Resolution as misleading and unfounded

(ma) The National Assembly of Cambodia has condemned a recent European Parliament resolution, calling it biased and based on misinformation. In a statement issued on November 30, the assembly emphasized that Cambodia remains committed to upholding human rights and democratic principles. It refuted allegations of political prisoners and repression of civil society, asserting that legal actions are conducted in line with the rule of law to maintain public order and accountability. The assembly highlighted the country's open civic space, citing over 6,000 registered civil society organizations and nearly 2,000 media outlets operating freely.

It also defended the credibility of the 2023 general elections, which saw an 84.59 percent voter turnout and participation from 18 political parties. Tens of thousands of observers, including international representatives, deemed the elections free and fair. The National Assembly pointed to the increasing number of trade unions and professional organizations as evidence of a conducive environment for freedom of association, in line with ILO conventions.

Reaffirming its commitment to democratic governance and human rights, the National Assembly called for a balanced reassessment of the situation by European Parliament members. [Khmer Times]

ADB approves USD 50 million loan to boost Cambodia's business competitiveness and trade

(ma) The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has approved a USD 50-million policy-based loan to enhance Cambodia's business environment, promote competitiveness, and reduce trade barriers. As part of the second sub-program under the Trade and Competitiveness Programme, the initiative aims to attract private sector investments for inclusive and sustainable growth. ADB Country Director Jyotsana Varma highlighted the program's focus on supporting micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) to drive competitiveness through targeted incentives, digital integration, and productivity enhancements.

The program addresses key challenges such as an underdeveloped business ecosystem, MSME constraints, and cross-border trade barriers. By improving regulatory frameworks and streamlining procedures, it seeks to boost Cambodia's participation in regional and global markets. Efforts will include enhancing public services and simplifying business regulations to create a more investor-friendly environment, positioning Cambodia as a competitive hub for trade and investment.

By 2027, the program aims to formally register approximately 50,000 MSMEs through an online platform that facilitates digital business licensing. Additionally, it will provide technological support and incentives to help businesses expand into strategic sectors and climb the value chain. Reforms focused on border facilitation aim to further enhance trade efficiency, fostering greater economic integration and growth potential. [The Cambodia Daily]

Indonesia calls for support for ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific at G7 summit

(mu) Indonesian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sugiono has called on all countries to support ASEAN in realizing transparent and inclusive cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region as stipulated in the ASEAN Outlook on Indo-Pacific (AOIP). Sugiono made the statement during a meeting of foreign ministers of G7 countries and their partner countries in the Indo-Pacific in Fiuggi, Italy.

Indonesia attended the G7 forum at the invitation alongside other countries in the Indo-Pacific, such as the Philippines, India, and South Korea. The minister

emphasized that Indonesia would continue to serve as "bridge builder" between developed and developing countries.

On the sidelines, Sugiono held bilateral talks with the Ukrainian and South Korean foreign ministers, discussing strategies for resolving the Russia-Ukraine conflict and exploring opportunities for expanding bilateral cooperation in defense and workforce training. [Antara] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia, in Indonesian] [Tempo.co]

Indonesia weighs MPIA membership amid WTO challenges

(gk) Deputy Trade Minister of Indonesia Dyah Roro Esti Widya Putri said that Indonesia is currently mulling over the decision of joining the alternative arbitration mechanism Multi-Party Interim Arbitration Arrangement (MPIA), amidst the Appellate Body crisis at the World Trade Organization (WTO).

Ever since Donald Trump's administration blocked appointments to the Appellate Body in 2019, the body has been unable to enforce WTO rules, and many disputes have been put in limbo. As an alternative, in 2020, the European Union and other countries such as Canada, came together to establish the MPIA.

With Trump's return as the President of the United States, the future of WTO's Appellate Body remains uncertain. Countries that wish to lodge an appeal can use the MPIA instead of the uncertain WTO Appellate Body.

While Indonesia is not a member yet, President Subianto's economic advisor Mari Elka Pangestu said that Indonesia is keen on joining the MPIA, since Trump's return means that there shall be no place for any further actions on reviving the Appellate Body. Mari Elka further added that joining the MPIA would give small and developing countries a fair chance and would protect them from bullying at international fronts, although Jakarta needs to keep its drawbacks in mind. [Jakarta Globe]

Annual CPOPC ministerial meeting held in Jakarta

(gk) The 12th Council of Palm Oil Producing Countries (CPOPC) Ministerial Meeting was held in Jakarta, bringing together key stakeholders from member,

observer, and guest countries to address various challenges facing the palm oil sector.

Indonesia's Coordinating Minister for Economic Affairs, Airlangga Hartarto, and Malaysia's Minister of Agriculture and Commodities, Johari Abdul Ghani, held a joint press conference where both nations emphasized the need for greater cooperation to tackle regulatory challenges confronting the global palm oil industry.

One focus of the meeting was the European Union Deforestation Regulation (EUDR), which seeks to combat global deforestation by ensuring that certain commodities sold in the EU do not contribute to forest loss or degradation. Ghani cautioned that protectionist policies like the EUDR could create trade barriers, disproportionately affecting small-scale palm oil farmers – estimated at around 2.5 million in Indonesia and 400,000-450,000 in Malaysia. He emphasized CPOPC's role in devising strategies to ensure fair treatment for small-scale farmers, improve market access, and promote sustainable practices in the palm oil sector.

Hartarto affirmed that the Joint Task Force on the EUDR, involving Indonesia, Malaysia, and the EU, would continue its efforts. He stressed the importance of gaining recognition for Indonesia's and Malaysia's respective sustainability standards – Indonesian Sustainable Palm Oil (ISPO) and Malaysian Sustainable Palm Oil (MSPO) – as equivalent to European standards and the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO). On the matter of traceability under EUDR standards, he highlighted that the EU's requirement to disclose specific location data imposes undue burdens on Indonesia, noting that such data is already accessible through a platform developed by the country.

Hartarto also announced that Indonesia's mandatory 40% biodiesel program (B40) will be implemented starting January 1, 2025. He revealed that the government has agreed to increase national palm oil production to meet the B40 quota, aiming to reduce CO2 emissions by over 40 million tons annually.

The meeting welcomed Nigeria and Congo as new observer countries, while Colombia, Ghana, and Papua New Guinea are in discussions to become full members. The event concluded with Indonesia officially handing over the CPOPC chairmanship to Malaysia for the 2024–2025 term. [Antara 1] [Antara 2] [Bernama] [Tempo]

Indonesia discusses cooperation with Melanesian Spearhead Group member countries

(gk) Indonesia's Vice Foreign Minister Arrmanatha Nasir attended the Ministerial level Meeting of the sub-regional block Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG), held in Port Villa, Vanuatu, on November 28.

Indonesia, being an associate member of this grouping, affirmed its commitment to cooperation with the MSG member countries and has set three main priorities. Firstly, priority is given to advancing development cooperation. Indonesia is dedicated to supporting the MSG member countries in tackling critical challenges, including effects of climate change and rising sea levels. Nasir added that Indonesia remains committed to offering training programs in areas that significantly benefit the society, such as fisheries, public health, law enforcement, and vocational education. He further added that Indonesia sees great trade opportunities with MSG countries, especially for flagship products such as cocoa, fish, sugar and mineral water.

Secondly, Indonesia is also prioritizing strengthening regional resilience. Indonesia proposed synergy of the MSG program with the Archipelagic and Island States Forum, for energy transition disaster preparedness enhancement; and blue economy development by utilizing the vast potential of Pacific marine resources.

The third area of focus for Indonesia is to act as a bridge for Pacific region advocating for the spirit of non-alignment amid global geopolitical tensions, as emphasized in the Efate Declaration. It highlights the importance of strengthening Southeast Asia-Pacific cooperation, aligned with the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, particularly in infrastructure development, climate change mitigation, and sustainable development.

The MSG is a sub-regional intergovernmental organization in the Pacific, that brings together Melanesian countries and territories. Its full Members are Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, The Kanak and Socialist National Liberation Front (FLNKS) from New Caledonia (a political movement advocating for independence). The organization focuses on cooperation in the fields of economy-socio-culture, politics, and security. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The Republic of Indonesia]

Indonesian warship completes humanitarian mission in Pacific countries

(mu) The Indonesian warship KRI dr. Wahidin Sudirohusodo-991 completed a humanitarian mission to South Pacific countries, including the Solomon Islands, Fiji, Vanuatu, and Papua New Guinea, as part of the 2024 Pacific Port Visit Task Force.

The mission, which began on October 9, and lasted for 48 days, aimed to support Indonesia's foreign policy and enhance regional relations. The task force provided free medical services, delivered aid packages, and promoted Indonesia's presence in the region. [Antara] [RRI, in Indonesian]

Malaysia in process of joining International Solar Alliance

(ga) Discussions on Malaysia's membership in the International Solar Alliance (ISA) are moving forward positively, with the Indian Ministry of Energy recommending Malaysia's inclusion. ISA Director-General Dr. Ajay Mathur expressed confidence that Malaysia's membership will be finalized soon. The talks have been strengthened through collaboration between the Indian Ministry of External Affairs and Malaysia's Foreign Ministry.

The ISA, founded in 2015, brings together countries to address climate change through solar energy initiatives, and Malaysia, with its ambitious goals for solar energy, is poised to become a key member.

The ISA is also exploring Singapore as the hub for its Global Solar Facility in the ASEAN region. [Bernama]

Myanmar's opposition welcomes ICC's move to arrest junta leader

(sc/nf) International Criminal Court (ICC) Prosecutor Karim A.A. Khan KC has filed an application for an arrest warrant against Min Aung Hlaing, the leader of Myanmar's military, who "bears criminal responsibility for the crimes against humanity of deportation and persecution of the Rohingya, committed in Myanmar, and in part in Bangladesh." [ICC] [BBC]

The National Unity Government (NUG), along with the Karen National Union (KNU), Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), and Chin National Front

(CNF), issued a joint statement on November 30, welcoming the ICC's action. They emphasized that this marks the first time in Myanmar's history that an individual military leader faces such international legal proceedings for crimes against humanity. [National Unity Government of Myanmar]

The opposition groups called on military personnel to support security sector reforms based on federal principles, aiming to free the military from Min Aung Hlaing's control and restore its reputation as a professional institution respected by the people. They condemned the planned elections by the military leader as illegitimate and a reckless step that offers no meaningful political resolution.

The groups urged neighboring countries, ASEAN, the United Nations, and the international community to avoid actions that could legitimize the military's crimes. They vowed to intensify efforts to bring Min Aung Hlaing to justice through international mechanisms and reaffirmed their commitment to transitional justice to prevent future military coups and address the suffering of Myanmar's ethnic communities and people. [National Unity Government of Myanmar]

Meanwhile, China’s foreign ministry stated that the ICC lacks jurisdiction over non-signatory countries like Myanmar and criticized the move as outside the authority of the UN Security Council. Myanmar’s military government similarly rejected the ICC’s authority.

G7 calls on Myanmar junta to release detainees and engage in inclusive dialogue

(anl) At the G7 Foreign Ministers' Meeting on November 26, member countries, including Japan, Canada, France, Italy, Germany, the US, and the UK, issued a statement urging Myanmar's junta to release all individuals arbitrarily detained and engage in inclusive dialogue with all relevant stakeholders.

The statement called for the full and unconditional implementation of UNSC Resolution 2669. It also demanded that the junta lift restrictions on UN agencies, humanitarian aid, and international humanitarian organizations, ensuring unimpeded access to the Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar. Additionally, the G7 urged the international community to cease the transfer of arms and dual-use materials, including jet fuel, to the Myanmar military. [Mizzima]

United Nations Security Council Resolution 2669, adopted on December 21, 2022, addressed the ongoing crisis in Myanmar following the military coup of February 2021. The resolution expressed deep concern over the situation, calling for an immediate cessation of violence and the release of all arbitrarily detained individuals, including political figures like Aung San Suu Kyi and Win Myint. The Security Council emphasized the importance of dialogue and a peaceful resolution to the crisis and called for the implementation of ASEAN's Five-Point Consensus, which seeks to bring stability and resolve the conflict in Myanmar

Asian Development Bank approves USD 500 million loan for the Philippines' climate change efforts

(er) The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has approved a USD 500 million loan to support the Philippines' climate change initiatives. The loan will help accelerate reforms in agriculture, natural resources, energy, and transport, aiming to make these sectors more climate-resilient and low-carbon. The Philippines, which faces the highest disaster risk globally, has committed to cutting greenhouse gas emissions by 75 percent by 2030. This follows a pledge made in 2021, up from an earlier target of 70 percent. The ADB also announced USD 10 billion in climate finance for the country from 2024 to 2029. [Reuters]

Singapore, EU strengthen law enforcement cooperation

(fi) A working arrangement was recently signed to establish cooperative relations between Singapore's law enforcement authorities and Europol, marking a significant step toward enhanced collaboration on international crime. The agreement aims to facilitate the exchange of information, joint operations, and mutual support in combating transnational crime, including cybercrime, terrorism, and human trafficking.

By fostering closer ties with Europol, Singapore reinforces its commitment to global security and law enforcement efforts. This partnership highlights the importance of international cooperation in addressing complex and evolving security challenges. [Europol]

Thailand to host informal ASEAN talks on Myanmar crisis to advance Five-Point Consensus

(acs/lm) Thailand is set to host extended informal consultations on the Myanmar crisis in December, with a focus on advancing the ASEAN Five-Point Consensus. These talks will aim to review the progress made in implementing the consensus, which was originally adopted during Indonesia's ASEAN chairmanship. The five points of the consensus call for an immediate cessation of violence in Myanmar, inclusive dialogue among all parties, the appointment of a special envoy, the provision of humanitarian aid, and a visit by the envoy to engage all stakeholders.

The meeting, scheduled for December 19-20, will involve the ASEAN chairs of the previous year (Indonesia), the current year (Laos), and the incoming chair (Malaysia). Other ASEAN member states are also invited to participate in the discussions. Laos has been proactive in advancing the initiative, having hosted previous consultations and allowed a non-political representative from Myanmar to attend the ASEAN summit.

In addition to the ASEAN-led efforts, the meeting comes amidst increasing international pressure on Myanmar. This includes the issuance of an arrest warrant by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for Myanmar's military leader, Min Aung Hlaing, over alleged crimes against the Rohingya Muslim minority. While Thailand, not being an ICC member, acknowledges the sensitivity of the issue, the country is committed to playing a constructive role in resolving the crisis within ASEAN frameworks. [Bangkok Post 1] [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand concludes first free trade agreement with European bloc to boost exports and investment

(lm) Thailand has finalized its first free trade agreement (FTA) with the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), which includes Switzerland, Norway, Iceland, and Liechtenstein. The agreement, set to be signed during the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2025, aims to enhance export opportunities and attract European investments.

The FTA, negotiated since 2022, covers 15 areas, including trade, investment, sustainability, and small and medium enterprise (SME) development.

Commerce Minister Pichai Naripthaphan emphasized its alignment with Thailand's goals of fostering trade ties and sustainable growth. The agreement is seen as a gateway for future trade deals, particularly with the European Union.

From January to October 2024, trade between Thailand and EFTA exceeded THB 100 billion (USD 2.9 billion), marking a 23.22 percent increase year-on-year. Key exports include jewellery, machinery, and rice, while imports focus on pharmaceuticals, seafood, and gold. [Bangkok Post]

Israel warns of intensified terror threat in Southeast Asian; Thailand identified as particular focus

(lm) Israel has issued a warning to its citizens about an increased terror threat in Southeast Asia, with Thailand identified as a particular focus. This follows intelligence linking the suspects behind the November 21 murder of Rabbi Zvi Kogan in Dubai to potential attacks in the region. Kogan, a prominent figure in the Jewish community, was found murdered on November 24. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has arrested three individuals connected to the crime but has not disclosed their identities.

Israel's National Security Council has recommended avoiding non-essential travel to the UAE and urged citizens to exercise caution at places associated with Israeli and Jewish populations. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu vowed to hold the perpetrators accountable and highlighted cooperation with the UAE in addressing the incident.

The alert reflects broader concerns amid heightened risks to Israelis abroad following the Israel-Hamas war that began in October 2023. [Bangkok Post]

UNHCR supports Thailand in making statelessness history

(hrs) Building on the recent decision by the Thai Cabinet to expedite the path to nationality for nearly half a million stateless individuals, the Royal Thai Government (RTG) has reaffirmed its commitment to ending statelessness in the country. During an event in Bangkok, organized jointly by the RTG and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), senior Thai officials outlined a comprehensive vision

aimed at empowering approximately 500,000 stateless individuals to gain Thai nationality and become contributing members of society.

