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Asia in Review

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Dear Reader,

Welcome to the final edition of Asia in Review (AiR) for 2024. In this issue, as in the previous 52 editions this year, we provide you with the latest events, developments, and trends in domestic politics, international relations, and geopolitics across East Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia.

Special greetings are extended to all who celebrate the Independence Day of Haiti, Myanmar, and Sudan, the Restoration Day of the Czech Republic and Slovakia, and the Liberation Day of Cuba this week.

The entire AiR team wishes you a prosperous, joyful, and fulfilling 2025.

Best regards,

Henning Glaser

Editor-in-Chief

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

China: “Two sessions" set for March

(jf) China’s top legislature will kick off its annual parliamentary meeting on March 5, 2025, a session that investors will be closely watching. During the meeting, Beijing is expected to announce its growth target and outline strategies to rejuvenate the country’s struggling economy.

The announcement came on December 24 from the NPC Standing Committee, confirming the date for the third session of the 14th National People’s Congress (NPC) in Beijing. In a similar vein, the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), the

country's leading political advisory body, revealed that its annual session would tentatively start on March 4.

These meetings, collectively known as the "two sessions," typically take place in early March and are highly anticipated as they outline the government's policy plans for the upcoming year. These plans will cover areas like the economy, military, trade, diplomacy, and the environment, all of which will be discussed and voted on by legislators. The session is expected to last about a week, with President Xi Jinping and other top Communist Party officials participating in group discussions. Xi's speeches during these sessions are closely analyzed as they often provide insight into China's priorities and strategic direction. [South China Morning Post]

China: President Xi calls on Politburo to lead by example in anti-corruption campaign

(jf) President Xi Jinping has called on the Communist Party's top leadership to practice strict self-discipline and closely oversee the behavior of their families and subordinates as part of China's ongoing anti-corruption campaign.

Speaking to the Politburo on December 27, Xi urged its members to "resolutely combat all forms of misconduct and corruption" while strengthening the education and management of those within their personal and professional circles, according to state news agency Xinhua. The Politburo, comprising 24 members, sits just below the seven-member Politburo Standing Committee, the core of the party's power structure.

Xi highlighted the immense responsibility held by Politburo members, stressing the importance of vigilance in wielding power. He called for them to lead by example in practicing both criticism and self-criticism while adhering strictly to party discipline and rules. The speech also underscored the need for loyalty to the Communist Party and selfless dedication to advancing its goals and serving the people. [South China Morning Post 1]

Two generals removed from legislature over corruption allegations

Xi's remarks came shortly after his anti-corruption campaign in the military has claimed two more high-ranking figures. On December 24, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPC)

announced the removal of Lieutenant General You Haitao, a former deputy commander of the army, and Vice-Admiral Li Pengcheng, previously a naval commander in the People's Liberation Army' (PLA's) Southern Theatre Command, from their positions as lawmakers.

According to a statement from the NPC, both You and Li are under investigation for "serious violations of laws and discipline," a phrase commonly used in corruption cases.

You Haitao, 66, had a distinguished military career, rising to deputy commander of the PLA Army in 2016 after serving as deputy commander of the Nanjing Military Region. He achieved the rank of lieutenant general in 2014. Meanwhile, Li Pengcheng, 61, held senior positions such as deputy chief of staff of the Navy's North Sea Fleet and chief of staff of the East Sea Fleet, in addition to leading the Navy Equipment Research Institute. [South China Morning Post 2]

Their removal comes only weeks after Admiral Miao Hua, a senior official in the Central Military Commission (CMC), has been suspended and placed under investigation. 69-year-old Miao heads the CMC's Political Work Department and is considered a close ally of President Xi Jinping (see AiR No. 49, December/2024, 1).

The move highlights Beijing's ongoing efforts to enforce discipline and weed out corruption within the ranks of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and raises questions about Xi's control over the military. [NDT]

China: New political commissar of Army appointed while four generals missing from ceremony

(jf) China has promoted Chen Hui, a seasoned officer with decades of experience in the air force, to the rank of general, confirming him as the new political commissar for the army, replacing Qin Shutong, who had been in the role since January 2022. Qin's current whereabouts remain unknown.

A political commissar in China holds significant responsibility for ideology, political education, and morale within military units. Chen's promotion comes amid widespread personnel changes in the People's Liberation Army (PLA), which has seen a series of corruption investigations targeting high-ranking officers, including Miao Hua, the former head of the PLA's political work department (see article above).

Chen, 61, has a long and distinguished career in China's military. He graduated with a degree in radio communication from Hebei University of Technology in 1983 and served in various capacities in the air force over the decades. He played a key role in the Sichuan earthquake relief efforts in 2008 and held positions such as deputy political commissar at the PLA Air Force Command College in Beijing. By 2020, he was secretary of discipline and inspection for the air force, focusing on enforcing internal rules and anti-corruption measures. Most recently, in 2021, he served as political commissar of the PLA Strategic Support Force's space systems department. [South China Morning Post]

Chen's promotion was marked by a ceremony on December 23, the first such event since Miao Hua's dismissal and investigation for corruption. However, what has garnered even more attention than the promotion ceremony is the fate of former Army Political Commissar Qin Shutong, who was dismissed and is now unaccounted for. He, along with three other generals – Army Commander Li Qiaoming, Navy Political Commissar Yuan Huazhi, and Armed Police Commander Wang Chunning – were all notably absent, sparking speculation.

Analysts believe they may have been suspended due to connections with the corruption case of Miao Hua, the former head of the Chinese Communist Party's Central Military Commission Political Work Department. Most of these individuals, including Qin Shutong, hail from the 31st Group Army and have close ties to Miao Hua. This personnel shake-up is seen as a continuation of the CCP's anti-corruption campaign. [VOA in Chinese]

China: Space agency sees leadership change

(dql) China is poised for a leadership transition at its national space agency, with Zhang Kejian set to step down after being removed from his position. Zhang, 63, has led the China National Space Administration (CNSA) since May 2018 and was recently replaced as Party Secretary of the State Administration for National Defense Science, Technology, and Industry (SASTIND) by Shan Zhongde, 54. [State Administration for National Defense Science, Technology, and Industry, in Chinese]

The SASTIND oversees the China National Space Administration (CNSA). The CNSA has yet to confirm this leadership change. Shan, previously a vice minister at the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology

(MIIT), also served as president of Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics. He has led significant space initiatives, including the first far-side moon landing, the Tiangong space station, and lunar and Mars missions.

The CNSA head plays a critical role in China's space policy, ensuring alignment with national goals such as technological self-reliance, security, and global space leadership. They also coordinate key projects like the International Lunar Research Station (ILRS) and work with organizations like the China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation (CASC).

Shan is expected to take over as China progresses with its crewed lunar program and efforts to expand the ILRS. The reason for Zhang's removal remains unclear, and such transitions could signal a routine reassignment or reflect underlying issues. Previous CNSA leaders have been promoted to provincial leadership roles, while two senior CASC officials were removed over corruption allegations linked to the People's Liberation Army.

Zhang was one of the longest-serving heads of CNSA since its establishment in 1993. [Space News]

China: License age limits for bus and truck drivers to be extended due to aging population

(jf) China is extending the license age limits for drivers of medium and large buses as well as trucks, reflecting efforts to address challenges tied to its aging population, declining birth rate, and shrinking labor pool. This move is aimed at keeping older transportation workers on the job to help maintain stability within the country's vast transportation network, at least in the medium term, as the sector transitions toward increased use of autonomous vehicles.

A decade ago, Beijing had allowed male bus drivers to retire earlier, at 55, due to health concerns and operational safety. However, with a declining workforce, the approach has shifted. Starting next year, the maximum age for individuals applying for licenses to drive medium or large buses and trucks will rise from 60 to 63, according to a statement released by the Ministry of Public Security on December 27. [State Council, China]

Drivers over 63 will also be able to extend their licenses for up to three years, provided they

successfully pass medical exams and tests assessing memory, situational judgment, and reaction time.

This change aligns with broader reforms addressing China's aging population. Earlier this year, the country's top legislative body approved a historic proposal to raise the national retirement age. Men will now retire at 63 instead of 60, while white-collar women will retire at 58 instead of 55. For women in blue-collar roles, the retirement age will rise to 55 from 50. These adjustments, set to begin on January 1 and phased in over 15 years, bring China closer to its regional peers like Japan and South Korea, which face similar demographic challenges due to falling fertility rates and aging workforces (see AiR No. 38, September/2024, 3).

China's retirement age remains one of the lowest globally, but these changes signal a strategic response to maintain its labor force and sustain economic stability in an era of rapid demographic shifts. [Reuters]

China: Lawyers criticize police power abuse for transferring a blogger to a psychiatric hospital

(jf) Chinese legal experts have criticized police in Jiangxi province for allegedly abusing their authority by sending Li Yixue, a prominent blogger, for psychiatric treatment once again. Li, who has over 800,000 followers on Douyin (China's TikTok), previously accused an auxiliary police officer in Nanchang, Jiangxi's capital, of sexual assault – a claim that police dismissed following their investigation.

On December 22, Nanchang police stated that Li was sent to a hospital for treatment after a Beijing facility diagnosed her with "obsessive-compulsive disorder" and "personality disorder." However, this action has raised concerns about misuse of psychiatric evaluations to silence dissent or deflect scrutiny.

The controversy stems from an incident in April 2022, when Li accused a local auxiliary officer of sexual assault. Police not only rejected her allegations but also admitted her to a psychiatric hospital for two months, citing concerns for her mental health and the possibility that she might harm herself. After her release, tests from other institutions found Li to be mentally sound. She sued the hospital later that year, drawing significant public attention, though the court has yet to deliver a verdict.

Earlier this month, Li posted a video plea on Douyin claiming police had forcibly entered her home with a dozen people and damaged a security camera. Nanchang police denied this accusation in a statement on December 22, asserting that their visit involved law enforcement officers and medical experts from Beijing. They said they had spoken with Li and her father during the visit, conducted between December 13 and December 14.

The incident has sparked widespread debate on Chinese social media, with many raising concerns about the potential misuse of psychiatric diagnoses as a tool to undermine credibility and suppress individuals challenging authority. Legal experts have called for greater oversight and accountability in cases where psychiatric interventions intersect with law enforcement actions. [South China Morning Post]

China – Hong Kong: Police announce bounties for six more activists abroad

(jf) Hong Kong police have announced new HKD 1 million (USD 128,000) bounties for information leading to the arrest of six overseas pro-democracy advocates accused of violating national security laws. Authorities also revealed plans to revoke the passports of seven individuals already targeted by similar bounties, including ex-lawmakers Ted Hui and Dennis Kwok, according to local reports.

The bounties come in the wake of Beijing's imposition of a sweeping national security law in 2020, which followed massive pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong the year before. The law has effectively crushed dissent, leading many opposition figures to flee abroad while others face lengthy prison sentences.

This marks the third time since 2020 that Hong Kong has offered such rewards, following similar moves in July and December 2023. The targets include activists like Carmen Lau, a former district councillor now based in Britain, and Chung Kim-wah, a prominent former pollster. Most of the accused face charges of inciting secession or collusion with foreign powers.

The international response to these announcements has been overwhelmingly critical. Western nations have condemned previous bounties as politically motivated and inconsistent with human rights standards. Hong Kong and Beijing, in turn, have accused these countries of interfering in China’s internal affairs. The bounties are largely seen as

symbolic, as extradition for political offenses is unlikely in most countries where the activists now reside.

The continued pursuit of these individuals reflects Hong Kong's determination to exert control over dissidents, even those living abroad, while sending a clear message to potential critics of the national security law. [The Guardian] [Reuters]

China – Hong Kong: Father of Democracy stripped off Justice of the Peace title

(jf) Martin Lee, a founding member of Hong Kong's Democratic Party and often called the "Father of Democracy," has been stripped of his title as Justice of the Peace. Lee, 86, a highly respected barrister and long-time advocate for democracy, played a pivotal role in shaping Hong Kong's democratic movement, particularly following the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown.

Lee co-founded the Democratic Party in 1994, and served as a member of the city's Legislative Council for over 20 years. His contributions to Hong Kong's fight for democracy have left a lasting legacy, even as the political landscape continues to shift.

The Chief Executive's Office did not provide specific reasons for the revocation of Lee's title. However, the Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau clarified to HKFP that the decision was made because Lee had been convicted of an offense that resulted in a prison sentence, whether suspended or not. [Hong Kong Free Press]

China: November industrial output sees slight decline

(jf) China's industrial profits fell at a slower rate in November, signaling some improvement as economic stimulus measures began to take effect, according to The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) on December 27. However, for the full year, industrial earnings are projected to see their sharpest decline in over two decades, reflecting persistent weakness in domestic consumption and investment. [National Bureau of Statistics in Chinese]

The NBS reported a 7.3 percent year-on-year drop in industrial profits for November, a notable improvement from October's 10 percent decline. This moderation coincided with a slower decrease in

factory-gate prices, with the producer price index falling 2.5 percent in November compared to a 2.9 percent drop the previous month.

Despite these signs of stabilization, industrial profits for the first 11 months of 2024 dropped by 4.7 percent, worsening from a 4.3 percent decline in the January-October period. The annual decline in industrial earnings is expected to be the steepest since at least 2000, under previous data compilation methods that included smaller enterprises. Current challenges, including soft consumer demand, a prolonged housing market slump, and looming trade tensions with the incoming U.S. administration of President-elect Donald Trump, have weighed heavily on businesses.

On the economic growth front, the World Bank revised its 2024 forecast for China slightly upward to 4.9 percent from its earlier estimate of 4.8 percent (see below). However, structural challenges in boosting private demand continue to hinder a robust post-pandemic revival. [World Bank] [The Guardian]

Recent economic indicators have presented a mixed picture. While industrial output accelerated in November, new home prices fell at the slowest rate in 17 months, underscoring the continued fragility of the property sector.

In response to these challenges, Chinese leaders have pledged stronger fiscal and monetary support. At a recent policy meeting, the government announced plans to raise the fiscal deficit, issue additional debt, and loosen monetary policies to stabilize growth (see AiR No. 51, December/2024, 3). Direct fiscal support to households and enhanced social security measures have also been promised to stimulate consumer spending and economic activity. [Reuters]

China: World Bank increases GDP forecast 2024 and 2025

(jf) The World Bank has revised its forecast for China's economic growth in 2024 and 2025 upward but cautioned that persistent challenges in household and business confidence, alongside ongoing property sector struggles, will continue to dampen growth prospects next year. [World Bank]

The World Bank's updated projections estimate China’s gross domestic product (GDP) will grow by 4.9 percent in 2024, slightly higher than its June forecast of 4.8 percent. This aligns closely with Beijing’s stated target of "around 5 percent" growth, which the government

remains confident in achieving. For 2025, growth is expected to decelerate to 4.5 percent, still above the earlier forecast of 4.1 percent.

Weakened household income growth and the erosion of wealth due to falling property prices are expected to restrain consumer spending into 2025, according to the Bank. A meaningful recovery in the property sector is unlikely before late 2025, despite regulatory efforts to stabilize the market.

In response, Chinese authorities have approved a record RMB 3 trillion (USD 411 billion) in special treasury bonds for 2025 to spur economic activity. However, these measures will not be finalized until the National People's Congress meets in March, leaving room for adjustments.

Although China's middle class has grown significantly – encompassing 32 percent of the population in 2021 – the World Bank noted that approximately 55 percent of the population remains "economically insecure." This highlights the need for targeted policies to expand economic opportunities and strengthen financial stability for more citizens. [Reuters]

China: New plan to cut import tariffs announced

(jf) China has announced plans to significantly reduce import tariffs on a range of goods starting January 1, 2025, as part of efforts to boost domestic demand.

The new measures will introduce provisional tariffs lower than the most-favored-nation rates on 935 commodities, according to the Customs Tariff Commission of the State Council. The adjustments are expected to facilitate access to high-quality products, lower production costs for industries, and support green and technological innovation.

Key reductions include tariffs on essential raw materials such as ethane, cycloolefin polymers, and ethylene-vinyl alcohol copolymers, vital to the petrochemical sector. Lowering these tariffs is anticipated to aid green development and technological advancements in the industry, according to the China Petroleum and Chemical Industry Federation. Other measures include reduced tariffs on recycled copper and aluminum materials, which align with China's push for sustainable resource use, and on specialized vehicle parts, such as automatic transmissions for fire trucks and repair vehicles, aimed at enhancing their production and competitiveness.

China will also extend its zero-tariff policy on certain pharmaceutical materials and medical equipment, such as sodium zirconium cyclosilicate and nickel-titanium alloy wires for implants, to improve healthcare accessibility.

Under 24 free trade agreements, conventional tariffs will apply to imports from 34 countries or regions. For example, tariffs under the China-Maldives free trade agreement will be gradually reduced to zero for nearly 96 percent of tariff lines. Additionally, China will continue offering zero tariffs on all items from 43 least-developed countries to foster mutual development. Some changes are strategic: while import tariffs will be cut for electric passenger vehicles to encourage technological growth, they will increase for certain battery components, like diaphragms, to support domestic industry and market needs. [State Council]

China: New plan to issue USD 411 billion special treasury bond issuance in 2025 revealed

(jf) China is set to issue a record-breaking RMB 3 trillion (USD 411 billion) in special treasury bonds in 2025, a sharp rise from this year's RMB 1 trillion, as part of a broader fiscal push to stimulate the slowing economy. The decision, revealed by sources familiar with the matter, highlights Beijing's readiness to take on more debt to counteract deflationary pressures and an anticipated hike in U.S. tariffs under President-elect Donald Trump.