Deputy Minister of Interior, Sabeeda Thaised, emphasized that the ultimate goal is to ensure stateless individuals are recognized as full members of Thai society. The initiative will focus on providing permanent residency to 335,000 long-term residents and granting nationality to 142,000 children born in Thailand. This effort is one of the most ambitious global initiatives to address statelessness. UNHCR's Representative in Thailand, Tammi Sharpe, praised Thailand's leadership, highlighting that this bold move could inspire other nations to follow suit.

The UNHCR, working closely with the RTG, is instrumental in the implementation of this resolution, assisting with mobile registration drives and collaborating with civil society organizations, including those led by stateless or formerly stateless people. These groups will help guide stateless communities through the application process. [Bangkok Post]

Bangladesh-India relations take a further dive amid protests and arrest of ISKCON leader

(lm) On November 26, tensions between Bangladesh and India reached new heights following the arrest of Hindu religious leader Chinmoy Krishna Das, a member of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON). Das was charged with sedition after leading a rally in which he called for justice for Hindus and better protection of religious minorities in Bangladesh. The court's denial of his bail triggered violent protests, with over 2,000 demonstrators surrounding the prison van transporting Das, hurling bricks at the police. Authorities responded with tear gas to disperse the crowd, but no serious injuries were reported.

Das's arrest stemmed from an October rally where he was accused of disrespecting Bangladesh's national flag while advocating for the protection of Hindus, who had faced increasing persecution. This incident quickly garnered significant attention from neighboring India, which expressed grave concern over the treatment of religious minorities in Bangladesh. [Al Jazeera]

In the wake of the unrest, the chief minister of India's West Bengal bordering Bangladesh, Mamata Banerjee, further stoked tensions by suggesting the deployment of UN peacekeepers to Bangladesh. This proposal was

met with strong condemnation in Dhaka, where the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) rejected it outright, accusing Banerjee of undermining Bangladesh's sovereignty. BNP leaders, including Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, emphasized that Bangladesh's independence, hard-earned through the Liberation War, should not be compromised. They warned against external interference in Bangladesh's internal matters. [The Daily Star 1] [Dhaka Tribune 1]

Further complicating matters, Bangladesh's Home Affairs Adviser, Lt Gen (retd) Md Jahangir Alam Chowdhury, accused Indian media of spreading false narratives regarding the treatment of minorities in Bangladesh, claiming that these reports had fueled the unrest.

The political fallout from Das's arrest continued to escalate when protests spread into India on December 2, particularly in the border state of Tripura. Activists from organizations such as the Hindu Sanatani Nagarik Samaj, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), and Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) organized demonstrations demanding Das's immediate release and the revocation of Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus's prize. Yunus, Bangladesh's interim leader, was criticized for his alleged failure to address violence against minorities in his country. [The Indian Express 1]

In Agartala, the capital of Tripura, protesters attacked the Bangladesh Assistant High Commission, vandalizing the mission and setting fire to the Bangladesh national flag. The protest, initially peaceful, escalated when some demonstrators breached the mission premises. This attack followed a similar incident in Kolkata, deepening the strain in relations between the two nations. [The Daily Star 2] [The Daily Star 3]

Amid the escalating tensions, Hefazat-e-Islam, a conservative Islamic organization in Bangladesh, entered the political discourse. The group condemned Indian media's portrayal of events in Bangladesh, accusing India of inciting communal tensions. Hefazat leaders also criticized the Awami League government for allegedly repressing Islamic scholars and being unduly influenced by foreign powers, especially India. On December 2, Hefazat activists held a rally in Chittagong, where they submitted a memorandum to the local deputy commissioner, demanding an end to anti-Bangladesh propaganda by Indian media and politicians. [Dhaka Tribune 2]

In India, the escalating situation led to a boycott of Bangladeshi patients by J N Roy Hospital in Kolkata. In response to the desecration of the Indian national flag

in Bangladesh, the hospital's director called for national dignity to be upheld and urged other medical institutions to follow suit. This move reflected broader sentiment among Indian political figures and medical professionals, who called for a tougher stance on Bangladesh in light of the ongoing violence and the arrest of Das. [Business Today]

In response to these developments, Bangladesh's Foreign Affairs Adviser, Md Touhid Hossain, reiterated the country's commitment to maintaining good relations with India. However, he called on India to address several unresolved issues in the bilateral relationship, including the Teesta water-sharing agreement, border killings, and the protection of minority rights in both countries. Hossain emphasized that Bangladesh would continue to protect its diplomatic interests while striving to maintain communal harmony and ensure equality for all its citizens. [The Daily Star 4] [The Indian Express 2]

Bangladesh wants to renegotiate Adani power deal unless court cancels

(lm) Bangladesh aims to significantly lower prices under its power purchase agreement with India's Adani Group unless the deal is cancelled by a court, which has ordered an investigation into the 25-year contract.

Adani Group's founder Gautam Adani is already under scrutiny for alleged involvement in a USD 265 million bribery scheme in India, though he denies the charges. Meanwhile, in Bangladesh, the High Court recently formed an expert committee to examine the deal under which Adani supplies power from a USD 2 billion coal-fired plant in eastern India. The investigation is set to conclude by February, with a ruling expected soon after.

The agreement, signed in 2017, supplies about 10 percent of Bangladesh's electricity, but the power comes at a high price, partly due to the use of expensive imported coal. Bangladesh's power and energy adviser, Muhammad Fouzul Kabir Khan, stated that if the investigation reveals anomalies such as corruption, the deal could be cancelled; otherwise, the government may renegotiate certain aspects of the contract.

Key concerns include Bangladesh not benefiting from certain Indian tax exemptions granted to the power plant. Adani's rates for power were the highest in the 2022/23 fiscal year, charging BDT 14.02 per unit

compared to the average price of BDT 8.77 per unit for other suppliers. In 2023/24, the rate was reduced to BDT 12 per unit, still significantly higher than rates from other Indian producers.

The high cost of power has led Bangladesh to subsidize electricity, costing the government BDT 320 billion annually. Despite these challenges, Bangladesh is committed to paying for the electricity it imports from Adani and has enough domestic power capacity to meet its needs, even with some plants underutilized due to gas shortages or other issues.

Khan emphasized that Bangladesh will not allow any power producer to "blackmail" the country. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh's interim leader seeks more Swedish investment

(lm) On December 2, Bangladesh interim leader Muhammad Yunus met with Swedish Ambassador to Bangladesh, Nicolas Weeks, and urged for increased Swedish investment in Bangladesh. Yunus highlighted the interim government's ongoing reforms aimed at improving the business environment, such as reducing corruption, facilitating investments in export processing zones, and advancing labor law reforms through ratification of International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions.

Ambassador Weeks reaffirmed Sweden's support for the Yunus-led interim government, particularly its efforts to reform key institutions such as the police, judiciary, election commission, and civil administration. Weeks assured Yunus of Sweden's full backing in the government's transition process.

During their discussion, Yunus and Weeks also addressed the student-led mass uprising that led to the ouster of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Yunus described the uprising as a call for reform, highlighting the crucial role women played in the movement. He reaffirmed the interim government's commitment to carrying out necessary reforms before elections, while acknowledging the challenge of managing public expectations as the country works toward stabilization. [Dhaka Tribune]

24 pardoned Bangladeshi expatriates returning home from United Arab

Emirates

(lm) A total of 24 Bangladeshis are set to return to Bangladesh after being pardoned by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) government. This follows the UAE's decision last week to release 75 more expatriates who were arrested for protesting in solidarity with Bangladesh's student-led protest movement, which led to the ouster of then-Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in August, bringing the total number of pardoned individuals to 188.

In a statement, the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment confirmed that the UAE government's clemency decision, which began with the release of 57 Bangladeshis on September 3, had now extended to 188 individuals. The pardons are part of a broader general amnesty for those involved in the protests. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh urges Australia to take more proactive stance to resolve Rohingya crisis

(vk) Bangladesh's interim government has urged Australia to take a more proactive stance in pressuring Myanmar to resolve the Rohingya crisis, calling for global political action. Senior officials also requested Australia's technical support in areas such as agriculture, education, energy, the blue economy, and ICT.

These discussions took place during the fifth Senior Officials' Talks between the two nations, held at Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). The talks covered a wide range of topics, including development partnership, migration, security, and cooperation in multilateral forums. Australia reaffirmed its support for Bangladesh's interim government and sought assistance on issues like irregular migration and human trafficking. Both sides emphasized their commitment to tackling global environmental challenges, with the next round of talks set for Dhaka in 2025. [The Daily Star]

Brunei and Singapore strengthen translation collaboration

(ga) The seventh Translator Placement Programme between Brunei and Singapore took place from November 18 to 24, strengthening collaboration in the

field of translation. Participating stakeholders are Singapore's Ministry of Digital Development and Information, Brunei's Information Department, Radio Television Brunei, the Language and Literature Bureau, and Universiti Brunei Darussalam.

The officials gained insights into Brunei's translation processes, particularly the use of Jawi script, and engaged in discussions with local translators.

Launched in 2016, this program alternates annually between Brunei and Singapore, aiming to enhance translation skills, share best practices, and address translation challenges in diverse contexts while promoting professional ties and knowledge sharing. [Borneo Bulletin]

Brunei and Malaysia strengthen education ties during ASEAN visit

(ga) Malaysian Minister of Education Fadhlina Sidek paid a one-day visit to Bandar Seri Begawan on November 27 during her ASEAN Visit 2024, where she met with Brunei's Minister of Education Dr. Romaizah Salleh. The two ministers discussed key educational matters and explored opportunities for furthering the development of the Malay language.

Both sides expressed their desire for continued collaboration to advance educational initiatives and strengthen ties between the two countries in the field of education. [Borneo Bulletin]

Brunei and United States strengthen maritime security and bilateral ties in 30th CARAT exercise

(ga) The 30th Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) Exercise between the Royal Brunei Armed Forces (RBAF) and the U.S. military in Bandar Seri Begawan concluded on November 25 after eight days of training and collaboration.

The exercise featured a range of activities, including Subject Matter Expert Exchanges (SMEEs), operational training, and community engagement programs, all aimed at building professional skills, promoting knowledge sharing, and enhancing collaboration between the forces.

Participants engaged in expert exchanges on key topics such as cybersecurity, maritime law, force protection, and humanitarian disaster relief, while also taking part in training activities such as medical evacuations, mine countermeasures, and underwater demolition, all designed to improve operational readiness and interoperability.

Participating U.S. assets included staff from the U.S. 7th Fleet, Marine Rotational Force – Southeast Asia (MRF-SEA), and the U.S. Embassy in Brunei, along with various task forces and units. [United States Navy] [Borneo Bulletin]

Cambodia and China reaffirm strong bilateral relations in high-level talks

(ma) Prak Sokhonn, Cambodia's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, held bilateral talks with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Beijing on November 28. Wang emphasized the enduring friendship between China and Cambodia, which has remained resilient through international changes. He reaffirmed China's willingness to maintain close high-level exchanges with Cambodia, promote the building of a China-Cambodia Community with a Shared Future, and strengthen strategic coordination to address risks, safeguard mutual interests, and contribute to regional peace and stability.

In response, Sokhonn reaffirmed Cambodia's commitment to a friendly policy toward China, emphasizing the importance of enhancing political mutual trust, promoting practical cooperation, and strengthening diplomatic coordination. He expressed Cambodia's intention to elevate the longstanding friendship between the two nations to new heights. [Khmer Times]

Cambodia reaffirms Funan Techo canal progress

(mfr) Cambodia has reaffirmed the progress of the USD 1.7 billion Funan Techo Canal project, dismissing reports of delays due to alleged financial issues with China. Deputy Prime Minister Sun Chanthol confirmed on November 27 that Chinese investors had fully approved the project's feasibility studies during a November 19 meeting, and concession agreement negotiations are underway. He cited rainy-season

challenges as the main reason for minor delays. [The Phnom Penh Post 1]

China reiterated its commitment to the project on November 26 during talks between Cambodian Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn and Chinese Ambassador Wang Wenbin. Both sides also announced 2025 as the "Cambodia-China Tourism Year" and discussed restoring Chinese tourism and advancing shared development projects, including the Fish and Rice Corridor and the Industrial Development Corridor.

Sokhonn departed for China on November 28 for high-level discussions with Chinese officials, focusing on bilateral economic and strategic collaboration under the Diamond Hexagon Framework. Cambodia emphasized the canal project's importance for regional cooperation and confirmed the Mekong River Commission's approval, ensuring no environmental risks to neighboring countries. [The Phnom Penh Post 2]

Malaysian financiers eye key sectors in Cambodia

(ma) Malaysian investors, led by Hong Leong Manufacturing Group and the Malaysian Chamber of Commerce in Cambodia (MBCC), have expressed strong interest in four key sectors in Cambodia: motorcycle manufacturing, ceramics, semiconductors, and real estate. In a meeting on November 29, Chea Vuthy, secretary-general of the Cambodian Investment Board (CIB), encouraged further market analysis for motorcycle production and suggested leveraging Cambodia's special economic zones (SEZs) for other projects. The rapid development of SEZs has attracted various modern technology projects, fostering industrial clusters across multiple sectors.

Trade between Cambodia and Malaysia has flourished, with bilateral trade reaching USD 715.15 million in the first ten months of 2024, marking a 35.3 percent increase compared to the same period last year. Malaysia is now Cambodia's 12th-largest trading partner. [The Phnom Penh Post]

China steps up crackdown on cross-border crime with mass repatriations from Cambodia

(ma) China repatriated 240 Chinese nationals from Cambodia on November 28, targeting suspects involved in online gambling and telecom fraud. This marks the second large-scale operation this year, following the return of over 680 individuals in April. The joint effort with Cambodia is part of China's broader campaign to dismantle organized crime networks in Southeast Asia.

In September China and Cambodia signed agreements to bolster law enforcement collaboration against gambling and fraud, particularly in areas like Sihanoukville, known for Chinese-run operations. [VOA]

Cambodia-India joint exercise CINBAX 2024 kicks off in Pune

(mfr) The Indian and Cambodian armies launched their first-ever Joint table top exercise, the Cambodia–India Bilateral Army Exercise (CINBAX), at the Foreign Training Node in Pune, India, on December 1. Scheduled to run until December 8, the exercise focuses on counterterrorism operations under United Nations peacekeeping mandates, with 20 personnel from each side participating.

Conducted in three phases, CINBAX includes orientation, tabletop exercises, and finalizing plans through practical discussions and tactical scenarios. Key themes include counterterrorism strategies, advanced technology applications in sub-conventional warfare, cyber and hybrid operations, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief. The exercise aims to improve operational coordination, strengthen bilateral defense ties, and enhance crisis management capabilities.

CINBAX also features Indian-made defense equipment, showcasing India's Atmanirbhar Bharat (Self-Reliant India) initiative, that aims at making India self-sufficient and resilient across various sectors. This aligns with India and Cambodia's earlier commitment to deepening military collaboration in areas like counterterrorism and training.

In March, Cambodian Commander-in-Chief General Vong Pisen and Indian Defense Attache Colonel Dheeraj Kotwal met in Phnom Penh to reaffirm these ties. Gen. Pisen acknowledged India's support in military training and skill development and called for expanded collaboration, which Col. Kotwal endorsed, emphasizing mutual benefits in strengthening defense partnerships. [Khmer Times]

Cambodia denies France 24's deforestation allegations in REDD+ projects

(mfr) Cambodia's Ministry of Environment and its partner, Wildlife Alliance (WA), have firmly rejected allegations of deforestation linked to the country's REDD+ projects, as reported in a recent France 24 video titled "Real Carbon, False Credits? Investigating Mass Deforestation in Cambodia". The ministry criticized the video for spreading misinformation, stating that it relied on outdated footage and misrepresented the impact of the projects.

In a joint statement, both the Ministry of Environment and WA emphasized that Cambodia's REDD+ initiatives, including the Southern Cardamom and Keo Seima projects, follow internationally recognized standards, including the Verified Carbon Standard and Climate, Community & Biodiversity Standards. These projects undergo regular audits by third-party experts to ensure environmental and social sustainability.

WA reiterated its commitment to forest conservation and the protection of indigenous rights. The organization also addressed the video's portrayal of REDD+ projects, claiming that it misrepresented the relationship between conservation efforts and local communities. According to WA, these projects have provided significant resources to local populations, helping them to both preserve forests and improve their livelihoods.