The funds will be directed towards initiatives aimed at boosting domestic consumption, upgrading business equipment, and supporting advanced innovation-driven sectors. Key measures include subsidy programs encouraging consumers to trade in old vehicles and appliances for new ones and offering financial incentives for businesses to modernize equipment. Additionally, the proceeds will finance major infrastructure projects such as railways, airports, and farmland improvements, as well as initiatives to bolster security in critical areas.

The planned issuance has already caused a slight uptick in treasury yields, with the 10-year and 30-year treasury yields rising by 1 and 2 basis points, respectively. Analysts see the move as exceeding market expectations and a sign of the central government's decisive action to support growth. Tommy Xie, head of Asia Macro Research at OCBC Bank, noted that the central government's significant

borrowing capacity makes such measures a crucial tool for economic stabilization.

Unlike regular bonds included in annual budgets, these ultra-long special treasury bonds are treated as extraordinary instruments, earmarked for specific projects or policy priorities. About RMB 1.3 trillion of the planned issuance will be allocated to the “two major” and “two new” initiatives outlined in official documents. The "new" programs focus on consumer subsidies for durable goods and business equipment upgrades, while the "major" initiatives include large-scale infrastructure development aligned with national strategies.

This expansion in treasury bonds underscores Beijing's commitment to reviving its economy through direct fiscal intervention, with a particular emphasis on increasing domestic demand and fostering industrial modernization. [Reuters]

China: World's largest hydropower dam to be built in Tibet

(jf) China has given the green light to construct what will be the world's largest hydropower dam on the eastern edge of the Tibetan plateau, a move with potential implications for millions of people downstream in India and Bangladesh. The dam will be located on the lower reaches of the Yarlung Zangbo River and is projected to generate an estimated 300 billion kilowatt-hours (kWh) of electricity annually.

This output would far surpass the current capacity of the Three Gorges Dam, the world’s largest hydropower facility, which produces 88.2 billion kWh annually. According to reports from the Power Construction Corporation of China, this ambitious project is expected to play a critical role in advancing China’s carbon peaking and neutrality objectives, while simultaneously boosting engineering industries and creating employment opportunities in Tibet.

The proposed site for the dam features a steep 2,000-meter drop over just 50 kilometers, presenting a mix of unparalleled hydropower potential and complex engineering hurdles. However, the project is likely to surpass even the enormous costs of the Three Gorges Dam, which totaled RMB 254.2 billion (USD 34.83 billion). That figure included significant expenses for resettling 1.4 million people, an aspect that had been severely underestimated in early projections.

Officials have yet to disclose how many people the Tibetan dam would displace or the extent of its impact on the local ecosystem, one of the plateau's most biodiverse regions. The lack of clarity raises concerns, particularly for downstream countries like India and Bangladesh, which rely on the Yarlung Zangbo River – known as the Brahmaputra after it flows into India – for water resources and agriculture. [Reuters]

China: 58,000-tonne flat-top cargo ship sets world record

(jf) China has completed sea trials for the *Fan Zhou 8*, a groundbreaking self-propelled deck vessel boasting a record-breaking carrying capacity of 58,000 tonnes. Declared seaworthy after five days of rigorous testing, it now holds the title of the largest vessel of its kind worldwide.

The ship, which left the Taizhou Zhonghang Shipbuilding facility in Zhejiang province on December 26, underwent extensive trials in waters east of Shanghai before returning to dock. According to state broadcaster CCTV, the *Fan Zhou 8* demonstrates exceptional seaworthiness and complies with the Polar Code, enabling navigation in icy conditions with small drifting floes.

The massive vessel measures 256 meters in length and 51 meters in width (approximately 840 by 167 feet). It has an impressive range of 16,000 nautical miles and can reach speeds exceeding 15 knots (28 km/h). This makes it capable of covering long-distance routes such as the Shanghai to New York route, which spans about 14,000 nautical miles.

The *Fan Zhou 8* is uniquely designed with a flat-top deck that dominates the hull, enabling it to transport a diverse range of heavy and oversized cargo. This includes offshore oilfield equipment, wind and nuclear power components, and large vessel steel structures. Some have even compared the vessel's size to that of the *Fujian*, China's first domestically developed aircraft carrier, which measures approximately 300 meters by 70 meters. [South China Morning Post]

China: New amphibious assault ship revealed

(jf) China has unveiled its newest and most advanced amphibious assault ship, the *Sichuan*, signaling a

significant boost to the navy's capability for distant sea operations. Launched on December 17, the *Sichuan* is the first vessel of the 076 class, displacing 40,000 tons and featuring cutting-edge technology such as an electromagnetic catapult for fighter jet launches, according to the state-run Xinhua news agency. [Xinhua, in Chinese]

The ship is specifically designed to deploy ground troops using landing crafts while providing substantial air support. Its electromagnetic catapult system, a key innovation, allows fighter jets to take off directly from its deck, complemented by an arrestor system enabling aircraft to land safely. This marks a technological leap from China's earlier type 075 amphibious ships, first launched in 2019.

The *Sichuan* represents a broader effort by China's People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) to modernize and expand its reach beyond coastal waters. For over a decade, PLAN has been upgrading its fleet to operate globally, aiming to reduce reliance on bases near the Chinese mainland. The electromagnetic catapult technology was first successfully used on China's indigenously developed aircraft carrier, the *Fujian*, which was launched two years ago.

While the *Sichuan* will now undergo further tests, including sea trials, its debut underscores China's ambitions to maintain a competitive edge in naval technology. This launch comes as the PLAN remains the largest navy in the world by fleet size and continues to focus on upgrading its capabilities. Recent reports also suggest China is working on designing nuclear-powered aircraft carriers, which would significantly extend the operational range of its fleet without the need for refueling bases.

By comparison, the United States currently operates 11 nuclear-powered aircraft carriers, enabling it to maintain strike groups in key global regions, including the Asia-Pacific, at all times. China's advancements aim to narrow this strategic gap, signaling its growing presence on the global naval stage. [AP]

China: New record for annual rocket launches despite latest launch failure

(jf) China's commercial space sector experienced a setback late December 26 when the Kinetica-1 (Lijian-1) solid rocket failed during a launch, marking an end to a record-setting year for domestic rocket launches.

The rocket, operated by CAS Space, a subsidiary of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS) lost attitude control just three seconds after ignition, triggering the self-destruct mechanism. The failure marks the first loss for the Kinetica-1 rocket, which had completed five successful missions prior to this attempt. The most recent successful launch occurred in November 2024.

Despite the failure, China achieved a significant milestone in 2024 with its 68th orbital launch attempt, setting a new national record and surpassing the previous high of 67 launches in 2023. However, the year also witnessed two launch failures: the Kinetica-1 solid rocket from CAS Space and the Hyperbola-1 rocket by iSpace in July.

Globally, China ranked second in launch numbers, trailing the United States, which surpassed 150 launches, largely driven by SpaceX's Falcon 9 missions. Russia, in contrast, saw a continued decline, with just 17 launches in 2024, down from 19 the previous year.

Despite the record-breaking activity, China fell short of its ambitious target of 100 launches for the year. State-owned CASC, which had aimed for about 70 launches, and commercial players like Landspace, Galactic Energy, and Orienspace, which collectively targeted 30 launches, struggled to meet their projections. The slower-than-expected cadence reflects challenges such as limited access to launch facilities. Efforts to address this bottleneck include expanding commercial launch zones at Wenchang and Jiuquan and increasing sea launch capabilities.

China also set a new national record by deploying more than 260 spacecraft into orbit, surpassing the 221 from 2023. [Space News]

China: First sixth-generation stealth fighter jet surpasses global advanced standards, Chinese experts claim

(jf) Chinese military experts suggest that the country's first sixth-generation stealth fighter jet could achieve unprecedented stealth capabilities even at hypersonic speeds. Some commentators have gone so far as to claim that the new jet signifies that China's military aviation technology has "fully surpassed global advanced standards."

Speculation about the jet intensified after a mysterious aircraft with a three-engine configuration was spotted over Chengdu, Sichuan province, on December 26. Observers believe this could have been the stealth

fighter's maiden flight. Notably, the flight was conducted in broad daylight, and the aircraft was accompanied by a J-20, China's current fifth-generation stealth fighter jet.

The new jet's design – featuring a tailless triangular structure – caught significant attention. During the flight, the aircraft kept its landing gear down, a typical procedure during early test stages to ensure safety and readiness for further evaluation.

While Chinese authorities have yet to officially confirm the existence or name of the fighter, an indirect hint came from *Defence Times*, a Chengdu-based media outlet. On its Weibo account, it posted an image of a ginkgo leaf alongside the comment, "It really looks like a leaf," which many interpreted as a subtle acknowledgment of the jet's design.

The new aircraft, reportedly developed by the Chengdu Aircraft Industry Group, could signify a major leap forward for the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Air Force, further advancing China's capabilities in cutting-edge aviation technology. [South China Morning Post]

China: Man, who killed 35 in car attack, sentenced to death

(jf) A Chinese court has sentenced a man to death for deliberately driving his car into a crowd at a sports center in Zhuhai, killing 35 people in what has become the deadliest public act of violence in China in a decade. The sentencing of Fan Weiqiu, 62, took place on December 27 at the Zhuhai Intermediate People's Court after he pled guilty earlier the same day, according to state broadcaster CCTV.

The incident occurred on the evening of November 11, when Fan, reportedly enraged over a failed marriage and a divorce settlement he deemed unfair, drove his car into a large group of people exercising at the Zhuhai Sports Center. Witnesses described scenes of chaos and devastation as his off-road vehicle plowed through the crowd, injuring dozens in addition to those killed (see AiR No. 47, November/2024, 3).

This case has added to growing concerns in China over a recent spike in violent public attacks, including those targeting children, as the nation grapples with economic challenges and societal pressures. Such episodes have unsettled a population that has long taken pride in low violent crime rates and extensive surveillance infrastructure. [CNN]

In a separate case, a court in northern China has sentenced two teenagers to lengthy prison terms for the murder of a classmate in a case that sparked public debate on juvenile delinquency. The Handan City court in Hebei province sentenced Zhang to life imprisonment and Li to 12 years for intentional homicide, citing the "particularly cruel methods and heinous circumstances" of the crime. A third suspect, Ma, received "special correctional education" under the law.

The victim, a 13-year-old surnamed Wang, was killed with a shovel and buried in a shallow pit in an abandoned greenhouse on March 10.

At the time of the incident, all three suspects were 13 years old. In 2021, China lowered the minimum age of criminal responsibility to 12 for severe crimes such as intentional homicide, though minors remain exempt from the death penalty.

The case highlights the challenges faced by "left-behind children" – the offspring of rural migrant workers who often grow up without parental supervision. Nearly 67 million children in this demographic, according to 2020 census data, face heightened risks of mental health issues, bullying, and involvement in criminal activities. Public reaction included calls for harsher punishments for juvenile offenders, with some advocating the death penalty for serious crimes. [Reuters] [Sixth Tone]

Japan: Bills on transparency in political party funds pass parliament

(dql) Japan's Diet passed three reform bills on December 24 aimed at increasing transparency in the use of political funds. The move addresses public concerns stemming from a 2023 slush fund scandal involving senior lawmakers of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). The scandal centered on unreported revenues generated through fundraising activities and used to create slush funds.

One bill, proposed by seven opposition parties, bans policy activity allowances to lawmakers from political organizations. These allowances have faced criticism due to the lack of disclosure requirements.

Another bill, co-submitted by Komeito, the junior partner in the ruling coalition with the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), and the opposition Democratic Party for the People (DPP), mandates the creation of a

third-party entity in the Diet to monitor lawmakers' fund usage, gaining bipartisan support.

The ruling LDP introduced and passed a bill prohibiting the purchase of fundraising party tickets by foreign entities and mandating the creation of a database for political fund reports from lawmakers and party headquarters. However, this database will not cover reports from other political organizations, which handle the majority of such funds. [Kyodo News]

A broader ban on donations from companies and organizations, proposed by the main opposition party, the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan, is set for further debate next year. Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba of the LDP has expressed a preference for greater transparency over an outright ban, arguing that political donations provide companies with a platform to express their views. His position could obstruct efforts to honor a verbal agreement between ruling and opposition parties to resolve the issue by March 2025. [The Asahi Shimbun]

The reforms were approved on the final day of an extraordinary Diet session, which had been extended to allow for additional deliberations. This session also marked the first parliamentary debate since Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba's LDP and its coalition partner, Komeito, became a minority government after losing their majority in the October 27 general election over the fund scandal was widely regarded as a major factor contributing to their electoral defeat (see AiR No. 44, October/2024, 5). Due to electoral defeat the LDP was compelled to respond to demands from empowered opposition parties for stricter regulations on political funds.

Japan: Cabinet approves record budget draft for fiscal 2025

(dql) The Japanese government has approved a record JPY 115.54 trillion (USD 730 billion) draft budget for fiscal 2025, driven by increased social security and defense spending, raising concerns about fiscal sustainability.

The budget surpasses the previous record of JPY 114.38 trillion (USD 724 billion) set in fiscal 2023. While projecting a record JPY 78.44 trillion (USD 497) in tax revenue due to strong corporate earnings, the government plans to issue JPY 28.65 trillion (USD 181 billion) in new bonds, marking the lowest bond issuance in 17 years. However, a quarter of

expenditures will still rely on debt, underscoring Japan's fiscal challenges.

Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba, who leads a minority government after his Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and Komeito lost their majority in the October 27 House of Representatives election (see AiR No. 44, October/2024, 5), emphasized the need for swift approval of the budget in the upcoming Diet session, urging opposition parties to cooperate.

The budget drafting follows the recent passage of a supplementary fiscal 2024 budget with opposition support (see AiR No. 51, December/2024, 3), signaling potential challenges to its approval in the Lower House, where Ishiba's ruling LDP/Komeito coalition on command 220 of the 465 seats.

Budget spendings

Social security spending will account for a record JPY 38.28 trillion (USD 242 billion), reflecting the demands of an aging population and efforts to address the declining birthrate. To bolster regional security against threats from China and North Korea, defense spending will rise to JPY 8.70 trillion (USD 55 billion), exceeding JPY 8 trillion yen for the first time.

Economic stimulus measures include funding for semiconductors, artificial intelligence, and a JPY 100 billion (USD 633 million) investment in domestic chip venture Rapidus Corp. Interest payments on debt will rise to JPY 28.22 trillion (USD 178 billion), indicating higher long-term rates amid the Bank of Japan's tightening monetary policy.

Japan's outstanding central and local government debt is projected to reach JPY 1,330 trillion (USD 84 billion) by the end of fiscal 2025, amounting to twice the nation's GDP. The budget drafting follows the recent passage of a supplementary fiscal 2024 budget with opposition support, signaling potential challenges in the hung parliament.

The Cabinet Office forecasts 1.2 percent real GDP growth for fiscal 2025, up from 0.4 percent in fiscal 2024, with increased tax revenues driven by higher consumption taxes amid rising prices. [Kyodo News]

Details of the defense budget proposal

Key allocations of defense budget include JPY 940 billion (USD 6 billion) for a "standoff" defense system featuring long-range cruise missiles, satellite constellations, and U.S.-made Tomahawk missiles, with deployments beginning in late 2025. Additionally, JPY

533 billion (USD 3.37 billion) will strengthen missile defenses, including interceptors and reconnaissance radar on Okinawa, home to significant U.S. military presence.

Japan aims to double annual military spending to JPY 10 trillion (USD 63 billion) by 2027, positioning itself as the world's third-largest defense spender after the U.S. and China. Efforts to bolster the domestic defense industry include JPY 314.8 billion (USD 2 billion) for three advanced Mogami-class destroyers, which feature long-range missiles, anti-submarine warfare capabilities, and reduced crew requirements. Japan hopes to sell these vessels to Australia, competing with Germany's MEKO A-200 frigate for Australia's Sea 3000 project.

The budget also allocates JPY 108.7 billion (USD 690 million) for a next-generation fighter jet developed jointly with Britain and Italy, targeted for deployment by 2035. JPY 111 billion (USD 703 million) is designated for unmanned weapons and artificial intelligence, alongside measures to improve salaries and working conditions for Self-Defense Force personnel. [Mint] [Independent]

Japan: 2024 number of births to fall below 700,000 for first time

(dql) According calculations of newspaper *The Asahi Shimbun*, based on data of the health ministry, the number of births in 2024 will fall below the targeted 700,000 as an estimated 687,080 Japanese children were or will be born this year. This figure is a decrease of about 5.5 percent compared with 727,288 births in 2023 and marks the lowest level on record.

The 2023 figure reflects a 5.6 percent drop compared with 2022, when 770,759 births were recorded and the first total below 800,000 was recorded since demographic statistics were first collected in 1899.

In the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research's mid-range estimate of the future population, released in 2023, the number of births will fall below 700,000 in 2038, indicating the decline in the birth rate takes place at a pace about 14 years faster than expected. [The Mainichi]

Persistent low birthrates have long triggered concerns about a shrinking working population, labor shortages in the nursing care sector, and a lack of various services in both rural and urban areas. An accelerated drop in the birthrate will only fuel these fears.

In response, the Cabinet in late 2023 approved the Kodomo Mirai Senryaku (“Children's future strategy), an annual JPY 3.6 trillion (USD 23 billion) program to address the declining birthrate. The program provides financial support, such as expanded child allowances, and allows for the usage of day care centers and other facilities without regard of the parents’ employment status and other requirements. [The Asahi Shimbun]

Japan: Education ministry calls for more flexible school curriculum to meet diverse needs

(dql) The Central Council for Education, an advisory panel of Japan's education ministry, has been tasked to explore expanding school flexibility to better support children with diverse personalities and needs. As part of curriculum revisions, Education Minister Toshiko Abe proposed shortening class periods by five minutes to allocate extra time for individual study or personalized learning.