Furthermore, the Cambodian government assured that all REDD+ projects comply with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, ensuring that affected communities give free, prior, and informed consent. The government expressed its openness to constructive dialogue but rejected unverified attacks aimed at discrediting the programs.

The Southern Cardamom REDD+ project alone covers over 465,000 hectares and aims to reduce CO2 emissions by nearly 3.9 million tons annually while protecting endangered forests and species. Despite criticism, Cambodia stands by the efficacy and transparency of its REDD+ efforts. [The Phnom Penh Post]

China arrests man over murder of Japanese schoolboy

(dql) According to diplomatic sources, Chinese authorities have formally arrested a man suspected of murdering a 10-year-old Japanese schoolboy in Shenzhen in September, with prosecution expected.

The boy, of Japanese-Chinese descent, was fatally stabbed on his way to school on September 18 and died in the hospital the next morning. The suspect was apprehended near the school shortly after the incident (see AiR No. 39, September/2024, 4).

The Japanese government has requested details of the investigation, but Chinese officials have not disclosed the motive or background of the attack.

While some have speculated a connection to the 93rd anniversary of the Manchurian Incident, Chinese authorities have dismissed this, describing the case as an isolated event. A senior Chinese Foreign Ministry official assured Japan that further details would be shared as judicial procedures progress. [Kyodo News]

The Manchurian Incident on September 18, 1931, during which a small quantity of dynamite detonated close to a railway line owned by Japan's South Manchuria Railway near Mukden (now Shenyang), was a Japanese military-staged false flag event as a pretext for the 1931 Japanese invasion of Manchuria.

Chinese public opinion of Japan turns more negative

(to) A survey revealed that nearly 90 percent of Chinese respondents have a negative view of Japan, marking a sharp rise from the year before. This is the second-highest level of negative opinions recorded since the survey began in 2005. Tensions over historical disputes, the Senkaku Islands, and Japan's release of treated water from the Fukushima nuclear plant were noted as key reasons.

The poll, conducted by Japan's Genron NPO and China International Communications Group, also found that only 26.3 percent of Chinese respondents considered Sino-Japanese relations important, a record low. Meanwhile, 67.1 percent of Japanese respondents viewed relations with China as significant, reflecting mixed perspectives on the bilateral relationship. [Kyodo News]

US imposes stricter rules on chip technology exports to China

(to) The US has introduced new restrictions on China's access to advanced semiconductor and AI chip technologies. The Department of Commerce banned the export of high-bandwidth memory chips and expanded controls on chipmaking equipment, targeting both US and foreign firms working in China. These measures aim to slow China's advancements in military and AI technologies. The US also blacklisted 140 Chinese firms linked to chip production.

China criticized the restrictions as "economic coercion" and stated to protect its interests. [BNN Bloomberg]

China criticizes Trump's tariff plan

(to) China has strongly criticized US President-elect Donald Trump's proposal to impose new tariffs on Chinese goods, including a 10 percent tariff linked to fentanyl production. Trump argued the measure would pressure China to crack down on chemicals used in the US opioid crisis (see AiR No. 48, November/2024, 4).

However, Beijing dismissed the approach as ineffective and harmful to economic ties. China's Ministry of Commerce emphasized that tariffs would not solve America's domestic problems and urged adherence to international trade rules.

Chinese state media also warned that escalating trade tensions could harm both economies, potentially leading to a repeat of the previous US.-China trade war during Trump's first term as president. [Reuters] [Global Times]

China extends tariff exemptions for select US imports

(alk) China announced on November 29 that it will extend tariff exemptions for select U.S. imports until February 28, 2025. The exemptions apply to products such as rare earth metal ore, medical disinfectants, nickel-cadmium batteries, and other specified items. These products will remain free from the additional tariffs China imposed as retaliatory measures to the US Section 301 tariffs.

This decision reflects ongoing efforts to manage the economic fallout of the US-China trade war, which began in 2018 when the U.S. imposed tariffs on Chinese goods citing unfair trade practices. China retaliated with its own tariffs, targeting key US exports.

While some tensions have eased through partial trade agreements, key issues remain unresolved. By extending exemptions, China may be seeking to stabilize trade relations with the US while addressing domestic needs for critical imports. [Reuters]

Report warns of US security risks from Chinese lidar technology

(to) A report from the Foundation for Defense of Democracies raised concerns about Chinese-made lidar technology posing national security risks to the US. Lidar, which is a remote sensing system used in civilian and military applications, enables detailed mapping of environments and could be exploited for espionage. The report suggests that Chinese companies dominating the global lidar market could use the technology to infiltrate US infrastructure and military systems.

The report noted examples of potential abuse, such as a Chinese firm planning to transmit data from Estonian self-driving cars back to Beijing. US lawmakers have introduced bills to restrict the use of Chinese lidar in important infrastructure, asking domestic production and stricter cybersecurity measures to address vulnerabilities. [The Record]

China releases three Americans in prisoner swap with US

(to) China has released three American citizens, Mark Swidan, Kai Li, and John Leung, as part of a prisoner swap with the United States. The three men had been held for years on charges ranging from espionage to drug offenses, although the US considered them as wrongfully detained. [Politico]

The three Chinese nationals include Xu Yanjun, a Chinese intelligence officer sentenced to 20 years in prison for attempting to steal aviation trade secrets from GE Aviation; Ji Chaoqun, a naturalized U.S. citizen convicted in 2022 for providing classified defense information to Chinese intelligence; and Jin Shanlin: A former doctoral student at Southern Methodist University, convicted in 2021 of possessing and distributing child pornography. [VoA]

This rare agreement follows months of quiet negotiations between the two nations, reflecting

efforts to address wrongful detentions before President Biden leaves office.

The release comes shortly after Biden's meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Peru (see AiR No. 47, November/2024, 3), where the issue of detained Americans was a key discussion point. [The Guardian]

China and Russia strengthen military cooperation with joint patrols

(to) China and Russia conducted their ninth joint aerial patrol over the Sea of Japan, part of an annual military cooperation plan. The November 29 patrol follows similar operations earlier this year, including a July mission over the Bering Sea where their bombers were intercepted near Alaska. Recent naval patrols in the Pacific further demonstrate the growing military ties between the two nations, reflecting their increased focus on joint strategic operations. [Ministry of Defense, China] [AA]

South Korea mobilized fighter jets after detecting Chinese and Russian military aircraft entering its Air Defense Identification Zone (KADIZ) during the joint aerial patrol. Five Chinese and six Russian warplanes flew close to South Korea's coasts without prior notice, leading to tactical responses from the South Korean air force.

While air defense zones are not territorial airspace, South Korea emphasized the importance of such measures to prevent accidental conflicts. [South China Morning Post] [The Moscow Times]

Sweden calls on Chinese ship to aid cable damage investigation

(to) Sweden requested the return of the Chinese cargo ship Yi Peng 3 to assist in investigating recent damage to two Baltic Sea fiber optic cables. The cables, linking NATO nations, were damaged on November 18, raising concerns of potential sabotage (see AiR No. 48, November/2024, 4). The ship, which was in the area at the time, is considered a key suspect. [ScandAsia]

Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson emphasized the importance of clarity but refrained from making direct accusations. Neighboring countries, including Germany and Finland, have launched similar investigations and stressed the need to safeguard critical infrastructure amid rising security tensions in Europe. [Euronews]

China has responded to Sweden's call for cooperation by stating its willingness to assist in the investigation of the damaged Baltic Sea cables. China's foreign ministry emphasized that Beijing seeks to "find out the truth" and is maintaining communication with relevant countries about the issue. [DW]

German foreign minister visit China

(to) German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock visited Beijing on December 2 to discuss concerns over China's potential support for Russia's war in Ukraine. Reports that a Chinese company is building drones for Russia have raised alarm in European nations. Baerbock asked China to use its influence to push for peace, warning that support for Moscow could damage relations with Europe.

She emphasized that as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, China has a responsibility to promote global peace. Baerbock highlighted the negative global effects of the war, including rising food prices, and urged the need for a diplomatic solution to end the conflict. [AA]

Germany increases investment guarantees for businesses in China

(to) Germany announced an increase in state guarantees for investments in China, signaling a cautious shift in its restrictive policy toward the country. New guarantees for 2024 totaled EUR 105.6 million (USD 111 million), compared to EUR 71 million (USD 74 million) in 2023, though still significantly lower than in previous years, when figures exceeded EUR 1 billion (USD 1.05 billion).

The guarantees protect German companies operating in China against losses, with fees paid by businesses generating revenue for the German government. Export credit guarantees for China also rose to EUR 696.2 million (USD 726 million) this year, reflecting ongoing economic relations despite concerns over China's slowing economy and geopolitical tensions. [Reuters]

China and Hungary discuss strengthening relations and cooperation

(to) Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with Hungarian Foreign Minister Péter Szijjártó on November 26 in Beijing to discuss enhancing bilateral relations and improving China-EU cooperation. The talks emphasized the importance of the "all-weather comprehensive partnership" created earlier this year during President Xi Jinping's visit to Hungary in May during which the two counties upgraded their diplomatic relations to s comprehensive strategic partnership (see AiR No. 20, May/2024, 2).

Hungary expressed interest in expanding economic and cultural exchanges. Both ministers highlighted their shared commitment to mutual respect and global stability, with Hungary advocating for stronger EU-China relations to support peace and development. [State Council, China]

Hungary is the top European destination for Chinese investment, receiving 44 percent of all Chinese investments in Europe last year. Chinese projects in Hungary, worth over USD 10 billion, include significant investments in smart technology and automotive manufacturing. [Intellinews]

Hungary's deepening diplomatic and economic ties with China pose a significant challenge to the European Union's unity, particularly as the bloc navigates its collective stance on Beijing's growing global influence.

French Sanofi announces largest investment agreement in China

(jf) Sanofi, the French pharmaceutical giant, has announced plans to invest approximately EUR 1 billion (USD 1.05 billion) to establish a new insulin production facility in Beijing. This initiative represents Sanofi's largest single investment in China to date. The facility will be located in the Beijing Economic and Technological Development Zone, adding to the company's existing three production and supply bases in the country.

China continues to pursue closer economic ties with individual European Union member states, even as its broader trade relationship with the EU has faced challenges. These include disputes over alleged Chinese subsidies to the electric vehicle sector, which have strained the bloc's trade dynamics with Beijing.

During a meeting on December 2 with Sanofi Chairman Frederic Oudea, Chinese Commerce Minister Wang Wentao reaffirmed China's commitment to supporting

businesses. He emphasized that all enterprises, regardless of origin, will receive equal encouragement in technological innovation and fair participation in market competition, according to a statement from the ministry. [Reuters]

China Unicom sets up branch in United Arab Emirates

(dql) China Unicom (Middle East) Operations Limited officially launched in Dubai, UAE, on November 29 marking the latest step in its global expansion. [China Daily]

State-owned China Unicom is one of China's major telecommunications companies and plays a significant role in the country's telecommunications infrastructure. It has been involved in expanding China's 5G network and international connectivity projects.

China, QatarEnergy sign supply pact

(alk) QatarEnergy and Shell have signed a long-term agreement to supply three million tons of liquefied natural gas (LNG) annually to China, starting in January 2025. This marks QatarEnergy's 11th partnership with Shell and reinforces its strategy to dominate the global LNG market while supporting China's transition to cleaner energy.

China, the world's largest LNG importer, relies on LNG to reduce coal dependence and achieve carbon neutrality. In 2024, Qatar supplied China with 14.4 million tons of LNG, making it China's second-largest supplier after Australia.

QatarEnergy is expanding its production capacity by 85 percent, from 77 million tons to 142 million tons annually by 2030, anchored by its North Field project, the world's largest LNG reserve. Recent investments, including four new LNG carriers, aim to enhance its export capabilities.

The deal with Shell highlights Qatar's focus on high-demand markets like China, where LNG is critical to energy security and emissions reduction. China's robust energy needs, coupled with Qatar's reliable supply model, strengthen their partnership. [News.AZ]

China introduces zero tariffs for 33 African countries

(dql) China has introduced zero tariffs for Least Developed Countries (LDCs) with diplomatic ties, including 33 African nations, effective December 1 and aimed at enhancing China-Africa trade. [CGTN]

At the September Forum on China–Africa Cooperation, President Xi Jinping announced USD 50 billion in funding for Africa and a commitment to triple infrastructure projects across the continent. Despite a shift toward high-tech and green initiatives, China remains focused on comprehensive regional development, emphasizing collaboration in industry, agriculture, infrastructure, and trade (see AiR No. 37, September/2024, 2).

Xi pledged 30 connectivity projects, 30 clean energy initiatives, and potential cooperation in nuclear technology to address Africa's power shortages. He also proposed creating a "China-Africa network" for integrated land-sea links and development. Additionally, Xi urged Chinese contractors to resume projects in Africa following the easing of COVID-19 restrictions. [Business Insider Africa]

This comes as U.S. President Joe Biden is visiting Angola this week, marking his first and only presidential visit to sub-Saharan Africa, during which focuses on the Lobito Corridor railway redevelopment in Zambia, Congo and Angola and aims to advance the U.S. presence in a region rich in the critical minerals. [AP News]

China strengthens partnerships with Central Asian countries

(to) Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi held separate meetings with his Turkmen, Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Kazakh, and Tajik counterparts on December 1 to bolster cooperation in energy, trade, and infrastructure under the China-Central Asia framework. The meetings followed the conclusion of the China-Central Asia Foreign Ministers' Meeting held in Chengdu, China.

Turkmenistan

During his meeting with Turkmen Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov, Wang emphasized China's commitment to strengthening energy relations, vowing to urge Chinese companies to increase investments in Turkmenistan. Discussions also covered expanding

trade and a broader regional agenda as part of the China-Central Asia Foreign Ministers' Meeting.

Additionally, China is advancing an USD 8 billion rail project linking Xinjiang to Uzbekistan, aimed at improving connectivity with Central Asia and Europe. [State Council, China] [South China Morning Post]

Kyrgyzstan

In talks with Kyrgyz Foreign Minister Kulubaev Zheenbek Moldokanovich, both sides agreed to deepen collaboration in trade, infrastructure, and regional connectivity. Key initiatives include the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan Railway and the enhanced Beshkent border port.

Plans to expedite a trade agreement, increase direct flights, and cooperate under international frameworks such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization were also discussed, underscoring the alignment of strategic interests between China and Kyrgyzstan. [CGTN]

Uzbekistan

Speaking with Uzbek Foreign Minister Saidov, Wang highlighted the implementation of 90 percent of the priority investment projects and stressed the need to enhance bilateral trade agreements, expand cooperation in emerging sectors, and ensure energy stability, particularly regarding Uzbekistan's gas supply to China. Saidov, for his part expressed Uzbekistan's readiness to deepen cooperation in the Belt and Road Initiative, the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway, and to facilitate people-to-people exchanges.

The meeting concluded with the signing of a visa exemption agreement between China and Ukraine. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China 1, in Chinese] [KUN.UZ]

Kazakhstan

During the meeting between Wang and Kazakh Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Nurtlev both sides agreed to expand trade by implementing more trade facilitation measures, improving cross-border railways, and enhancing the Trans-Caspian International Transport Corridor.

They also committed to strengthening energy transition and water conservation cooperation to support Kazakhstan's green development goals. High-level exchanges were prioritized, with both countries agreeing to leverage the China-Kazakhstan

Cooperation Committee to boost collaboration, particularly in legislative and state governance matters. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China 2, in Chinese] [Kazinform]

Tajikistan

In talks with his Tajik counterpart Muhriddin in Chengdu Wang emphasized the need to enhance trade, with China offering to import more agricultural products from Tajikistan, and promote cooperation in digital technology, green energy, infrastructure, and security.

Muhriddin reaffirmed Tajikistan's commitment to deepening cooperation, welcoming more Chinese investments. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China 3, in Chinese] [Asia-Plus]

China warns New Zealand to not join AUKUS

(to) China's ambassador to New Zealand, Wang Xiaolong, has warned of negative consequences if New Zealand joined the AUKUS security pact. Speaking on *Radio New Zealand*, Wang criticized the pact as a product of a "Cold War mentality" and expressed concerns about its impact on regional stability and China-New Zealand relations. He stated that AUKUS, which involves Australia, the US, and the UK, would lead to greater confrontation and questioned its alignment with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

New Zealand has yet to make a decision on joining AUKUS, with Prime Minister Christopher Luxon stating the government is still gathering information. Opposition leader Chris Hipkins voiced skepticism, suggesting the pact may not benefit New Zealand.