With advancements in digital technology, including artificial intelligence, the minister also called for measures to improve digital literacy across all school levels, addressing concerns about the rise of fake news and online harassment.

The panel will submit its recommendations by March 2027, with the updated curriculum set to roll out from 2030 for elementary schools to 2032 for senior high schools. [Kyodo News]

Japan: Government aims for 60 percent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions from 2013 levels by 2035

(dql) Japan's ministries of environment and industry have finalized a plan to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 60 percent from 2013 levels by 2035, updating the previous target of a 46 percent reduction by 2030. The plan reflects efforts to balance domestic priorities with global climate commitments.

The new plan also sets a path toward achieving net zero emissions by 2050, aligning with international pledges like the Biden administration’s target of a 61-66 percent reduction by 2035. However, critics argue that Japan's plan is inadequate given its continued reliance on fossil fuels. [ESG News]

The proposed climate target has faced criticism from environmentalists and politicians, who argue that it is inadequate for Japan, the world's fifth-largest carbon emitter, still heavily reliant on fossil fuels. Climate activists pointed out that the target falls short of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) recommendation to limit global warming to 1.5°C, which requires a 66 percent reduction in Japan's emissions from 2013 levels by 2035.

Despite strong opposition, a joint panel of experts from two ministries approved the draft target, which seeks to balance economic growth, energy security, and decarbonization. Although some panel members argued the target was too low to meet global expectations, the goal was left unchanged. The ministries will submit the revised Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) to the UN in February, after public consultation. [Reuters]

This comes as Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the U.S. Department of State have reaffirmed their commitment to accelerating decarbonization, fostering economic growth, enhancing industrial competitiveness, and strengthening energy security. This pledge was made during the 3rd Annual Japan-U.S. Energy Security Dialogue held on December 24 in Tokyo.

Both sides agreed to pursue these goals by deploying innovative clean energy technologies and developing resilient, complementary clean energy supply chains under Japan's GX Promotion Act and the U.S. Inflation Reduction Act.

Japan and the U.S. will further collaborate on advancing clean energy technologies, including floating offshore wind, clean hydrogen and its derivatives (ammonia, synthetic fuels, synthetic methane), carbon capture and storage/recycling, and advanced nuclear reactors, including Small Modular Reactors (SMRs).

Additionally, both countries have agreed to cooperate on building resilient mineral resource supply chains, ensuring a stable LNG supply, reducing methane emissions, and promoting clean energy in the Indo-Pacific. They also reaffirmed their continued support for Ukraine's recovery, particularly in the energy sector. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan]

Japan: Top five defense firms see revenue increase in 2024

(dgl) Japan's top five defense firms reported USD 10 billion in sales, marking a 35 percent increase from 2022 and reflecting the country's major defense buildup to address security threats from China, North Korea, and Russia.

These figures push Japan in a leading position, together with South Korea, in Asia and Oceania which saw significant activity, with regional arms sales rising by 5.7 percent to USD 136 billion. China, the second-largest arms producer globally, generated USD 103 billion in revenues but experienced a slowdown in growth to 0.7 percent due to economic pressures and structural challenges.

Mitsubishi Heavy Industries led with USD 3.89 billion in revenue, followed by Kawasaki Heavy Industries at USD 2.06 billion. Fujitsu, NEC, and Mitsubishi Electric rounded out the top five. Domestic military orders for all five companies doubled or quadrupled compared to 2022, driven by demand for advanced aircraft and missiles. [The Mainichi]

This growth aligns with Japan's 2022 revised National Security Strategy, which aims to double annual defense spending within five years and strengthen domestic defense production capabilities (see AiR No. 51, December/2022, 3).

In 2023, the global arms industry experienced significant growth, with revenues rising by 4.2 percent to USD 632 billion. This increase was driven by conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza, escalating tensions in East Asia, and rearmament programs worldwide, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI).

The U.S. maintained its dominance, accounting for 50 percent of total revenues from SIPRI's Top 100 arms manufacturers. The 41 U.S. companies featured recorded a 2.5 percent increase in revenues, reaching USD 317 billion.

In Russia, arms revenues surged by 40 percent to USD 25.5 billion, primarily driven by the state-owned conglomerate Rostec, which reported a 49 percent increase. Analysts attributed this growth to expanded production of military equipment and modernization of existing arsenals, despite limited official data availability.

Asia and Oceania saw significant activity, with regional arms sales rising by 5.7 percent to USD 136 billion, led by South Korea and Japan. South Korean companies posted a remarkable 39 percent growth, reaching USD 11 billion. China, the second-largest arms producer

globally, generated USD 103 billion in revenues but experienced a slowdown in growth to 0.7 percent due to economic pressures and structural challenges. [SIPRI] [The Eurasian Times]

Japan: Firms hiring foreign workers to cover labor shortages

(dgl) A Japanese government survey published last week showed that 65 percent of companies in Japan hire foreign workers to cover shortages in key areas such as manufacturing, nursing, and other specialist fields.

Conducted in October and November 2023, this was the labor ministry's first survey on foreign worker employment and recruitment, targeting companies with five or more employees. Responses were received from 3,534 businesses and 11,629 workers.

Challenges cited by 44.8 percent of companies included communication difficulties with foreign workers. Additionally, 51.5 percent of foreign employees reported being introduced to their jobs by agencies or individuals in their home countries, while 13.5 percent found employment through Japanese-based agencies or individuals. Notably, 82.5 percent of foreign workers stated they encountered no workplace issues.

The emphasized plans to continue the survey as a foundation for policymaking amid the country's graying and declining population. [Kyodo News 1] [Nippon.com]

In 2024, the number of births will fall below the targeted 700,000 as an estimated 687,080 Japanese children were or will be born this year, according to calculations based on data of the health ministry. This figure is a decrease of about 5.5 percent compared with 727,288 births in 2023 and marks the lowest level on record (see article above).

In 2023, Japan's population decreased for the 15th consecutive year, seeing a drop of over half a million people. The country recorded a historic low of 730,000 births and a record high of 1.58 million deaths, bringing the total population to 124.9 million as of January 1, 2024. Meanwhile, the population of foreign residents increased by 11 percent, surpassing 3 million for the first time (see AiR No. 31, July/2024, 5).

In separate news, Japan's education ministry has advised schools to schedule trips during off-peak

seasons due to a labor shortage in transportation and accommodations, exacerbated by a surge in inbound tourism. The ministry issued a notice on December 12, urging schools to be flexible with timing to avoid issues with securing charter buses and hotel bookings.

Traditionally, school trips occur between May and June or from September to December. Popular destinations include Tokyo, Osaka, Kyoto, and Okinawa. A shortage of bus drivers, partly due to government-imposed working hour restrictions, has led some schools to opt for train travel instead. [Kyodo News 2]

Japan: Tokyo faces accelerated inflation in December

(dql) Core inflation in Tokyo accelerated in December while services inflation held steady, according to data presented by the Bank of Japan (BOJ), the country's central bank, on December 27. However, factory output saw a drop in November for the first time in three months, indicating impacts of softening overseas demand on Japan's export-reliant economy.

The Tokyo core consumer price index (CPI), which excludes volatile costs for fresh food, rose 2.4 percent in December from a year earlier, compared with a median market forecast for a 2.5 percent gain. In November the CPI suggested a 2.2 percent year-on-year rise. Another index that does not cover both fresh food and fuel costs, which the BOJ views as a better gauge of demand-driven inflation, rose 1.8 percent in December from a year earlier after a 1.9 percent increase in November. Meanwhile, prices in the service sector rose 1.0 percent in December following a 0.9 percent gain in November.

The increase in Tokyo inflation is largely attributed to higher utility bills and the price of food like rice, which could weigh on consumption and discourage firms from hiking prices further. This includes 13.5 percent gains in energy prices after government subsidies for gas and electricity bills were phased out.

Inflation data for Tokyo are viewed as an important indicator of nationwide trends and is closely watched by policymakers for insights into ow much progress Japan is making towards durably meeting the BOJ's 2 percent inflation target – a prerequisite for more rate hikes. The BOJ will review this data at its next policy meeting on January 23-24, with analysts expecting a decision to raise short-term interest rates.

Separate data revealed that factory output dropped by 2.3 percent in November from the previous month, driven by shrinking production of chip equipment and automobile. This has raised questions about the strength of Japan's fragile economic recovery. [Reuters] [BNN Bloomberg]

Japan: Kawasaki Heavy Industries accused of creating slush funds through fraudulent MSDF transactions

(dql) Defense contractor Kawasaki Heavy Industries Ltd. is facing accusations of generating approximately JPY1.7 billion (USD 11 million) in slush funds over six years through fraudulent transactions with subcontractors, using part of the funds to purchase goods and meals for Japan's Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF) personnel.