Furthermore, Wang denied accusations of Chinese political interference in New Zealand, calling these claims baseless and emphasizing China's commitment to mutual respect in its relations. [ABC News]

China lifts trade restrictions on Australian meat processing

(alk) China has lifted trade restrictions on two Australian meat processing facilities, allowing the full resumption of red meat exports, the Australian government announced on December 3. This decision marks the end of trade bans imposed on 10 Australian

abattoirs between 2020 and 2022, during a period of heightened tensions between the two nations.

The bans coincided with a sharp deterioration in diplomatic relations after Australia called for an independent investigation into the origins of COVID-19. In response, China, Australia's largest trading partner, restricted imports of key commodities such as coal, barley, wine, and lobster. These measures were part of a broader pattern of using trade as a tool in geopolitical disputes, reflecting China's increasing willingness to leverage its economic influence to respond to perceived slights.

Since Australia's new government came to power in 2022, bilateral relations have improved significantly. Most trade restrictions have been lifted, with lobster trade set to resume by the end of 2024. Prime Minister Anthony Albanese welcomed the latest development, calling it "great news for Australian exporters, producers, and farmers" and a "win for trade and Australian jobs."

China is Australia's second-largest market for beef and veal, importing approximately 200,000 metric tons annually, valued at $1.5 billion. Even during the ban, Australian beef exports to China continued through unrestricted processors. However, the broader lifting of trade barriers comes at a time when Australian beef exports are surging globally, driven by reduced U.S. production and increased demand from other key markets like Japan.

This development also reflects China's pragmatic approach to balancing political concerns with economic necessity. As the world's most populous nation and a major consumer of protein, China relies heavily on agricultural imports to meet its domestic demand. The restoration of Australian beef imports aligns with Beijing's broader efforts to stabilize trade relations with key partners amid ongoing global economic challenges and geopolitical tensions. [Reuters] [Global Times] [Prime Minister's Office, Australia]

Russian President Putin invited to visit India in 2025

(rsv) Russian President Vladimir Putin has been invited by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to visit India, with the dates expected to be set in early 2025. Kremlin aide Yury Ushakov confirmed the invitation, noting that the two leaders have an agreement to meet annually, and this time, it's Russia's turn. This will be Putin's first

visit to India since the start of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022.

Earlier this year, Modi visited Moscow for the 22nd Russia-India Summit, marking his first bilateral trip to Russia since his third term began. During that visit, he was awarded Russia's highest honor, "The Order of St. Andrew the Apostle." [Business World]

Indonesia and China hold forum to strengthen maritime cooperation

(mu) Indonesia's National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN) and China's Ministry of Natural Resources held the 8th China-Southeast Asian Countries Marine Cooperation Forum to solidify collaboration in maritime issues in Jakarta on November 28.

The forum has been held annually since 2013 and is aimed to foster cooperation between Southeast Asian countries and China to protect and restore maritime ecosystems, prevent and mitigate disasters, conduct science and technology, and devise maritime management and policies. [Antara]

Indonesia and Malaysia to hold joint training and operations in narcotics eradication

(gk) The Indonesian National Narcotics agency (BNN) and the Royal Malaysian Police (PDRM) have agreed to jointly cooperate in narcotics eradication.

The joint training will be conducted at the BNN Human Resources Development Center facility while the joint operations will be carried out along the Indonesia-Malaysia border. The two countries have also agreed to ramp up the exchange of information related to law enforcement, rehabilitation, and the formulation of more effective policies in tackling narcotics trafficking. [Antara]

Indonesia and Singapore take part in joint search and rescue exercises for aviation accidents

(gk) Indonesia and Singapore conducted their joint exercise, Sarex Indopura 2024, a search and rescue

(SAR) drill for aviation accidents, virtually in the Natuna District of the Riau Islands on November 28–29. The exercise aimed to enhance the understanding and capabilities of Indonesia's National Search and Rescue Agency (Basarnas) and local stakeholders in conducting SAR missions for aviation accidents.

On Indonesia's side, participants included Basarnas, the Indonesian Defense Forces, the National Police, and other supporting entities such as AirNav Indonesia, the Indonesian Coast Guard, the Meteorological, Climatology, and Geophysical Agency (BMKG), the Ministry of Transportation, the Ministry of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, and local governments.

The exercise simulated a response to an aviation disaster in the Natuna region, reflecting Indonesia's recent assumption of airspace management responsibilities in the area, which were previously overseen by Singapore. [Antara]

Indonesia and Canada sign Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement

(gk) On December 2, Indonesia and Canada signed a joint statement on the Indonesia-Canada Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (ICA-CEPA). This agreement will provide wider market access for Indonesian products in North America, especially Canada.

Under CEPA, Indonesia will see liberalization of 90.5 percent of the total tariffs for goods entering Canada with a trade value of USD 1.4 billion. In addition to trade in goods, the agreement, which comes into effect from 2026, also includes preferential treatment for Indonesian sectors of business, construction, tourism, transportation, and telecommunications. It will also facilitate investment in sectors such as manufacturing, agriculture, fisheries, forestry, mining and quarrying, and energy infrastructure. Areas such as intellectual property rights, good regulatory practices, e-commerce, business competition, small and medium enterprises, women's economic empowerment are also covered in this agreement.

The agreement was signed by the trade ministers of both countries. Indonesia's Trade Minister, Budi Santoso, said that this agreement would advance sustainable critical mineral management, support Indonesia's net zero target by 2060, and foster Canadian investment while bring about green growth in both nations. [Antara] [Reuters]

U.S. under Donald Trump to block Japanese takeover of US Steel

(dql) President-elect Donald Trump has announced that he will block a proposed USD 14.9 billion acquisition of U.S. Steel by Japan's Nippon Steel, citing concerns about maintaining the company as a domestic entity. On his platform, Trump emphasized using tax incentives and tariffs to boost U.S. Steel and prevent foreign ownership. Current President Joe Biden also opposes the deal, underscoring the importance of keeping U.S. Steel domestically owned (see AiR No. 40, October/2024, 1).

The deal, which Nippon Steel plans to finalize by the end of 2024, hinges on a national security review by the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS). While Nippon Steel has pledged USD 2.7 billion to modernize U.S. Steel's facilities and secure union jobs, the acquisition faces bipartisan criticism in Congress and resistance from steelworker unions, though some workers support it to keep plants operational. [South China Morning Post]

Trump's announcement came shortly after Japan's Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba reportedly sent a letter to Biden requesting his approval of the deal to avoid undermining recent efforts to strengthen ties between Washington and Tokyo. [Reuters]

Japan eyes transfer of military technology to Australia

(dql) The Japanese government has confirmed its intention to transfer components, parts, and technical information related to frigate technology to Australia, should Japan be chosen to co-develop and produce Australia's next-generation general-purpose frigates. [Ministry of Defense, Japan, X]

The 06FFM frigate – the frigate in question – features enhanced capabilities for anti-submarine warfare, anti-air warfare, anti-surface warfare, and mine countermeasures. It will also include long-range missile capabilities and advanced ASW functions.

Under Japan's National Defense Strategy, Australia is considered a "special strategic partner," second only to the U.S. in importance. The joint project aims to enhance interoperability between Japanese and Australian forces, while bolstering shipbuilding and

maintenance infrastructure in the Indo-Pacific. [The EurAsian Times] [Defence Blog]

This move is part of a broader initiative to strengthen defense cooperation between Japan and Australia, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. It also comes after Australian Defense Minister Richard Marles officially announced earlier last week that Japan's Mitsubishi Heavy Industries and Germany's Thyssenkrupp Marine Systems (TKMS) have been shortlisted for the highly sought-after general-purpose USD 6.5 billion frigate contract, beating rivals from Spain and South Korea. [The Sydney Morning Herad]

France's continues to support community nutrition in Laos

(cc) France has extended a helping hand to children in Sekong Province, Laos, with a new EUR 500,000 investment aimed at improving community nutrition and empowering women farmers. This initiative, launched in collaboration with the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) and local authorities, targets over 10,000 people in 15 communities.

The project focuses on a two-pronged approach: food assistance will be provided to vulnerable communities, particularly pregnant and breastfeeding women, adolescent girls, and children under five. This intervention aims to combat chronic malnutrition, a devastating issue affecting a significant portion of Sekong's young population. Additionally, the project will connect local women farmer groups with schools in the region, enabling them to supply fresh, locally produced food for daily school lunches. This not only fosters a sustainable and locally-sourced food system but also creates economic opportunities for women in the area.

This initiative builds upon France's ongoing commitment to food security and nutrition in Laos. Over the past five years, France has invested a total of EUR 3.3 million (USD 3.5 million) in WFP projects across the country, prioritizing vulnerable populations and promoting sustainable practices. [Lao News Agency]

Malaysia provides financial support to Lebanon

(oc) Malaysian Minister of Foreign Affairs Mohamad Hasan has presented a cheque for MYR 1.5 million

(USD 336,000) to Lebanon's Ambassador to Malaysia, George Bitar Ghanem, during a ceremony at the ministry.

This contribution follows a pledge made by Malaysia during a meeting between Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati at the Extraordinary Joint Arab-Islamic Summit in Riyadh on November 11.

Hasan stated that the donation underscores Malaysia's ongoing solidarity with Lebanon, particularly as winter approaches. It is aimed at supporting recovery efforts in areas impacted by Israeli attacks. [Malaysia World News]

Malaysia and Timor-Leste strengthen ties

(ga) Timor-Leste Prime Minister Xanana Gusmão visited Malaysia from December 1-3 at the invitation of Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim. Both leaders welcomed the establishment of a Bilateral Consultation Mechanism (BCM) and emphasized further collaboration on various fronts, including trade, investment, and capacity-building initiatives.

Both countries also emphasized the importance of educational exchange, mainly through the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) facilitating the mobility of Timor-Leste's government scholarship recipients to study in Malaysia. Defence cooperation was another key area, with both countries agreeing to strengthen existing partnerships under the Malaysian Defence Cooperation Programme (MDCP) and explore new defence collaborations.

Furthermore, the leaders welcomed the signing of the Air Services Agreement, enabling direct flights between Kuala Lumpur and Dili, and exchanged notes on a visa exemption arrangement, both aimed at promoting tourism and enhancing people-to-people exchanges. Malaysia also pledged assistance in developing Timor-Leste's Halal industry, with a focus on tapping into the global Halal market.

Prime Minister Anwar further reiterated Malaysia's commitment to supporting Timor-Leste's full ASEAN membership and its accession to relevant ASEAN agreements. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia]

Maldives, Tajikistan sign agreement for 30-day visa on arrival for Maldivian

citizens

(sl) The Permanent Representatives of the Maldives and Tajikistan to the United Nations, Dr. Ali Nasir Mohamed and Jonibek Hikmat, respectively, signed an agreement allowing Maldivian citizens to receive 30-day visas upon arrival in Tajikistan. Under the current unilateral visa-free regime, Tajikistan already offers a 30-day visa to Maldivians. However, the new agreement formalizes this by providing for the issuance of official visas upon arrival. [the edition]

Mongolia secures affordable, quality medicines through South Korean partnership

(fs) Mongolia's Ministry of Health and the Medicine and Medical Devices Regulatory Authority signed a procurement contract with South Korean pharmaceutical company DongKoo Bio & Pharma.

This initiative aims to enhance the quality and affordability of medicines in Mongolia, with a focus on WHO-approved treatments. Health Minister Munkhsaikhan Togtmol emphasized that the agreement reflects a broader government policy to procure high-quality, low-cost medicines from nations with strict regulatory systems.

The contract ensures the supply of five medicines for diabetes, hypertension, blood thinning, and antifungal treatments, priced 50 percent below similar imports. These medicines will also be subsidized through Mongolia's Health Insurance Fund.

This follows September 2024 negotiations in South Korea, where Minister Togtmol secured agreements with four leading pharmaceutical firms to deliver 18 subsidized medicines. The recent amendments to Mongolia's laws on medicines and procurement have facilitated direct contracts with international manufacturers, ensuring access to quality-assured medicines and vaccines. [Montsame]

Mongolia and Vietnam to establish medical collaboration

(fs) The National Trauma and Orthopedic Research Center of Mongolia (NTORC) and Hanoi Medical University Hospital of Vietnam have formalized a

cooperation agreement and Memorandum of Understanding.

The partnership aims to enhance clinical technology, academic training, and research between the two institutions. It includes provisions for short- and long-term training for medical professionals, joint diagnostic consultations, and surgical treatments.

Ten NTORC specialists will undergo training in Vietnam in 2025. Additionally, the NTORC will upgrade the digital system of its Radiology Department. [Montsame]

Mongolia and Australia initiate talks for bilateral social security agreement

(fs) Mongolia and the Commonwealth of Australia have initiated negotiations for a bilateral social security agreement.

Representatives from Mongolia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Family, Labor, and Social Protection, the Australian Department of Social Services, and the Australian Embassy in Mongolia discussed the social security systems of both nations. They exchanged ideas for drafting an agreement and scheduling formal negotiations for January 2025.

This agreement aims to protect the social security rights of Mongolian citizens residing abroad, particularly the 16,600 Mongolians in Australia, including 10,000 employed individuals.

Mongolia has existing social security agreements with six countries, including Russia and South Korea, and is working to establish agreements with others such as Kazakhstan and Austria. [Montsame]

Myanmar’s Ta’ang National Liberation Army agrees on peace talk with junta

(tl) The Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) has issued a statement expressing readiness for negotiations, while also calling for a halt to junta airstrikes on civilians.

This comes as China has been mediating between Myanmar's junta and ethnic insurgent groups, aiming to reduce violence and safeguard its economic interests in Myanmar. China, maintaining ties with both the military and rebel groups, has applied

pressure on insurgents by closing borders and cutting off supplies.

Analysts suggest this is producing results, although critics argue that China's support for the junta undermines public trust and international democratic efforts.

Meanwhile, the National Unity Government (NUG) has rejected the junta's calls for dialogue, advocating for international sanctions targeting the military's financial lifelines, such as jet fuel supplies. Observers remain doubtful about peace prospects, given the ongoing violence and entrenched mistrust. [Radio Free Asia] [The Irrawaddy] [Reuters]

Myanmar's National Unity Government criticizes China's proposal of joint security company with junta

(tl) Myanmar's National Unity Government (NUG) has criticized China's proposal to establish a "joint security company" with the military junta, asserting it will not effectively protect Chinese interests in Myanmar. NUG official U Kyaw Zaw highlighted that the junta's violent actions and the resulting anti-Chinese sentiment threaten Chinese investments and citizens. [Reuters]

China has proposed the establishment of a joint security company in Myanmar, aimed at safeguarding its investments and projects amid the ongoing conflict in the country. This proposal is driven by growing concerns over the inability of Myanmar's military junta to protect Chinese assets and personnel, as the junta's forces are stretched thin and facing increasing pressure from resistance groups.

The joint venture security company would be a partnership between Chinese and Myanmar entities, with the aim of providing enhanced security for Chinese infrastructure projects, particularly in areas critical to the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC).

This proposal comes amid China's frustration with the security situation in Myanmar, which has escalated as resistance forces have captured key areas and attacked Chinese-invested projects. The plan reflects Beijing's broader shift towards more direct involvement in Myanmar, though it also raises concerns about further militarization and the potential for Chinese security forces to become involved in combat situations similar to the role of Russia's

Wagner Group in other conflicts. [Geopolitical Monitor] [VOA]

Myanmar's ethnic Wa rebels reject Thailand demand to withdraw from border bases

(tl) The Thai military has ordered Myanmar's ethnic United Wa State Army (UWSA) to vacate nine camps allegedly located in Thailand's Mae Hong Son Province near the Myanmar border. This decision follows border talks between UWSA leaders and Thai officers in Chiang Mai on November 18-19. Thai authorities have given the UWSA a deadline of December 19 to vacate the camps.

However, UWSA has refused to comply. UWSA official Nyi Rang acknowledged the withdrawal order but stated that the issue should be addressed by both the Thai government and Myanmar's military junta. Despite Thailand increasing its military presence, the UWSA claims its operations remain unaffected.

Although no clashes have occurred, tensions remain high along the Shan-Thai border, with both sides in a standoff. [Democratic Voice of Myanmar] [Radio Free Asia]

Myanmar navy detains 31 Thai fishermen

(sc) A deadly maritime confrontation occurred on November 30 when the Myanmar navy opened fire on Thai fishing boats operating inside Myanmar waters, resulting in one Thai fisherman drowning and 31 crew members being detained.

According to Thailand's Ministry of Defence, two of the 15 Thai vessels were fired upon after being found 4 to 5.7 nautical miles inside Myanmar territory off the coast of Ranong province. Three fishermen jumped into the water during the attack; one drowned while two were rescued by the Thai navy. [Bangkok Post] [Channel News Asia]

Thai authorities, including Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra, are negotiating with Myanmar to secure the release of the detained fishermen and are investigating whether international laws were violated. The incident has heightened tensions over illegal fishing, as Thai boats often enter Myanmar's waters due to richer fish stocks. The Ranong fisheries department has issued warnings to fishers to avoid the

maritime border, and the Thai navy is exploring all avenues to assist the detained crew. Myanmar's junta government has not yet commented on the incident. [Bangkok Post] [Channel News Asia]

Russia delivers humanitarian aid to Myanmar, plans to recruit Myanmar workers for labor shortages

(nf) The Russian Federation has delivered 35 tons of humanitarian aid to Myanmar to support the rehabilitation of flood-hit regions following Typhoon Yagi. The aid, provided by the Ministry of Civil Defence, Emergencies and Disaster Relief, the Ministry of Industry and Trade, Rosatom, and the Aquarius Group of Companies, arrived at Nay Pyi Taw Airport aboard a transport aircraft.

Separately, Myanmar and Russia are moving forward with plans to send Myanmar workers to Russia under a labor recruitment program. Employment agencies linked to Myanmar's military regime are arranging jobs for workers in construction, shipbuilding, agriculture, and livestock sectors to help meet Russia's growing labor needs amid its ongoing war in Ukraine.

This initiative stems from a proposal made last year, when Russia expressed interest in bringing Myanmar workers. The two governments discussed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to formalize the arrangement. Employment agencies have received demand letters for the program, which promises no up-front fees for workers and wages far above Myanmar's monthly minimum income of around $40. In contrast, Russia's minimum wage exceeds USD 200 a month.

This recruitment effort comes at a time when both countries face significant challenges: Russia is struggling with the economic fallout from Western sanctions, and Myanmar is embroiled in a civil war that has led to forced conscription and migration restrictions, prompting many young people to seek opportunities abroad. [The Global New Light of Myanmar] [Irrawaddy]

Nepal’s Prime Minister Oli arrives in China for discussions on BRI framework, key connectivity projects

(rs/lm) Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli of Nepal arrived in Beijing on December 2 for a four-day official visit aimed at strengthening Nepal-China relations. This visit marks a shift in Nepal's foreign policy focus, moving beyond its traditional reliance on India, to enhance economic ties and advance key infrastructure projects under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The visit is particularly significant as the two countries approach the 70th anniversary of diplomatic relations in 2025.

Oli, leading an 87-member delegation, met with Chinese Premier Li Qiang at the Great Hall of the People on December 3. The meeting, which included a formal guard of honor by the Chinese People's Liberation Army, focused on enhancing cooperation in infrastructure development, trade, and economic partnerships. Following the meeting, Prime Minister Oli was scheduled to meet Chinese President Xi Jinping and Zhao Leji, chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress. [The Kathmandu Post 1] [The Kathmandu Post 2]

A key objective of Oli's visit is to push forward stalled BRI projects. Nepal joined the initiative in 2017 but has seen limited progress since then. Oli aims to recalibrate Nepal's engagement with China in an effort to reduce its traditional economic dependence on India. A critical part of this strategy is securing grants, rather than loans, to fund infrastructure projects like the Pokhara International Airport, which, despite being a key BRI project, has faced difficulties, including limited international flights due to India's restrictions on airspace.

During the visit, Nepal and China signed nine agreements and memorandums of understanding (MoUs), covering areas such as trade enhancement, technical assistance, and cultural exchanges. Notable agreements included the construction of the Tokha-Chhahare tunnel and the establishment of a Chinese language teaching program in Nepal. Nepal is also seeking to convert existing loans, such as the USD 9.5 million loan for the Pokhara airport, into grants to reduce its growing debt burden. [Reuters]

On December 4, Oli is scheduled to deliver a keynote address at Peking University and participate in the Nepal-China Business Forum, which will be jointly hosted by the Embassy of Nepal in Beijing, the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade (CCPIT), and the Federation of Nepalese Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FNCCI). [The Kathmandu Post 3]

Foreign Minister Arzu Rana Deuba, who laid the groundwork for the visit through preparatory talks

with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, emphasized Nepal's strong commitment to the BRI and the need to expedite the implementation of projects. Wang Yi expressed China's readiness to support Nepal's development goals under the BRI framework, highlighting the progress made in the Trans-Himalayan Multi-dimensional Connectivity Network. [The Kathmandu Post 4] [The Kathmandu Post 5]

Nepal's Chief of Army Staff General Sigdel to leave for India on December 11

(lm) Nepal's Chief of Army Staff (CoAS), General Ashok Raj Sigdel, will embark on a four-day visit to India on December 11 at the invitation of Indian Army Chief General Upendra Dwivedi. During this visit, General Sigdel is set to be conferred with the honorary rank of General of the Indian Army, continuing a longstanding tradition between the two countries.

General Dwivedi, who visited Nepal in November 2024, was conferred with the honorary rank of General of the Nepal Army by President Ramchandra Paudel. During his stay, General Dwivedi met with several top leaders, including President Paudel, Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli, and CoAS Sigdel. The Indian Army remains a major military donor to Nepal, and these visits further strengthen the bilateral military ties between the two nations. [The Kathmandu Post]

MCA-Nepal relaunches bid for 297-km transmission line under MCC Compact

(lm) The Millennium Challenge Account Nepal (MCA-Nepal) has relaunched the bidding process for constructing a 297-km power transmission line under the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) Nepal Compact. The transmission line aims to bolster Nepal's power transmission infrastructure, with the bid submission deadline set for January 30, 2025.

The construction has been divided into three segments: Lapsiphedi-Ratmate-New Hetauda, Ratmate-New Damauli, and New Damauli-New Butwal. The relaunch follows a comprehensive review of the initial bidding process, incorporating design optimizations, better access to tower locations, and updated commercial terms based on previous feedback. These revisions aim to attract competitive bids and address cost concerns.

In August, MCA-Nepal awarded a USD 12.36 million contract to Transrail Lighting Ltd. to construct the 18-km Nepal portion of the Butwal-Gorakhpur transmission line, set to be completed within 21 months. According to Khadga Bahadur Bisht, MCA-Nepal's executive director, this progress reflects confidence that the redesigned requirements for the remaining 297-km segment will attract strong market interest.

This project is part of the MCC Nepal Compact, which includes a USD 500 million investment from the United States, supplemented by USD 197 million from the government of Nepal. Ratified by Nepal's Parliament in February 2022, the compact focuses on enhancing Nepal's power and transport infrastructure.

Construction of these projects must be completed within five years, as stipulated by the MCC agreement, which came into force in late August. MCA-Nepal is also working on three 400kV substations and remains committed to meeting the environmental and social standards of both Nepal and the MCC. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal, Finland strengthen ties with key agreements on infrastructure, digital development, public investment

(rs/lm) As part of ongoing celebrations marking the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Nepal and Finland, Finland's Minister for Foreign Trade and Development, Ville Tavio, visited Nepal to meet Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli. Discussions during the visit focused on enhancing bilateral cooperation, particularly in sectors like hydropower, waste management, and infrastructure development. Prime Minister Oli expressed gratitude for Finland's longstanding support in Nepal's development initiatives. [The Kathmandu Post 1]

A highlight of Tavio's visit was the formalization of a framework agreement between Nepal and Finland for the Public Investment Mobilisation Project, aimed at bolstering Nepal's socio-economic infrastructure and promoting sustainable development. The agreement was signed by Nepal's Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Bishnu Prasad Paudel and Minister Tavio at Nepal's finance ministry in Kathmandu.

The initiative is part of Finland's Public Investment Facility Programme and will provide concessional financing for critical projects in areas such as water supply, waste management, energy, digitalization,

healthcare technology, disaster management, and rescue operations. Given Nepal's status as a Least Developed Country, the framework ensures that 50 percent of the assistance will be provided as grants. [The Kathmandu Post 2]

On the digital front, WorldLink Communications, Nepal's leading internet service provider, secured a EUR 10 million (USD 10.8 million) investment from Finnfund, Finland's development financier, to expand internet access and bridge the digital divide between urban and rural regions in Nepal. The agreement, signed by WorldLink's Chairman Dileep Agrawal and Finnfund's Senior Investment Manager Kutti Kilpeläinen, aims to accelerate Nepal's digital transformation, particularly in underserved rural areas.

The funding will be used to expand the internet infrastructure and enhance connectivity, with a significant collaboration with Finnish telecommunications company Nokia, which will supply advanced technology to ensure faster and more reliable services. Agrawal highlighted the investment's potential to enhance Nepal's digital inclusion and noted that the partnership would be crucial for providing equitable internet access across the country.

Kilpeläinen assured that Finnfund would support the project in managing environmental and social risks associated with the expansion, including the construction of data centers. This investment also complements prior investments in WorldLink by British International Investment and Dolma Impact Fund. [The Kathmandu Post 3]

North Korea sends 40 trash-filled balloons into South Korea

(mc) According to the South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), on November 29, North Korea launched approximately 40 balloons filled with trash and propaganda leaflets into South Korea, with most landing in the capital and Gyeonggi Province, northwest of Seoul, that extends to the demilitarized zone (DMZ) near North Korea in the north.

The balloons, which were launched between the night of November 28 and the early morning of November 29, contained anti-South Korean propaganda. The JCS stated that there was no security threat from the balloons.

This marks the 32nd instance of North Korea launching balloon missiles filled with trash and propaganda leaflets since May 2024. [Yonhap News]

Sister of North Korean leader again denounces “political agitation” leaflets from South

(bw) The sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, Kim Yo-jong, has denounced "political agitation" leaflets, accusing South Korea of sending them across the border.

North Korean state media reported that on November 26 “various kinds of political agitation leaflets and dirty things sent by the ROK scum were dropped again in different areas near the southern border of the DPRK.” [KCNA]

Earlier last month, Kim accused South Korea of sending anti-Pyongyang leaflets to the North and warned that the South would pay a "dear price." This was followed by the North launching trash-filled balloons across the border into the South. [Korea Times]

U.S. slaps new sanctions against North Koreans

(dql) The U.S. Department of State has imposed sanctions on North Korean nationals Kim Sang Chol and Ri Sung Chol. These sanctions, effective November 20 were implemented under the Iran, North Korea, and Syria Nonproliferation Act (INKSNA), in response to their involvement in procuring ballistic missile-related materials for North Korea.

The sanctions prevent the designated individuals from contracting with the U.S. government. Those engaging in transactions with them will face restrictions on export licenses, and existing licenses will be suspended.

Ri had previously been sanctioned in March 2022, and this new round of sanctions renews his designation just eight months after the expiration of the previous sanctions. For Kim, this is their first time being sanctioned.

Although the State Department did not provide specific details, it has previously indicated that Ri was involved

in supplying sensitive items for North Korea's missile program. It is likely that Kim is similarly linked to the country's ballistic missile procurement activities. [Federal Register, USA] [MSN News]

Russia's expands military cooperation with North Korea

(mc/ac) Russian Defense Minister Andrey Belousov announced on November 29 that Russia's cooperation with North Korea is expanding across various sectors, including military cooperation. Belousov met with North Korean Defense Minister No Kwang-chol in Pyongyang, where he emphasized the growing importance of military cooperation between the two countries under the defense treaty signed in June 2024.

"We look forward to close and fruitful cooperation with our Korean comrades," Belousov said during the meeting. In turn, North Korean Defense Minister No Kwang-chol reaffirmed the significance of "war friendship" and stated that enhancing military cooperation is a key priority for North Korea.

Belousov's visit to North Korea follows a series of high-level meetings, including recent visits by Russia's ministers of natural resources and sports (see AiR No. 48, November/2024, 4), signaling an expansion of bilateral cooperation between the two countries. [Yonhap News Agency]

Meanwhile, Kim Jong Un praised the bilateral meeting and vowed unwavering support for Russia in defending its sovereignty and territorial integrity, framing Russia's war in Ukraine as a defensive response to "NATO's eastward advance." Kim also condemned Ukraine and the U.S. for fostering imperialist expansion, referring to earlier U.S. condemnations during the UN Security Council meeting and the long-range missiles supplied to Ukraine. [AP News 1] [AP News 2]

According to the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies, North Korea's military support for Russia has been expanding. The center estimates that North Korea is increasing production at its weapons manufacturing facility in Hamhung, known for producing KN-23 missiles (Hwasong-11A) and KN-24 missiles (Hwasong-11B).

Observers noted that Russia has fired 60 North Korean-made KN-23 missiles in 2024. New satellite images released by the James Martin Center indicate

that the facility has expanded in size. Analysts suggest this expansion likely signifies an increase in the production capacity of the facility. Additionally, several other North Korean manufacturing plants, including the "February 11 plant" as referred to by North Korean authorities, have undergone construction and workforce expansions. [CNN]

Ukraine's Defense Intelligence (DIU) recently released a report detailing the number of North Korean-made missiles transferred to Russia, highlighting the deepening military ties between Moscow and Pyongyang, reminiscent of Cold War-era relations. The report revealed that North Korea supplied approximately 100 short-range KN-23 and KN-24 ballistic missiles to Russia. DIU also identified 4,145 foreign-made components used in 149 Russian weapons, including 36 components in the KN-23 and KN-24 missiles sourced from companies in China, the U.S., Japan, the U.K., and Switzerland, suggesting that North Korea has acquired foreign-made parts despite sanctions. DIU further noted that Russia, North Korea, and Iran are collaborating to obtain weapons technology and evade sanctions. [Korea JoongAng Daily]Top of Form

Meanwhile, Lieutenant Andriy Kovalenko, head of Ukraine's Centre for Countering Disinformation, reported that North Korea completed a shipment of M1991 240 mm multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS) to Russia on November 29. The shipment, which included over 100 pieces of military equipment such as M-1989 Koksan self-propelled howitzers, KN-23 ballistic missiles, and more than five million artillery shells, is expected to bolster Russia's artillery capabilities in Ukraine.

The M1991 MLRS has a range of 22 to 45 kilometers and can launch 40 rockets in 40 seconds, designed for area bombardment. The system's mobility, due to its ability to be mounted on various truck chassis, provides a significant advantage by enhancing rapid deployment and battlefield mobility.

This arms shipment highlights the growing military cooperation between North Korea and Russia, underscored by the strategic partnership agreement signed in June 2024. [Army Recognition]

China's military vice chairman praises Pakistan Army's counter-terrorism efforts amid recent security challenges

(mra) General Zhang Youxia, Vice Chairman of China's Central Military Commission (CMC), visited Pakistan's General Headquarters (GHQ) in Rawalpindi on November 27 to commend the Pakistan Army's ongoing counter-terrorism efforts. The visit took place amid heightened concerns regarding the security of Chinese nationals in Pakistan, following recent attacks targeting Chinese nationals working on various infrastructure projects.

During his visit, General Zhang praised the professionalism and resolve of the Pakistan Army in tackling terrorism and ensuring the safety of foreign nationals, including Chinese citizens. This was particularly significant in the wake of recent terrorist attacks in the southwestern Balochistan region, which have raised concerns about the security of Chinese workers in Pakistan, especially in the context of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) projects.

The Chinese delegation, led by General Zhang, held talks with Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Asim Munir, focusing on mutual interests, regional security dynamics, and measures for regional stability. Both sides reaffirmed the strong and enduring nature of Pakistan-China relations, which have withstood various challenges over the years, including security concerns surrounding Chinese investments and nationals in Pakistan.

General Munir expressed gratitude to China for its unwavering support in the face of recent security threats, particularly the targeting of Chinese citizens, and emphasized the commitment of the Pakistan Army to ensure their safety. The discussions also focused on enhancing bilateral defense cooperation to further stabilize the region. [PTV] [GEO News] [The Diplomat]

Trump cabinet pick criticizes New York deal for Roosevelt Hotel rental

(lm) Vivek Ramaswamy, President-elect Donald Trump's choice to co-lead a new government department, criticized a USD 220 million rental agreement between New York City and Pakistan's Roosevelt Hotel. The iconic hotel, owned by Pakistan International Airlines (PIA), was repurposed in 2023 as an arrival center for migrants.