The Defense Ministry plans to demand repayment of the overcharged amount from Kawasaki, which is responsible for the maintenance and repair of MSDF submarines. The company allegedly invoiced fictitious purchases as part of repair work, funneling the proceeds to cover personal items and meals for submarine crew members.

A special investigation committee formed in June is examining the company's actions, with findings expected soon. The Ministry of Defense estimates the scheme generated around JPY 200 million (USD 1.28 million) annually. A defense audit is currently being conducted, targeting 1,500 MSDF members to assess the scope of the wrongdoing. [AA]

This scandal comes amid a series of misconduct cases, including mishandling of classified information and fraudulent allowances, leading to disciplinary actions against 218 SDF members and Defense Ministry officials. Following the discovery, Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, another company involved in submarine manufacturing and maintenance, was also found to have purchased unapproved items and failed to perform some contracted services. [Kyodo News]

Japan: Toyota to build EV plant in Shanghai

(dql) Car manufacturer Toyota Motor Corp. is planning to build a fully owned electric vehicle (EV) plant in Shanghai for its Lexus luxury brand. If realized, the

plant would mark Toyota's first independently operated facility in China, where the government is currently easing foreign investment regulations (see AiR No. 52, December/2024, 4).

The automaker is in negotiations with local authorities and other stakeholders to take advantage of China's foreign investment deregulation. This follows the example of Tesla Inc., which has already established a wholly owned plant in Shanghai.

Currently, Toyota ships Lexus models from Japan to China, but the new plant, expected to begin operations around 2027, aims to meet the growing demand for EVs in the world's largest auto market. [Nippon.com] [Nikkei Asia]

Toyota's plan comes as Honda and Nissan are in talks to merge, aiming to create the world's third-largest automaker group by sales, behind Toyota and Volkswagen. The merger would help both companies better compete with Tesla and Chinese EV makers like BYD. Both companies are struggling in markets like China, where local EV brands are gaining share, and have faced declining profits (see AiR No. 52, December/2024, 4).

Japanese police reveal North Korean hacker group behind theft of Japan's DMM Bitcoin assets

(dql) A North Korea-linked hacker group, TraderTraitor, stole JPY 48.2 billion (USD 307 million) worth of digital assets from the Tokyo-based cryptocurrency exchange DMM Bitcoin in May, according to Japanese police. The theft was discovered after DMM Bitcoin suspended services due to unauthorized fund leakage on May 31. The hacker group is suspected to be connected to North Korea's Lazarus Group.

The attack involved a malware implant after a DMM Bitcoin employee was targeted by a fake headhunter on LinkedIn. The malware manipulated wallet transactions and remittance details. Despite the theft, no customers were financially impacted, as DMM Bitcoin secured 55 billion yen from a group affiliate to cover the losses. [Kyodo News]

The investigation is ongoing, with international efforts led by the FBI and U.S. partners to address North Korea's cybercrime activities. [The Record]

Japan: Airline systems back to normal after cyberattack

(dql) Japan Airlines (JAL) announced on December 26 that its systems have returned to normal, allowing same-day ticket sales to resume after a cyberattack caused delays to domestic and international flights. The attack began in the morning, disrupting internal and external systems.

JAL temporarily shut down a malfunctioning router and suspended ticket sales for departures on December 26. The company confirmed no customer data was compromised, and there was no damage from computer viruses.

In contrast, ANA Holdings reported no indications of similar issues in its systems. Separately, American Airlines briefly grounded all flights for an hour earlier this week due to a network hardware glitch, disrupting Christmas Eve travel for thousands. [Reuters] [Kyodo News 1]

In a separate development, MUFG Bank, Japan's largest and the world's third largest bank, disclosed on the same day that its internet banking service has been unstable, indicating that it may have been targeted by a cyberattack. The bank claimed that no customer information leaked, nor any damage caused. [Kyodo News 2]

Japan: Popular travel destination Hokkaido set to introduce tourist tax

(dgl) The government of Hokkaido, a popular destination located on the Northernmost corner of Japan, has decided to introduce a lodging tax of up to JPY 500 (USD 3.17) per night from April 2026 in order to come in line with the increases in tourism it faces, hoping to increase revenue for investment in infrastructure to make tourism more sustainable. In addition, 20 local councils that are preparing to implement both a tourist tax and a short-let tax for business.

After a very busy year for Japan with tourism increasing and making real strides in growing GDP for Japan, as well as global trends of countries dealing with difficulties in growing tourist numbers, it seems like Japan is attempting to pre-emptively come up with a better long-term strategy for tourism policy. A tourist accommodation tax is expected to raise USD 28 million for the Hokkaido government. [Japan Today]

Japan: Okinawa begins sand deposition for controversial relocation of U.S. military base

(dql) Sand deposition for reinforcing soft soil at the relocation site for the U.S. Marine Corps Air Station Futenma in Okinawa began on December 28, marking progress in the controversial base transfer plan. The work involves land reclamation on the Oura Bay side of Henoko, where sand is being embedded into the soft ground before installing 70,000 piles into the seabed at depths of up to 70 meters.

This development follows the government's approval of a modified landfill plan on December 28, 2023, after the Okinawa prefectural government rejected it (see AiR No. 1, January/2024, 1). The project is expected to take until April 2033, with the U.S. handover planned for 2036.

Despite local opposition, the Japanese government maintains the relocation is the only solution to removing the dangers posed by the Futenma base while preserving the Japan-U.S. alliance's deterrence. [Kyodo News]

Japan: High levels of harmful chemicals detected at defense force facilities

(dql) Findings of a government survey revealed high levels of potentially harmful PFAS chemicals in tap water at Japanese Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) facilities in Tokyo's suburbs and other areas. Water systems at hospitals, schools, and other facilities were examined in the five-year survey due to health concerns over these long-lasting substances, commonly detected in water filtration plants and rivers nationwide.

PFAS, a group of over 10,000 artificial chemicals, includes PFOS and PFOA, with a provisional combined safety limit set at 50 nanograms per liter. The survey found significantly elevated levels at multiple JSDF sites, including Camp Higashitachikawa and Camp Kodaira in Tokyo as well as Gifu Air Base and Ashiya Air Base in Fukuoka Prefecture. Overall, PFAS levels exceeded the provisional standard at 42 sites across 10 prefectures, primarily in locations using well water. The survey covered 1,929 state-run facilities with over 100 occupants but excluded data on private facilities.

PFAS, widely used in products like fire extinguishers and nonstick coatings, has been linked to increased cancer risks. While the current limit is nonbinding, the Environment Ministry plans to enforce a legally binding cap from April 2026, requiring water quality tests and corrective measures for noncompliance. [Kyodo News]

In response, the Environment Ministry announced plans to raise water quality standards. Starting in April 2026, the ministry will implement legally enforceable standards for PFAS levels, replacing the current provisional guidelines. The new standards, under the Water Supply Law, will require municipal suppliers and operators to conduct regular water quality testing and take corrective actions if PFAS levels exceed the limit. The government will also consult with the Food Safety Commission to finalize the changes.

Measures have already been taken at 26 sites, such as switching to municipal water, while 14 cases implemented emergency responses like distributing bottled water. [The Asahi Shimbun]

Japan: Rising incarceration of older women linked to theft and drug crimes

(dql) According to Justice Ministry's latest White Paper "Actual Conditions and Treatment of Female Offenders," around 80 percent of female inmates in Japan were convicted of theft or drug-related offenses in 2023, a figure that has remained consistent since 2011. The percentage of female inmates aged 65 or older reached 22.7 percent, a 4.2-fold increase from 2004, with aging and isolation likely contributing to criminal behavior. [Ministry of Justice, Japan]

A special survey of about 900 inmates convicted of theft or drug offenses revealed that 95.9 percent of female inmates aged 60 or older convicted of theft had committed shoplifting, compared to 48.3 percent of males in the same age group. Among these women, 38.7 percent lived alone, and 37.4 percent cited financial struggles as the primary reason for their theft, a lower percentage than other age groups.

The survey also found that more female inmates convicted of drug crimes had experienced physical or psychological abuse from their partners compared to their male counterparts. Additionally, the number of crimes recognized by police in 2023, excluding traffic offenses, rose by 17 percent from the previous year, likely due to increased activity following the COVID-19 pandemic. [Kyodo News]

Mongolia: Parliament reviews draft amendment to enhance credit information regulation

(fs) Member of parliament Batshugar Enkhbayar has submitted a Draft Amendment to the Law on Credit Information and a related Draft Resolution to the Chairman of the State Great Khural Amarbayasgalan Dashzegve.

Enkhbayar emphasized the lack of regulations mandating authorized entities to approve creditworthiness assessments.

The proposed law would authorize institutions to assign credit ratings, enabling creditworthiness-based financial services. The amendment is expected to enhance access to banking services, improve risk assessments, and strengthen management practices.