New York City rents the hotel's 1,025 rooms for up to USD 210 per room daily, with the total agreement valued at USD 220 million over three years. Ramaswamy criticized the deal on social media,

asserting it indirectly channels taxpayer funds to a foreign government.

Pakistan closed the Roosevelt Hotel in 2020 during the pandemic due to financial losses, and the facility accumulated liabilities of USD 25 million. [Arab News]

US pledges support to Pakistan in countering terrorism

(mra) The United States has reaffirmed its unwavering support for Pakistan in its efforts to combat terrorism and violent extremism. Addressing a weekly media briefing in Washington on Monday, US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller emphasized the commitment, stating, "We continue to stand with Pakistan in its fight against terrorism and violent extremism." Miller also underscored the universal importance of peaceful protests, urging the Pakistani government to manage demonstrations responsibly following violent clashes during a protest by the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party.

The protest, initiated on November 24 by the PTI, led to violent confrontations resulting in the deaths of three Rangers personnel, two police officers, and claims of at least 20 PTI supporters losing their lives. Over 1,000 PTI members, including Afghan nationals, were reportedly detained in the crackdown. Miller avoided direct commentary on domestic developments in Pakistan but emphasized the US's broader commitment to supporting democratic principles and addressing terrorism globally. GEO News Dunya News

Pakistani delegation visits Moscow, aims to strengthen relations

(sn) A parliamentary delegation from Pakistan, led by Speaker Sardar Ayaz Sadiq, has concluded its three-day visit to Russia, which took place from November 27 to December 1. The visit aimed at enhancing bilateral relations through inter-parliamentary cooperation and was held at the invitation of Russian State Duma Chairman Vyacheslav Volodin.

During the visit, the delegation, which included Members of the National Assembly from various political parties, signed an important agreement to strengthen parliamentary ties. The agreement, signed between Speaker Sadiq and Volodin, seeks to establish permanent cooperation mechanisms between the two

legislative bodies, including through parliamentary committees, commissions, and friendship groups.

The delegation held fruitful discussions with Russian leaders, including meetings with Volodin, Chairperson of the Federation Council Valentina Matvienko, Deputy Prime Minister Alexei Overchuk, and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. These meetings focused on expanding Pakistan-Russia relations and increasing cooperation in various sectors. [AZORTAC] [The Nation] [DAWN]

Pakistan, Saudi Arabia discuss collaborations on refinery and petroleum product upgrades

(sn) Pakistan and Saudi Arabia are intensifying their cooperation in the energy sector, focusing on refinery and petroleum product upgrades as part of broader efforts to address Pakistan's growing energy challenges. Musadik Malik, Pakistan's state minister for petroleum, revealed that discussions are underway to modernize refineries and enhance petroleum products, with a particular emphasis on renewable energy needs for the future. These upgrades are expected to go beyond simple investment, addressing the deeper structural issues affecting Pakistan's energy sector.

Malik made these remarks during the World Investment Conference in Riyadh, where he highlighted the importance of a sustainable partnership between the two nations. He also confirmed that ongoing research into these upgrades would pave the way for significant long-term collaborations.

Pakistan's ties with Saudi Arabia have been deepening, especially in the energy field. Over the past few months, the two countries have signed 27 Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs), which include key agreements aimed at improving infrastructure and addressing inefficiencies in Pakistan's energy grid. One notable MoU is the plan to connect Pakistan's power grid with Saudi Arabia's, which will mitigate the energy inefficiencies caused by seasonal fluctuations. This partnership is expected to attract significant foreign investment, including discussions with Russian investors to explore further energy collaborations. [Arab News 1] [The News International]

In addition to energy, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have been expanding their economic cooperation across multiple sectors. Recently, Prime Minister Shehbaz

Sharif revealed that seven of the 34 MoUs signed with Saudi Arabia in October have already materialized into actual agreements worth USD 560 million. The total value of these MoUs stands at USD 2.8 billion, covering various areas of investment, from energy to infrastructure. This partnership is part of Pakistan's broader strategy to strengthen its trade relations, particularly with key countries like Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia has committed to a USD 5 billion investment package aimed at alleviating Pakistan's foreign reserve challenges and easing the country's balance of payments crisis. With Pakistan's large expatriate community in Saudi Arabia—comprising its second-largest group of nationals abroad—remittances play a significant role in strengthening bilateral ties and boosting Pakistan's economy. [Arab News 2]

Seychelles, UAE observe close ties on UAE's national Day

(akc) On December 1, Seychelles marked the UAE's 53rd National Day with a reception in Beau Vallon hosted by UAE Chargé d'Affaires Ahmed Alnayadi. The event highlighted the strong bond between the two nations, with Seychelles' Minister for Foreign Affairs Sylvestre Radegonde praising the UAE's support, including medical aid for La Digue hospital and scholarships for Seychellois students. [Seychelles News Agency]

Singapore's Senior Minister Lee visits China for top-level talks

(fi) From November 26 to 28, Singapore's former prime minister and current Senior Minister Lee Hsien Loong visited China ahead of the two countries' 35th anniversary of diplomatic relations in 2025.

In Beijing, Lee met with President Xi Jinping, who praised the longstanding cooperation between the two nations. Xi emphasized the Suzhou Industrial Park as a key example of successful collaboration and a platform to drive future cooperation, particularly in digital and green development. Established in 1994, the park has grown into a hub of innovation, attracting over USD 40 billion in foreign investment and hosting more than 400 Singaporean enterprises. Xi expressed confidence in continuing this partnership and urged Singapore to play a leading role in advancing these sectors.

The leaders discussed strengthening economic ties, regional stability, and multilateralism, with Xi inviting Singapore to continue its leadership in green and digital industries. They also touched on global issues, including China-U.S. relations.

In Shanghai, Lee met with Secretary Chen Jining under the Singapore-Shanghai Comprehensive Cooperation Council, exploring further collaboration in financial services, technology, and the digital economy. This reflects the broader depth of Singapore-China relations, with bilateral trade reaching USD 108.39 billion last year. Singapore remains China's largest trading partner in Southeast Asia and the first Asian country to sign a bilateral free trade agreement with China.

Lee also hosted a reception for Singaporeans in the Yangtze River Delta, reinforcing people-to-people connections. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs China] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs Singapore] [China Daily]

Johor-Singapore Special Economic Zone agreement to be signed on December 9

(lm) The joint agreement for the Johor-Singapore Special Economic Zone (JS-SEZ) is set to be signed on December 9 during the Malaysia-Singapore Joint Ministerial Committee for Iskandar Malaysia (JMCIM) retreat, scheduled for December 8 and 9.

The announcement follows a special JMCIM meeting in Johor Bahru on November 7, co-chaired by Malaysia's Economic Minister Rafizi Ramli and Singapore's Minister for National Development Desmond Lee. The meeting discussed the progress of the JS-SEZ. [The Edge Singapore]

Singapore, Vietnam leaders discuss fostering new growth sectors

(lm) Vietnam's National Assembly Chairman Tran Thanh Man arrived in Singapore on December 1 for an official visit. On December 2, he met with Prime Minister Lawrence Wong to discuss fostering new growth sectors, including green logistics, semiconductor manufacturing, and clean energy. They also agreed to enhance security, defense, and educational cooperation and emphasized ASEAN solidarity and multilateral cooperation, especially regarding regional security and the South China Sea.

Prime Minister Wong expressed confidence that the visit would strengthen bilateral ties and announced plans to visit Vietnam in 2025. Singapore remains Vietnam's second-largest foreign investor, with investments exceeding USD 81 billion, including the successful Vietnam-Singapore Industrial Parks (VSIP). Both leaders agreed to expand smart VSIP models to boost economic ties.

The visit also highlighted progress in parliamentary cooperation, with meetings scheduled with Singaporean leaders, major corporations, and the Vietnamese community. [Viet Nam News] [Asian News Network]

South Korea, Japan reaffirm security cooperation amid Sado mine row

(mc) Senior diplomats and defense officials from South Korea and Japan met in Tokyo on November 29 and stressed their commitment to cooperation to ensure regional security, despite the ongoing dispute over Japan's memorial service for Korean victims of wartime forced labor at the Sado mining complex.

Discussing the regional security environment, they underlined the need to strengthen bilateral and trilateral cooperation with the United States in the face of North Korea's military threats and deepening ties with Russia. Both sides agreed that bilateral security cooperation is indispensable in responding to the harsh regional and international political situation,' South Korean officials said. [Yonhap News Agency]

South Korea, Kyrgyzstan upgrade relations to comprehensive partnership

(ac) South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol and Kyrgyzstan's President Sadyr Japarov signed the Comprehensive Partnership Agreement between their countries on December 3, marking the first elevation of bilateral ties since their diplomatic relations began 32 years ago. This agreement aims to enhance cooperation in various sectors, including trade, investment, development, climate action, and green energy.

During the summit in Seoul, Yoon emphasized Central Asia's strategic significance and Kyrgyzstan's role as a key partner in the region. Japarov expressed his

intention to strengthen mutual cooperation, leveraging their traditional friendship.

The leaders also signed teen agreements, including a focus on mining and hydropower projects. South Korea hopes to leverage Kyrgyzstan's substantial antimony reserves, which are vital for the battery industry, while also exploring opportunities for hydropower collaboration.

In addition, they discussed initiatives to foster trade and investment, including a framework to prevent double taxation and support South Korea's economic aid through the Economic Development Cooperation Fund. Both leaders agreed on the importance of North Korea's denuclearization for regional and global peace, although they did not address ongoing military ties between North Korea and Russia.

This meeting is part of South Korea's broader "K-Silk Road Initiative" aimed at increasing its involvement in Central Asia's infrastructure and critical minerals sectors. Following similar engagements with other Central Asian countries, Yoon plans to host a multilateral summit in South Korea with five Central Asian leaders. [The Korea Herald]

South Korean parliament ratifies new defense cost-sharing agreement with U.S.

(dql) South Korea's defense cost-sharing deal with the U.S. for hosting U.S. troops from 2026 to 2030 officially entered into force November 29, following ratification by the parliament. The agreement, known as the 12th Special Measures Agreement (SMA), outlines South Korea's contribution of KRW 1.52 trillion (USD 1.09 billion) in 2026, marking an 8.3 percent increase from the previous year.

The deal was finalized in October (see AiR No. 41, October/2024, 2), just before the U.S. presidential election, and does not require Congressional approval in the U.S.

It comes after tensions during former President Donald Trump's administration, when he demanded a steep increase in South Korea's financial contribution, suggesting it could reach USD 50 billion. The new agreement is seen as a proactive measure by Seoul to avoid such demands upon Trump's return to office. [Yonhap News Agency]

Ukraine envoys meet South Korean president Yoon for defense meetings

(ac/bw) On November 27, South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol met with a Ukrainian delegation led by Ukraine's Minister of Defense, Rustem Umerov, in Seoul. The meeting had been arranged following a high-level phone call between President Yoon and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky on October 29. During the meeting, Yoon reaffirmed South Korea's commitment to maintaining close communication with Ukraine to address security threats posed by North Korea and Russia. Umerov briefed South Korean officials on the frontline situation in Ukraine's eastern regions, including the Kursk border are. [The Korea Herald]

Following the discussions, Seoul and Kyiv agreed to continue sharing intelligence on North Korean troop movements in the conflict. Umerov emphasized the importance of enhanced cooperation between South Korea and Ukraine, noting that North Korean troops gaining modern battlefield experience could create additional security challenges in the region.

In separate meetings, Umerov also met South Korea's National Security Adviser Shin Won-sik and Defense Minister Kim Yong-hyun. He described these meetings as "fruitful" and expressed optimism about deepening bilateral ties. [Reuters 1]

Umerov conveyed President Zelensky's request for South Korea to provide non-lethal aid and advanced defense systems, including surface-to-air missiles and artillery units, to counter the combined forces of North Korea and Russia. While South Korea's support to date has been limited to non-lethal assistance, such as gas masks and field rations, there is speculation that Ukraine is interested in South Korea's large stockpile of 155 mm artillery shells. Zelensky has repeatedly underscored Ukraine's urgent need for advanced air-defense capabilities. However, Yoon's office did not clarify whether discussions on military aid were part of the meeting. [Kyiv Post]

Whether South Korea will supply weapons to Ukraine remains uncertain. Public opinion in South Korea largely opposes direct military aid to Ukraine. A Gallup Korea poll conducted in October revealed that while 66 percent of respondents supported non-military aid such as food and medicine, only 13 percent supported providing military aid like weapons. Protests and public opposition to military assistance have also been reported. [Reuters 2] [Gallup in Korean]

Critics argue that the benefits of supplying military aid are limited for South Korea. President Yoon faces domestic challenges, including record-low approval ratings, public resistance to military aid, and uncertainties surrounding U.S. foreign policy, particularly with the potential return of Donald Trump to the presidency.

Meanwhile, Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal has confirmed that Ukraine has received a USD 100 million loan from South Korea aimed at supporting the country's social sector.

"Ukraine has received 100 million dollars from the Republic of Korea. This is the first budget assistance from our Korean partners to support the social sector." [Prime Minister, Ukraine, X] [KBS]

South Korea, Latvia agree to boost bio and defense industry cooperation

(mc) South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol and Latvian President Edgars Rinkevics met on November 28 to discuss common security concerns. They called for cooperation in strengthening partnerships in the bio and defense sectors.

During the summit, while underlining the strategic importance of Latvia for South Korean bio and pharmaceutical companies to enter the European market, Yoon expressed South Korea's potential as a "reliable partner" in supporting Latvia's defense capabilities. Rinkevics, for his part, expressed particular interest in South Korean air defense systems and drone technology.

Furthermore, the two presidents pledged to increase cooperation against disinformation and cyber-attacks through cooperation with the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence in Latvia. Finally, Rinkevics strongly condemned North Korea's nuclear weapons program and expressed his support for South Korea's policy towards North Korea. [Yonhap Agency News]

Shymhal also mentioned the framework signed in April between Ukraine and South Korea to provide the war-torn country with USD 2.1 billion in long-term, low-interest loans through the Economic Development Cooperation Fund. He expressed that he was "grateful to the Government of the Republic of Korea for supporting Ukraine during a full-scale war".

South Korea, Portugal hold talks on supply chains and batteries

(bw) South Korea and Portugal recently engaged in economic discussions to explore opportunities for collaboration in the battery sector, according to Seoul's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. At the seventh Joint Economic Committee meeting held in Lisbon, South Korea's Deputy Foreign Minister for Economic Affairs, Kim Hee-sang, met with his Portuguese counterpart, Joao Ferreira, to deliberate on strategies for bilateral cooperation.

Both nations concurred on the importance of strengthening economic ties in supply chains, trade, and investment to navigate the challenges posed by increasing uncertainties in the global trade landscape.

The talks underscored significant potential for partnership in the battery industry, leveraging South Korea's cutting-edge expertise in battery production alongside Portugal's abundant lithium reserves, a critical component in battery manufacturing. [Yonhap News Agency]

Indian, Sri Lankan navies seize narcotics in joint operation

(raa) On November 24 and 25, the Indian Navy, in coordination with the Sri Lanka Navy, intercepted and seized two Sri Lankan-flagged fishing vessels in the Indian Ocean carrying 500 kg of Crystal Meth. The operation followed intelligence from the Sri Lanka Navy about potential narcotics smuggling. The vessels, their crews, and the seized drugs are being handed over to Sri Lankan authorities for further legal action. [ADA derana] [Daily Mirror]

Japan to consider new projects in Sri Lanka only after reviewing economic status

(sl) Japan will evaluate any new project proposals from Sri Lanka based on the country’s current economic status, the Japanese Embassy announced. The embassy emphasized that Japan’s priority is to continue with the 11 projects that resumed after Sri Lanka’s debt restructuring. These include key projects like the Bandaranaike International Airport expansion and the Kalu Ganga Water Supply Expansion Project, all of which are progressing smoothly.

Following the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), Japan decided to resume disbursements to the 11 loan projects. By the end of September, Japan had disbursed YEN 12.5 billion (USD 87 million) for these initiatives.

In addition, Japan provided USD 100 million in humanitarian aid to Sri Lanka in response to the economic crisis. Japan also played a key role in restructuring the country's debt and organizing negotiations through the Official Creditors' Committee. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka-United States collaboration to develop roadmap for sustainable port development

(raa) The United States is collaborating with Sri Lanka to create a roadmap for sustainable development in the country's port sector, with a focus on sustainable energy, electric mechanization, and efficiency improvements. Dustin R. Bickel, Regional Indo-Pacific Strategy Coordinator at the US Embassy in Colombo, confirmed Washington’s for initiatives to enhance Colombo Port, which include over USD 550 million in funding from the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) for a deepwater shipping terminal.

The US is also supporting Sri Lanka’s Ports Authority through a Maritime Advisory Programme, aimed at enhancing human resource capabilities. A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed between the Sri Lanka Ports Authority and the Virginia Ports Authority, further strengthening US-Sri Lanka maritime ties.

Jonathan Goldner, Regional Managing Director at APM Terminals, expressed confidence in the future of Colombo Port, emphasizing the importance of prioritising sustainability. Dr. Malini Shankar of the Indian Maritime University also stressed the need for South Asian collaboration to address maritime challenges and leverage opportunities for regional economic growth. [Daily Mirror]

Australia commends Sri Lanka's new government on anti-corruption approach, offers further support

(sl) During a meeting with Presidential Secretary Dr. Nandika Sanath Kumanayake at the Presidential Secretariat on November 27, Australian High Commissioner to Sri Lanka Paula Stevens noted that the new government's anti-corruption approach is attracting investors.

Highlighting the 75-year friendship between the two countries, Paula Stevens expressed Australia's desire to further strengthen bilateral relations and its readiness to assist in creating a nationwide corruption-free system. Additionally, Commissioner Stevens praised President Anura Kumar Dissanayake's “Clean Sri Lanka” initiative.

The discussion further explored possibilities for Australian technical assistance in areas such as national security, maritime issues, digital transformation, public sector reforms, vocational education and training, and the energy sector. [Presidential Secretariat]

US approves USD 385 million arms sale to Taiwan

(sk) The US government announced on November 29 the latest arms sales to Taiwan, involving spare parts and support for F-16 fighter aircraft and continuing support for Improved Mobile Subscriber Equipment (IMSE), at a total cost of USD 385 million. These arms sales will be marked as the sixth arms sales in 2024, and the eighteenth arms sales under the Biden Administration. [CNA, in Chinese]

The US Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) highlighted these arms sales aligning with the American economic, security and national interests, to support Taiwan’s effort on military modernization and a strong defensive capability. Meanwhile, Taiwan’s security will be strengthened to maintain political stability, economic progress and military balance in the region, meeting any threats in the foreseeable timeframe. [US Defense Security Cooperation Agency 1] [US Defense Security Cooperation Agency 2]

Taiwan’s government shared their appreciation of these arms sales, as the firm commitment on the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) and the Six Assurances since 1982. Both Taiwan’s Office of the President and Ministry of Foreign Affairs highlighted the strengthened military capacity based on cooperation with like-minded partners, which can protect Taiwan’s interests and regional stability under the threat from

China. [Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in Chinese] [Taiwan's Office of the President]

In response to these arms sales, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed their remonstrance on the violation of the one-China principle and the three China-US joint communiqués. The ministry criticized Washington for sending a wrong signal to the "Taiwan independence" separatist forces and undermining efforts for stability in Taiwan Strait and Sino-American relationship. [China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs].

In a separate development, Taiwan's military has confirmed that it expects to receive 38 M1A2T tanks from the US by the end of this year, as originally scheduled. Army Vice Chief of Staff Lin Wen-huang dismissed media reports suggesting that tank components would arrive at the Port of Keelung on the same day, clarifying that the tanks' arrival would proceed according to plan. He affirmed that the delivery of all 38 tanks, along with additional tanks in 2025 and 2026, would remain on track.

The Ministry of National Defense (MND) has also been preparing two tank training sites at the Chang'an Army Base in Hsinchu County and the Kengzikou site in Xinfeng Township. Work on these facilities, including soil and water conservation efforts, is proceeding as planned. Once the tanks arrive, the sites will be adapted to host the necessary training.

In 2019, the U.S. Department of State approved the sale of 108 M1A2T tanks to Taiwan, equipped with advanced features such as 120-mm smoothbore guns capable of penetrating thick armor. [Focus Taiwan]

UK lawmakers pass motion supporting Taiwan's participation in international organizations

(am) The UK Parliament has passed a resolution clarifying that UN General Resolution 2758, which recognizes the People's Republic of China (PRC) as China's representative to the UN, does not exclude Taiwan from participating in international systems or endorse Beijing's "one China policy." The motion accused China of misinterpreting the resolution to undermine Taiwan's sovereignty and called on the UK government to address this misrepresentation. [Taiwan News]

Catherine West, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Indo-Pacific, emphasized the benefits of Taiwan's participation in international spaces,

particularly in global health, economic resilience, and climate initiatives. She reiterated the UK's unofficial but beneficial relationship with Taiwan and its commitment to peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.

China's UK embassy criticized the motion as a challenge to the international order and urged the UK to honor a 1972 bilateral agreement. [China UK Embassy]

Taiwanese President Lai Ching-te visits Marshall Islands

(dql/am) Taiwanese President Lai Ching-te announced on December 3 that Taiwan will provide a preferential loan to Air Marshall Islands, enabling the purchase of new aircraft to improve local air services. This pledge was made during his address at the Marshallese Legislature, where he also reaffirmed Taiwan's commitment to tackling climate change and supporting the Marshall Islands through various cooperative projects, including horticulture and animal husbandry training programs.

Lai highlighted Taiwan's ongoing aid efforts, such as infrastructure projects including a newly inaugurated medical facility, which symbolize the strong friendship between the two nations. He also expressed gratitude for the Marshallese government's support of Taiwan's international participation.

Additionally, Lai proposed an increase in funding for the "ROC (Taiwan)-RMI Presidents' Scholarship" program, which would raise its total to USD 1.5 million. He also attended a ribbon-cutting ceremony for the Majuro Hospital AI and Telemedicine Center, emphasizing its importance for local healthcare.

Lai's visit to the Marshall Islands is part of his South Pacific tour, his first overseas trip since assuming power in May. The tour includes further visits in Tuvalu and Palau and second stopover in Guam. He is accompanied by Taiwan's Presidential Office and Cabinet officials. [Focus Taiwan] [NBC News]

Prior to his arrival in the Marshall Islands, Lai made a stopover in Honolulu, Hawaii, which drew criticism from China. [DW]

During his stay in Honolulu, former U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi reaffirmed her unwavering support for Taiwan's participation in international organizations in a phone call with Lai. [Taiwan News]

Pelosi reiterated her long-standing support for Taiwan's participation in international organizations, emphasizing the pressing need for Taiwan's inclusion in bodies like the World Health Organization (WHO). Drawing on her history of advocacy, Pelosi warned that excluding Taiwan could lead to "unimaginable consequences" for regional security and the global economy.

The conversation also touched on economic cooperation, particularly the issue of avoiding double taxation between Taiwan and the United States. Resolving this matter has been a key concern for Taiwan as it seeks to deepen trade and investment ties with the U.S. Pelosi assured Lai of bipartisan backing in Congress to address this issue, underscoring the importance of fostering stronger economic collaboration. [Reuters]

Paraguayan foreign minister visits Taiwan

(sk) Paraguayan Minister of Foreign Affairs Rubén Ramírez Lezcano, accompanied by a group of delegates, officially visited Taiwan from November 27 to 30. During the visit, Taiwan and Paraguay signed a reciprocal visa-free agreement, aiming to strengthen people-to-people exchanges and bilateral ties. [Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1, in Chinese]

Taiwanese President Lai thanked the Paraguayan government for its firm support for Taiwan's international participation and speaking up powerfully for Taiwan. Ramírez expressed hope that the cooperative projects jointly promoted by the two countries will continue and grow, producing optimal benefits and providing maximum well-being to the people of both our countries.

In his 5th visit as the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ramírez also highlighted Paraguayan solid position on supporting Taiwan, as Paraguay maintains diplomatic ties with Taiwan as the precondition of developing any connection with China, including diplomatic, consular or commercial relations. [Taiwan's Office of the President] [The Associated Press]

Paraguay remains one of the 12 nations maintaining official diplomatic ties with Taiwan and is Taiwan's only ally in South America. The other 11 allies include Belize, Eswatini, Guatemala, Haiti, the Holy See, the Marshall Islands, Palau, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Tuvalu. [Taiwan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2]

No end in sight for China-Thailand submarine deal delay

(bk) Thailand's Defense Minister Phumtham Wechayachai has provided an update on the status of Thailand's long-delayed procurement of a Chinese-made S26T Yuan-class submarine for THB 13.5 billion (USD 39 million) with China, acknowledging that its future remains uncertain.

The submarine procurement project, which was initially approved in 2017 under the administration of former Prime Minister General Prayut Chan-o-cha and overseen by then-Defense Minister General Prawit Wongsuwan, has faced repeated delays, primarily due to issues such as Germany's refusal to supply the engines specified in the contract. Now in the opposition, General Prawit's absence from the government has added to speculation over the project's fate. Phumtham denied claims that the current administration deliberately stalled the process, emphasizing that he has yet to fully review the matter. He stressed that any decisions would prioritize military and public interests while ensuring transparency. Phumtham also clarified that no decision had been made on whether to continue with the procurement or renegotiate the existing contract. The Royal Thai Navy has briefed him on the situation, but no further steps have been taken.

Former Defense Minister Sutin Klungsang had announced in July that Thailand would proceed with the procurement, noting that the submarine had already been manufactured by China Shipbuilding & Offshore International Co. He stressed that halting the deal could jeopardize Thailand's diplomatic ties with China. However, following Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin's removal from office in August 2024 by the Constitutional Court due to an ethical violation involving his appointment of Pichit Chuenban as a Cabinet minister, Sutin's tenure was abruptly cut short, interrupting the procurement process. [The Nation]

Thai government protests Myanmar's attack on Thai fishing boats, negotiates crew's release

(lm) The Thai government has strongly condemned Myanmar's attack on a fleet of Thai fishing boats near Koh Phayam in the Andaman Sea on November 30, calling the military's actions an "overreaction." The

incident, which left one Thai crew member dead, two injured, and 31 crew members detained, has prompted diplomatic protests and urgent negotiations for the release of the Thai nationals and their seized vessel.

Fifteen Thai fishing boats were operating around 12 to 22 kilometers off Koh Phayam in Ranong province when Myanmar patrol vessels confronted them at approximately 1:15 a.m. Witnesses reported that Myanmar forces opened fire, forcing many boats to flee. One Thai crew member drowned while escaping, and two others sustained injuries—one from gunfire and another from electrocution. Thai patrol boats rescued the remaining crew members and transported the injured to a hospital in Ranong.

One fishing boat, Sor Charoenchai 8, was seized during the attack. The vessel, carrying 31 crew members—four Thais and 27 Myanmar nationals—was towed to Zedetkyi Island in Myanmar.

Thailand's Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra condemned the violence and affirmed the government's commitment to resolving the matter. Defence Minister Phumtham Wechayachai instructed Thai officials to work through the Thai-Myanmar Local Border Committee to negotiate the release of the Thai crew and the fishing boat. Foreign Minister Maris Sangiampongsa has summoned Myanmar's ambassador to Bangkok to demand an explanation and the immediate release of the detained crew members.

Through formal protest letters, Thai authorities questioned whether the Myanmar military's use of force was justified. The Defence Ministry noted that Myanmar initially signaled the boats to stop but escalated to excessive gunfire aimed at the vessels. Officials argued that such actions violated international practices, where warning shots are typically aimed at the gunwales rather than the hulls.

Thai officials are investigating the exact location of the incident to determine if the fishing boats strayed into Myanmar's territorial waters. Some officials have acknowledged that certain vessels may have crossed one or two nautical miles into Myanmar's jurisdiction but emphasized that the boats were unarmed and posed no threat.

The Thai-Myanmar Township Border Committee is set to meet within two days to finalize negotiations for the release of the four Thai crew members and the return of the seized boat. The government has assured that the detained Thais are in safe condition and expects a

resolution within days. [Bangkok Post 1] [Bangkok Post 2] [Bangkok Post 3]

Singapore, Thailand to collaborate in new areas including food and energy security

(hrs) On November 28, Singapore and Thailand announced plans to deepen their collaboration in food and energy security, green technologies, and digital connectivity. Singapore's Prime Minister Lawrence Wong and Thailand's Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra discussed a new partnership on carbon credits, with both countries aiming to boost green power production. Wong also emphasized the importance of enhancing food security, given Singapore's heavy reliance on food imports.

The two leaders highlighted further cooperation in defence, trade, and investment, with recent advancements such as the linkage of real-time payment systems through PayNow and PromptPay. They also explored the region's power grid integration, particularly in renewable energy, with an emphasis on phase two of the Lao PDR-Thailand-Malaysia-Singapore Power Integration Project. Additionally, a Memorandum of Understanding on Postgraduate Scholarships for Thai civil servants was signed to foster human resource development and educational exchanges.

Prime Minister Wong's visit marked his first official trip to Thailand since Paetongtarn became Prime Minister. The two leaders discussed celebrating 60 years of diplomatic ties in 2025, highlighting the strong people-to-people connections between both nations. [The Straits Times]

Thailand, Turkey sign MoU to strengthen tourism, economic ties

(acs) On November 28, Thailand and Turkey signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in Istanbul aimed at enhancing tourism and economic cooperation. The agreement, finalized between Kemal Yüksek, Director General of Turkey's Civil Aviation, and Suttipong Kongpool, Director General of Thailand's Aviation Authority, increases the frequency of passenger flights from 28 to 42 per week.

This move is expected to boost tourism, foster economic relations, and open up new investment

opportunities between the two countries. Previous agreements, including a 2023 MoU between Thai Airways and Turkish Airlines for joint-venture operations, further reinforce the goal of strengthening business ties and creating an economic hub in both nations. [Directorate General of Civil Aviation] [Air News Times] [Bangkok Post]

United Arab Emirates keen to boost ties with Thailand

(lm) The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is set to sign several bilateral agreements with Thailand to further strengthen relations, according to UAE Ambassador to Thailand, Obaid Saeed Obaid Bintaresh Aldhaheri. Speaking at an event on November 28 to commemorate the UAE's 53rd National Day, Aldhaheri highlighted that the UAE views Thailand as an essential partner, with ties extending beyond oil trade.

The UAE is Thailand's sixth-largest trading partner and the most significant one in the Middle East. In 2023, bilateral trade between the two nations reached USD 7 billion marking a 9 percent increase from the previous year. Additionally, Emirati airlines play a significant role in Thailand's aviation sector, operating over 110 weekly flights between the two countries. [Bangkok Post]

Vietnam's National Assembly Chairman begins visits to Singapore and Japan

(lm/hn) On December 1, 2024, Vietnam's National Assembly Chairman Tran Thanh Man, accompanied by a high-ranking delegation, departed Hanoi for official visits to Singapore and Japan. The visits, scheduled until December 7, aim to deepen bilateral ties with both countries. Chairman Man is visiting at the invitation of Singaporean Parliament Speaker Seah Kian Peng and Japanese House of Councillors President Sekiguchi Masakazu.

The delegation includes senior Vietnamese officials, including the Minister of Natural Resources and Environment and NA committee leaders. The visits are designed to strengthen Vietnam's Strategic Partnership with Singapore and Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with Japan. [Viet Nam News 1]

Singapore

National Assembly (NA) Chairman Tran Thanh Man arrived in Singapore on December 1. Singapore has

been a key partner for Vietnam since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1973 and a strategic partnership in 2013. The visit follows the signing of a cooperation agreement between the Vietnamese NA and Singapore's Parliament in May 2022, and recent discussions with Singapore's Parliament Speaker Seah Kian Peng at the AIPA-45 in Laos, which further reinforced bilateral ties.

During his visit, Chairman Man engaged with Singapore's top leaders, including a meeting with Prime Minister Lawrence Wong on December 2. They discussed enhancing cooperation in emerging sectors such as green logistics, semiconductor manufacturing, data centers, clean energy, carbon credits, food security, and green finance. Both leaders expressed confidence that the visit would foster deeper ties and set the stage for future collaboration, including Prime Minister Wong's planned visit to Vietnam in 2025.