It would allow lenders to make timely, risk-informed decisions, reducing overdue and non-performing loans. Borrowers would benefit from monitoring their credit history, improving financial discipline, and potentially lowering loan interest rates. [Montsame]

Mongolia: Cabinet prioritizes Ulaanbaatar city's pressing urban issues in 2025

(fs) The Cabinet has designated 2025 as the "Year to Resolve Ulaanbaatar City's Pressing Issues and Intensify Constructions," aiming to address critical urban challenges.

Officials have been tasked with formulating detailed work plans by January 2025, ensuring cross-sector coordination. The Cabinet also emphasized full support for projects under this initiative.

Key objectives for 2025 include accelerating the green transition, promoting energy-efficient technologies, reducing environmental pollution, and enhancing clean energy use in Ulaanbaatar. Plans will involve banks, financial institutions, and international partnerships to foster sustainable development and environmental improvement. [Montsame]

Mongolia: Journalists receive environmental training for COP-17

(fs) The Global Green Growth Institute (GGGI) Mongolia Program, in partnership with the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change (MECC) and the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA), conducted a climate change training for 27 journalists from national and regional media outlets.

The initiative aims to strengthen journalists' role in addressing climate change, disaster risk reduction, and adaptation efforts, preparing them for Mongolia's hosting of COP-17 on Desertification in 2026.

This session marks the beginning of a multi-year capacity-building initiative that will certify 20 journalists, including 10 English-speaking professionals, by 2026. Future training sessions will involve collaborations with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Red Cross Mongolia, and the Press Institute of Mongolia, expanding the program's reach and impact. [Akipress]

Mongolia: Parliament members propose amendments to criminal code addressing freedom of expression

(fs) The Speaker of the Mongolian Parliament, D. Amarbaysgalan, has received a proposed amendment to the Criminal Code from members of parliament. The bill aims to repeal Section 1 of Article 13.14, which criminalizes the dissemination of false information.

In 2020, the parliament amended Article 13.14 of the Criminal Code, introducing an offense for the dissemination of false information, defined as "publicly spreading obviously false information that harms one's reputation." However, lawmakers now contend that the provision fails to adequately clarify the intent or purpose behind the false information, thereby risking potential infringements on freedom of expression.

The proposal underscores the need to adopt international standards that safeguard the right to critique public officials and express opinions, aligning with Mongolia's constitutional guarantees of free speech and press freedom. [Sonin]

This comes after in July prominent Mongolian journalist Unurtsetseg Naran was sentenced to nearly five years in prison, a decision seen by critics as marking a concerning development for the country's media. In a closed-door trial, Unurtsetseg, editor-in-chief of the news site *Zarig*, was convicted of spreading false information, tax evasion, money laundering, revealing personal secrets, and illegal acquisition of

state secrets. Denying all wrongdoing, she received a sentence of four years and nine months. Unurtsetseg is known for her critical coverage and for investigating, among others, loan defaults at the Development Bank of Mongolia, uncovering sexual abuse in a Buddhist boarding school, and exposing military violence (see AiR No. 30, July/2024, 4).

Mongolia: Development bank and environment ministry to cooperate on green finance initiatives

(fs) The Development Bank of Mongolia (DBM) and the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change have signed a Memorandum of Cooperation to advance green finance and support priority projects aligned with Mongolia's Sustainable Development Goals.

The agreement, signed on December 24 by Minister of Environment and Climate Change Odontuya Saldan and DBM Executive Director Narantuya Zandaakhuu focuses on financing large-scale national initiatives to combat climate change and promote green development.

DBM Executive Director Narantuya highlighted plans to collaborate with international organizations to secure green credit resources for energy-efficient projects, eco-housing, and pollution reduction initiatives.

As part of its green economy strategy, DBM is engaging with global financial institutions like the Green Climate Fund and the Asian Development Bank to obtain affordable financing and technical assistance. [Montsame]

Mongolia: Government launches "White Gold" program to boost value-added production

(fs) President Ukhnaagiin Khurelsukh has officially inaugurated the national "White Gold" movement to enhance the production of value-added leather, wool, and cashmere products. The initiative aims to reduce Mongolia’s reliance on mining by revitalizing traditional sectors such as agriculture and light industry.

The 2025 state budget allocates MNT 788.9 billion (USD 230 million) in loan financing for the program, including MNT 300 billion (USD 87 million) for working capital, MNT 488.9 billion (USD 142 million) for

investment loans, and MNT 66.4 billion (USD 19 million) for interest subsidies on concessional loans.

Ten commercial banks signed agreements with the Ministry of Food, Agriculture, and Light Industry (FALI) to implement financing for the program. [GoGo]

Mongolia: Preliminary uranium mining deal reached with French Orano group

(fs) Mongolia announced on December 27 a preliminary agreement with France's Orano Mining Group to develop a USD 1.6 billion uranium mining project.

The project will involve an initial investment of USD 500 million and total expenditures of USD 1.6 billion, with preparatory work planned from 2024 to 2027 and production commencing in 2028. Peak production of 2,600 metric tons is anticipated by 2044.

Prime Minister Oyun-Erdene Luvsannamsrai described the agreement as a major milestone for increasing foreign investment and creating job opportunities in Mongolia. A prior statement suggesting a finalized agreement was issued in error, and a revised press release clarified the deal's preliminary status. The draft agreement has been submitted to parliament for discussion.

Orano, an uranium producer operating mines in Canada, Kazakhstan, and Niger, has conducted exploration activities in Mongolia for over 25 years. [Mining.com]

Mongolia: Drone test zones to be established

(fs) The Mongolian government has approved the establishment of drone and unmanned aerial system (UAV) test zones in Darkhan-Uul province, 230 kilometers north of Ulaanbaatar, and Bayanzurkh-Nalaikh district in Ulaanbaatar, at an altitude of 500 meters.

These zones aim to foster technological innovation, attract international investors, and support activities such as geological exploration, environmental monitoring, and providing energy, internet, and emergency services to remote areas.

A government-private sector working group, including the General Administration of Civil Aviation and the Department of Land Management, selected and approved suitable locations away from major airways. These zones will also facilitate studies on the impact of radio frequencies and electromagnetic fields. [Akipress]

North Korea: Advanced frigate design unveiled

(dql) North Korean state media, KCTV, has released photos of a new frigate that may feature a Vertical Launch System (VLS) for cruise missiles and/or guided surface-to-air missiles (SAM). The vessel appears to have double the displacement of previous classes, showcasing significant improvements in size and capability. This follows the 2023 unveiling of a cruise missile-armed corvette.

The new frigate, still under construction, was shown in photographs aired by KCTV, with Kim Jong Un inspecting the warship. The vessel features advanced technologies, including fixed-panel radars integrated into its superstructure and a VLS for potential cruise and/or anti-aircraft missiles. Efforts to minimize its radar cross-section (RCS) are also evident, similar to the Amnok-class corvette.

The frigate's design includes a smaller opening at the bow likely for a naval gun, and a larger one near the superstructure, possibly for a VLS. The ship's features resemble those of the Russian Project 20386 corvette. If the larger opening is confirmed for a VLS, it would significantly enhance North Korea's naval capabilities, placing it among a select group of navies with such systems. [Naval News]

South Korea: National Assembly impeaches Acting President

(yq) The National Assembly voted on December 27 to impeach Acting President Han Duck-soo less than two weeks after he assumed leadership following President Yoon Suk Yeol’s impeachment over his failed martial law declaration.

A unanimous 192-0 vote passed the motion to impeach Han, marking the first time an acting president has been impeached by parliament.

The ruling People Power Party (PPP) opposed the vote, arguing the impeachment was invalid, citing procedural issues and claiming the quorum should have been a two-thirds majority of 200 votes, as required for presidential impeachment, not the simple majority of 151 votes used for Cabinet ministers. National Assembly Speaker Woo Won-shik announced the quorum before the vote, prompting protests from PPP lawmakers.

The impeachment motion was introduced by the main opposition Democratic Party (DP), after Han refused to appoint additional Constitutional Court justices, nominated by the National Assembly with the votes of the opposition parties. Han argued that the rival parties need to agree first on whether he has the authority to do so before an impeachment ruling on Yoon. Other reasons for his impeachment, cited by the opposition included his involvement in Yoon's martial law imposition and his refusal to promulgate two special counsel bills targeting Yoon and first lady Kim Keon Hee.

The PPP is expected to seek legal action to nullify Han's impeachment. Meanwhile, Han reaffirmed his intention to comply with the law and await the Constitutional Court's decision. [Yonhap News Agency 1] [Yonhap News Agency 2]

Meanwhile, replacing Han as Acting President, Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Choi Sang-mok vowed to stabilize state affairs amid ongoing political unrest following martial law earlier this month.

Choi pledged to minimize disruption, apologizing for his involvement in the Cabinet meeting preceding Yoon's martial law declaration.

In a call with the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Choi reaffirmed the South Korea-U.S. alliance and ordered heightened military vigilance against North Korea. He instructed Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul to reassure partners of policy stability and continued international cooperation.