The two leaders also reaffirmed the strategic nature of the bilateral relationship, highlighting Singapore's position as Vietnam's second-largest foreign investor, with over USD 81 billion invested in 3,800 projects. They committed to expanding cooperation in economic, defense, education, culture, and people-to-people exchanges, while also emphasizing the importance of ASEAN's centrality in addressing regional security challenges. [Vietnam Plus] [Viet Nam News 2]

Chairman Man also met with Lee Ark Boon, CEO of Singapore's Sembcorp Development, to discuss the company's significant investment in Vietnam-Singapore Industrial Parks (VSIP). Sembcorp's 18 VSIP projects across 13 Vietnamese provinces have created over 300,000 jobs. Both parties agreed to focus on sustainable growth and high-tech industries, with Chairman Man pledging continued support for foreign investors. [Viet Nam News 3]

Chinese, Vietnamese news agencies chart future collaboration

(lm) Vietnam News Agency (VNA) General Director Vu Viet Trang held talks with Ren Weidong, Deputy Editor-in-Chief of China's Xinhua News Agency, in Hanoi on November 29. The meeting was part of a high-ranking delegation exchange program between the two agencies. Trang highlighted the strengthened cooperation, particularly following the August signing of a new professional agreement between VNA and Xinhua, which modernizes their collaboration in line with multimedia and technological trends. The two

agencies discussed plans to deepen cooperation, including joint activities for the 75th anniversary of Vietnam-China diplomatic ties in 2025, such as photo exhibitions and journalistic exchanges. They also addressed challenges in the digital age, including combating fake news. A memorandum of understanding on 2025 cooperation plans was signed. Ren invited VNA to visit Xinhua, further cementing bilateral media ties. [Viet Nam News]

Laos, Vietnam leaders reaffirm ties and cooperation

(lm) Vietnam's Communist Party General Secretary Tô Lâm and Lao leader Thongloun Sisoulith held talks on December 1, agreeing on steps to enhance bilateral cooperation and implement high-level agreements.

Tô Lâm congratulated Laos on its 49th National Day and praised its achievements, including its successful ASEAN chairmanship. He reaffirmed Vietnam's commitment to the special relationship with Laos, emphasizing its strategic importance.

Thongloun expressed gratitude for Vietnam's continued support and pledged to strengthen ties, highlighting their importance for both nations' security and development. The leaders discussed ways to enhance collaboration across various fields for mutual benefit and regional stability. [Viet Nam News]

Vietnam, Canada forge stronger ties in production and energy sectors

(cc) On November 27, 2024, a forum held in Vancouver highlighted the growing collaboration between Vietnam and Canada in production and energy. Co-organized by the Vietnamese Ministry of Industry and Trade (MoIT) and Canada's Ministry of International Trade, the event aimed to connect Canadian and Vietnamese businesses and explore opportunities in renewable and nuclear energy.

With over 100 delegates from both countries, the forum underscored strong economic ties, with bilateral trade reaching nearly CAD 8 billion in 2023. Both ministers emphasized the potential for cooperation in manufacturing, clean technology, and energy. The event also showcased investment opportunities and featured a business-to-business matching session. [Vietnam Plus]

Vietnam's Prime Minister calls on United States to lift tech embargo, expand satellite communication

(hn) Vietnam's Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh has called on the United States to lift export restrictions on certain technologies, particularly to support Vietnam's satellite communications development. Speaking at an event in Hanoi, Chinh emphasized the need for strong bilateral relations and multilateral cooperation to address global challenges. He also advocated for the US to recognize Vietnam as a market economy, which could lead to reduced tariffs.

While Vietnam is a significant exporter to the US, Chinh did not address the potential impact of US tariffs on imports from Vietnam, despite looming threats from the Trump administration. Foreign investment in Vietnam is expected to reach around USD 25 billion in 2024. [Tuoi Tre News, in Vietnamese] [The Straits Times]

Vietnam, Denmark deepen cooperation for a sustainable future

(cc) O During his official visit to Denmark on November 25, 2024, Vietnamese Deputy Prime Minister Tran Hong Ha and Danish officials deepened their commitment to environmental sustainability. Denmark, a leader in green solutions, will assist Vietnam in accelerating its green transition. Key areas of collaboration include clean energy, sustainable waste management, and environmental protection, with a focus on offshore wind power and improved waste management practices. The Mekong Delta's climate vulnerability was also highlighted, along with efforts to protect the region. Additionally, Tran Hong Ha met with Danish companies, like A.P. Moller-Maersk, to foster eco-friendly maritime practices in Vietnam. [Vietnam Trade Office in Sweden] [Voice of Vietnam]

Announcements

Upcoming Online Events

7 December 2024 @ 5:00 - 6:30 (GMT+7), CPG, Thailand

Navigating Geopolitical Tensions in the International Trading System

Jointly hosted by CPG's Peace & Security Center (CPSC) and the Institute of Customs and International Trade Law, University of Münster, this online expert talk will explore key concepts such as economic statecraft, economic security, and weaponized interdependence and examine their implications for global supply chains and the legal framework governing international trade. For more Information, see [CPG].

4 December 2024 @ 3:00 – 4:00 p.m. (GMT -4), Brookings, USA

Democracy's next act: How to build resilience around the world

This webinar will discuss ways to strengthen democratic resilience, prevent democratic backsliding, address increased political polarization, examine foreign threats, and restore people's confidence in government around the world. For more information, see [Brookings].

4 December 2024 @ 9:00 a.m. - 12:30 p.m. (GMT -4), Brookings, USA

The fentanyl epidemic in North America and the global reach of synthetic opioids

This hybrid event will present findings of a year-long project on synthetic opioids in the United States and

abroad, addressing, among others, the following questions: Is the U.S. finally turning a corner on the opioid crisis, after overdose rates started declining in 2024, following years of grim statistics? How have U.S. domestic and external drug policies evolved? How are synthetic opioids spreading beyond North America and reshaping drug markets and policies worldwide? For more information, see [Brookings].

4 December 2024 @ 6:00 - 7:00 p. m. (GMT +1), Chatham House, UK

Future-proofing truth: Youth perspectives on countering disinformation in a fractured global order

This webinar will discuss how to counter disinformation in a fractured geopolitical world. For more information, visit [Chatham House].

4 December 2024 @ 1:00 - 2:00 p. m. (GMT +1), Chatham House, UK

Rwanda's regional and foreign policy priorities

At this hybrid event, Olivier J.P. Nduhungirehe, Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of the Republic of Rwanda, will offer insights into Rwanda foreign policy vision and key factors shaping the country's international engagement. For more information, visit [Chatham House].

5 December 2024 @ 10:00 - 11:00 a.m., (GMT -4), Middle East Institute, USA

The Geopolitical Implications of Closer Ties Between Central Asia and the Middle East

This webinar will present the latest geopolitical developments in the Middle East region and discuss their strategic implications for the United States. For more information, visit [Middle East Institute].

5 December 2024 @ 10:00 - 11:15 a.m. (GMT +1), German Institute for Global and Area Studies

(GIGA), Germany

China's Foreign Ministry and Assertive Diplomacy

This webinar will address the question of how China's foreign ministry became the primary vehicle through which the idea of "China"' is produced, articulated, and represented on the world stage. For more information, see [GIGA].

5 December 2024 @ 4:00 p.m. (GMT -5), Atlantic Council, USA

A conversation with former President of Ukraine Petro Poroshenko

In this online conversation, former President of Ukraine Petro Poroshenko will discuss conflicting hopes and fears amongst Ukrainians and the broader foreign policy community in the wake of Donald Trump's return to presidency. He will also address the issues of the future of US support for Ukraine. For more information, visit [Atlantic Council].

5 December 2024 @ 12:00 - 1:15 p.m., (GMT -4), Belfer Center, USA

Russia-U.S. Relations in 2025: Can Arctic Science Diplomacy Mend Strategic Fences?

This webinar will address the question of whether – and how – Arctic science diplomacy can be a useful approach toward improving relations between the U.S. and Russia. For more information, visit [Belfer Center].

5 December 2024 @ 11:00 - 12:00 p.m. (GMT-5), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, USA

Trump 2.0 and Global Criminal Justice: International Accountability and What's Next for the U.S.

Against the backdrop of Donald Trump's return to the White House, this virtual event will explore the future of relations between the U.S. and the International Criminal Court and discuss what role we might expect

the U.S. to play on global accountability issues under the second Trump administration, and where progress might be possible. For more information, see [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace].

5 December 2024 @ 3:30 - 4:30 p.m., (GMT -4), Ash Center, USA

The Global Impact of the United States Election

This webinar will examine the global impact of Donald Trump's return to the White House. For more information, visit [Ash Center].

5 December 2024 @ 9:00 - 10:00 a. m. (GMT +1), Chatham House, UK

North Korea-Russia security cooperation: A marriage of convenience or strategic alliance?

This webinar will discuss the renewed relationship between Moscow and Pyongyang and address the question of how the growing ties destabilize international security. For more information, visit [Chatham House].

6 December 2024 @ 1:30 p.m. (GMT -5), Atlantic Council, USA

Commanding the Alliance: Perspectives from SACEURs

This webinar will feature General Christopher G. Cavoli, Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) and Commander of the US European Command, who will discuss with former SACEURs to discuss the challenges facing NATO alliance today and its enduring value to US and allied security. For more information, visit [Atlantic Council].

9 December 2024 @ 2:00 - 3:30 p.m. (GMT +8), ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore

International Responses to Myanmar's Post-2021 Aftermath

This webinar will explore responses by the international community to the conflict in Myanmar after the 2021 coup and the implications for continued responses or new approaches amidst shifting geopolitical and regional trends, the rise in technology, and leadership changes in several countries, while the Myanmar military regime pursues its intent to convene an election in 2025. For more information, visit [ISEAS].

9 December 2024 @ 1:00 - 3:00 p.m. (GMT +1), The Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies (RUSI), UK

Paper Launch: The Joint Expeditionary Force and its Contribution to European Security

This hybrid event will present a new research paper on "The Joint Expeditionary Force and its Contribution to European Security," followed by an evaluation of the first decade of JEF and an assessment of its reaction to Russia's war against Ukraine. It will also discuss its potential future, including the expectations on the leaders' meetings in Tallinn in December and in Oslo in May 2025. For more information, visit [RUSI].

10 December 2024 @ 09:00 - 10:00 a.m. (GMT -4), International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), USA

Europe's missile renaissance: new conventional deterrence options

This webinar will analyze Russia's use of ballistic and cruise missiles in Ukraine, outline European countries' existing and under-development analogous capabilities and explore the political, technical and budgetary challenges associated with a co-development that will need to be addressed if the European Long-Range Strike Approach (ELSA) is to bear fruit. For more information, visit [IISS].

11 December 2024 @ 9:00 - 10:00 a.m. (GMT -4), Brookings, USA

The Relations with Turkey under Trump 2.0

This webinar will explore the prospects of resetting a complex and ever-evolving relationship between the U.S. and Turkey as Donald Trump returns to the White Horse. For more information, see [Brookings].

Recent Book Releases

Ian Goldin and Tom Lee-Devlin, *Age of the City: Why our Future will be Won or Lost Together*, Bloomsbury, 256 pages, published September 12, 2023. For a review, see [LSE].

Nadine Dorries*, Downfall: The Self-Destruction of the Conservative Party*, HarperCollins, 320 pages, published 21 Nov. 2024. For a review, see [Guardian]

Maurice J. Casey, *Hotel Lux: An Intimate History of Communism's Forgotten Radicals,* Footnote Press, 400 pages, published October 8, 2024. For a review, see [LARB]

Geoff Raby*, Great Game On: The contest for Central Asia and Global Supremacy*, Melbourne University Press, 240 pages, published 12 November 2024. For a review, see [ARB]

Juan José Rivas Moreno*, The Capital Market of Manila and the Pacific Trade, 1668-1838: Institutions and Trade during the First Globalization*, Palgrave Macmillan, 296 pages, published 20 October 2024. For a review, see [ARB]

Calls

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].

Washington and Lee University School of Law's Frances Lewis Law Center and the Oxford University Centre for Corporate Reputation invites paper proposals for the ***London Roundtable on National Security & International Business***, to be held on May 19, 2025. The deadline for abstract submission is January 31, 2025. For more information, see [University of Oxford].

Jobs and Positions

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** is seeking an **Individual Consultant, Senior Research Consultant** under UNDP-IC-2024-296 to be based in Pakistan. Applications are accepted until December 13, 2024. More information is provided at [UNDP].

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** is seeking an **Individual Consultant, National — Teach English** under UNDP-IC-2024-XXX to be based in Comoros. Applications are accepted until [application deadline]. More information is provided at [UNDP].

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** is seeking an **Individual Consultant, Energy and Gender Analyst** under UNDP-IC-2024-XXX to be based in the United States. Applications are accepted until [application deadline]. More information is provided at [UNDP].

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** is seeking an **Individual Consultant, Coordinator, Education Especial** under UNDP-PAN-00434 to be based in Panama City, Panama. Applications are accepted until December 12, 2024. More information is provided at [UNDP].

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** is seeking an **Individual Consultant, Advisor Disaster Resilience** under UNDP-IC-2024-398 to be based in Pakistan. Applications are accepted until December 11, 2024. More information is provided at [UNDP].

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** is seeking an **Individual Consultant, Advisor Capacity Development for Resilience** under UNDP-IC-2024-397 to be based in Pakistan. Applications are accepted until December 11, 2024. More information is provided at [UNDP].

The **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** is seeking an **Individual Consultant, Coordinator, RECEIC** under READVT-UNDP-IC-2024-032 to be based in India. Applications are accepted until December 9, 2024. More information is provided at [UNDP].

The **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** is seeking a **Consultant – Strengthening Capacity in Health Financing and Public Finance for Health and Immunization in EAP Region** under UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office (EAPRO), to be based in

Bangkok, Thailand. Applications are accepted until December 15, 2024. More information is provided at [UNICEF].

The **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** is seeking a **Health Specialist – Immunization/COVID-19, P-4** under UNICEF ROSA, to be based in Kathmandu, Nepal (Temporary Appointment – 364 days). Applications are accepted until December 13, 2024. More information is provided at [UNICEF].

The **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** is seeking a **Senior Driver, GS-3** under UNICEF Thailand Country Office, to be based in Bangkok, Thailand. Applications are accepted until December 12, 2024. More information is provided at [UNICEF].

The **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** is seeking an **International Consultant to Develop a Multi-Sectoral Strategy and Action Plan for Preventing and Responding to Violence Against Children** in Uzbekistan. Applications are accepted until December 13, 2024. More information is provided at [UNICEF].

The **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** is seeking a **Supply Assistant, GS-5** under UNICEF Thailand Country Office, to be based in Bangkok, Thailand (Temporary Appointment – 364 days). Applications are accepted until December 12, 2024. More information is provided at [UNICEF].

The **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** is seeking a **Senior Executive Associate, GS-7**under UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office (EAPRO), to be based in Bangkok, Thailand. Applications are accepted until December 6, 2024. More information is provided at [UNICEF].

The **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** is seeking a **Consultant - Desk Review on Gender-Sensitive Female Community Workforce Policies and Practices in South Asia** under UNICEF ROSA, to be based in Kathmandu, Nepal (Remote, 47 days). Applications are accepted until December 8, 2024. More information is provided at [UNICEF].

The **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)** is seeking an **Intern – Data and Analytics for Development Programmes** under UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia, to be based in Kathmandu, Nepal (6 months). Applications are accepted until December 11, 2024. More information is provided at [UNICEF].

Team:

Ally Koh (alk), Alexandre Cayrouse (axc), Alperen Cennetkuşu (acs), Anna Chong (ac), Aung Naing Lin (anl), Axel Melkonian (am), Aye Moe Pwint Phyu, Ayesha Abrar (asa), Busawan Kachonnarongvanish (bk), Chow Song Chee (cc), Duc Quang Ly (dql), Felice Valeria Thessalonica (ft), Felix Serna Calvo (fs), Fitri Aulia Ikhsani (fi), Geo Dzakwan Arshali (ga), Gowthami Kunchihithlu (gk), Henning Glaser (hg), Herosha Shanmugam (hrs), Hoa Khanh Ngo (hn), Ji Fang (jf), Junaid Amjad (ja), Jyotsna Badrinarayanan (jb), Lucas Meier (lm), Mahnoor Tariq (mt), Melih Çolak (mc), Mohammad Rizwan Ali (mra), Muhammad Anugrah Utama (mu), Muhammad Farhan Yaumil Ramadhan (mfr), Myat Sandar Zaw (msz), Oliver Cubbin (oc), Rajeswari Vikiraman (rv), Rishi Shrivastava (rs), Robishan Subba (rs), Sike Chan (sc), Simon Welfonder (sw), Sofiia Lysko (sl), Stephen Kei (sk), Steven Naaman (sn), Tehreem Fatima (tf), Thomas van Oeveren (to), Thurein Lynn (tl), Tomwit Jarnson (tj), Venus Phuangkom, Volkan Kayhan (vk)

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