Choi emphasized public order and disaster readiness, directing the Interior Minister to enhance safety measures and the Health Minister to prioritize winter emergency medical plans.

Choi's leadership is expected to face resistance from opposition, urging him to appoint Constitutional Court justices to advance Yoon's impeachment trial. [Yonhap News Agency 3]

South Korea: Yoon defies summons for third time over martial law investigation

(mc) President Yoon Suk Yeol, suspended from office after being impeached by the National Assembly on December 14 for declaring martial law on December 3, refused to be summoned for questioning for the third time as part of the ongoing investigation into the December 3 events.

The Corruption Investigation Office for Senior Officials (CIO) had summoned Yoon to appear in court at their offices in Gwacheon on December 29. Still, Yoon failed to comply, marking the third time he has failed to appear after failing to show up on December 18 and December 25. The CIO is now seeking an arrest warrant for Yoon's arrest, an unprecedented move for a sitting head of state in South Korea.

Facing charges of abuse of office and sedition, Yoon has ignored requests from the CIO and the Defense Ministry's investigation unit. Yoon's legal team further delayed the process, arguing that the CIO had no authority to investigate the sedition charges or issue arrest warrants. [Yonhap Agency News 1] [The Korea Herald]

South Korea: Constitutional Court begins hearings on Yoon’s martial law case

(mc) South Korea's Constitutional Court, tasked with determining the validity of the impeachment motion passed by the National Assembly on December 14, held its first preliminary hearing on December 27, with the legal representatives of both Yoon and the National Assembly presenting their initial arguments, witness lists, and evidence to the session.

At the hearing, Yoon's representatives rejected claims that the short-term martial law had provoked an uprising and dismissed accusations of abuse of legislative power by the main opposition party.

The trial must be concluded within 180 days, and if the constitutional court upholds the verdict, the president will permanently suspend Yoon from office. On the other hand, if the charges are dismissed, Yoon can continue in office. [Yonhap Agency News 1] [Yonhap Agency News 2]

The Constitutional Court is working under growing pressure as it handles multiple impeachment cases

besides Yoon's and Han's cases, with a critical June 12 deadline looming for a decision on the former's case.

This has intensified legal and political complexities, with the ruling People Power Party (PPP) filing an injunction against Assembly Speaker Woo Won-shik over the impeachment motion. Observers note the court must rule on the injunction before addressing Han's case.

The Constitutional Court is currently operating with three of its nine seats vacant due to a partisan deadlock since October, while the terms of two justices, including acting Chief Justice Moon Hyung-bae, will end on April 18. This complicates deliberations further, as the law requires seven justices to review impeachment motions and six votes to uphold them. However, the court recently accepted an injunction allowing hearings with six justices, though achieving unanimous decisions under such circumstances remains challenging.

Since its establishment in 1988, the court has handled 16 impeachment cases, 13 of which were filed after Yoon took office in May 2022. [The Korea Herald]

South Korea: Launch of parliamentary-government consultative body delayed

(mc) The planned inauguration of a consultative body involving South Korea's rival political parties and the government, aimed at stabilizing state affairs following the December 14 impeachment vote against suspended President Yoon Suk Yeol, is likely to be delayed, a South Korean parliamentary official stated on December 25.

Originally scheduled for December 26, the inaugural meeting of the joint body has been postponed to an unspecified date amid rising tensions, particularly following the opposition's move to file an impeachment motion against Acting President Han Duck-soo. Han was designated to represent the government in the consultative process.

"A working-level meeting to launch the advisory body was supposed to be held today at the latest, but it did not take place," the parliamentary official noted, adding that delays in establishing the body and implementing related plans are anticipated.

The advisory body was envisioned as a platform to address the political crisis and stabilize governance in the wake of Yoon's impeachment. However, its

progress has been hindered by escalating tensions between the ruling and opposition parties. The opposition's impeachment proceedings against Han have further impeded efforts to foster bipartisan dialogue and mitigate the ongoing political instability. [Yonhap News Agency]

South Korea: Defense intelligence chief case transferred to military prosecution

(jb/yq) The Corruption Investigation Office for High-ranking Officials (CIO) transferred the investigation of Defense Intelligence Commander (DIC) Major General Moon Sang-ho to military prosecutors on December 26.

Moon is currently being interrogated on charges of treason and abuse of power for commanding martial law troops to storm the National Election Commission headquarters during President Yoon Suk-yeol's rapidly rescinded martial law declaration. Moon also allegedly co-conspired with the ex-Chief of the DIC, Noh Sang-won and other officials prior to the martial law crisis.

The CIO transferred his case and released him from police custody believing his case falls under military jurisdiction. It has handed over the relevant documents to the military prosecution which aims to detain Moon until January 6 in preparation of his indictment. [Yonhap News Agency 1]

Several top-ranking officials are currently under investigation by the National Office of Investigation and have been issued travel bans for fear of absconding (see AiR No. 52, December/2024, 4).

Meanwhile, former defense Minister Kim Yong-hyun has been indicted on insurrection charges over his alleged role in the brief martial law attempt. Prosecutors accuse Kim of orchestrating troop deployments and detaining lawmakers to prevent the reversal of President Yoon's martial law declaration on December 3.

Kim, who was arrested earlier this month, is the first to be indicted in the case. Investigators revealed Kim coordinated with Yoon on martial law plans since March, escalating preparations in November. Troops were sent to the National Assembly and election offices to disrupt operations. Prosecutors argue Kim's actions aimed to undermine the Constitution and incite unrest, meeting the threshold for insurrection. The case continues to unfold as further investigations proceed. [Yonhap News Agency 2]

South Korea: New financial package to stabilize prices, support vulnerable households unveiled

(dql) The government and the ruling People Power Party (PPP) have agreed to allocate KRW 11.6 trillion (USD 7.86 billion) in 2025 to stabilize consumer prices and alleviate financial pressures on low-income households.

During a consultative meeting at the National Assembly with government officials, PPP lawmakers, and private sector representatives, measures to boost the economy were discussed. Key decisions include creating over 1.24 million direct job opportunities, primarily for the elderly, with more than 90 percent to be filled in the first quarter of 2025. Additional support includes KRW 50 billion (USD 34c million) for special loans to the tourism sector and expanding a vacation support program to benefit over 130,000 employees, doubling the current reach.

To attract more tourists, the temporary exemption of the Korea Electronic Travel Authorization program for 68 countries will be extended, and visa issuance fees for tourists from China and Southeast Asia will be waived for a longer period. [Yonhap News Agency]

South Korea: Jeju Air crash leaves 179 dead

(jb) A failed landing by Jeju Air flight 2216 at Muan International Airport in South Jeolla province on December 29 led to the death of 179 passengers of a total 181 on board. The plane, which left Bangkok and was scheduled to land in Muan airport at 8:30 am, was unable to land on the runway, colliding into a structure which caused the plane to catch on fire. [The Korea Times 1]

South Korea's Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport (MOLIT), responsible for maintaining land, rail and air transport in the nation, oversaw the crash site investigation and were able to recover the identities of 141 deceased passengers through DNA and fingerprint identification thus far. Those on board included 173 Korean nationals, two Thai nationals and six crew members of Jeju Air. The incident marks the worst civil aviation disaster in South Korean history. [The Korea Times 2]

Immediately following the incident, Acting President Choi Sang-mok ordered the emergency inspection of all airlines operating Boeing 737-800s, the same model as flight 2216, within the nation in keeping with their safety protocols.

At present, the Boeing 737-800 accounts for a quarter of South Korea's international passenger fleet, totaling 411 aircraft. [Aviation Source News]

The incident has not only brought to question the condition of the Boeing 737 fleet in operation but also the design of the Muan airport as the plane crashed into a concrete wall on the airside. Experts engaged in the investigation have raised their concern about Muan airport not being equipped with measures to scare bird flocks which pose a common hazard to commercial aviation internationally.

The aviation policy head announced on December 30 that MOLIT will be carrying out the probe in concert with the US National Transport Safety Board as the plane was manufactured in the US. The airplane's black boxes will take nearly a month to be decoded, said the Ministry. [The Guardian] [Al Jazeera] [The Korea Herald 1]

Jeju Air has provided support for bereaved families at Muan airport but is yet to release an official statement on the crash, as it is also awaiting investigation. The airline's management, however, revealed that over 300 Jeju Air employees have been engaged with the bereaved families. [The Korea Herald 2]

South Korea: 1st homegrown light armed helicopter delivered to Army

(dql) The South Korean Defense Acquisition Program Administration (DAPA) has announced that the Army has received its first homegrown Light Armed Helicopter (LAH), the "Miron", on December 26. Developed over eight years at a cost of around KRW 650 billion (USD 445.5 million), the LAH aims to replace the Army's outdated 500MD and AH-1S Cobra helicopters. South Korea plans to build over 160 LAH units by 2031.

The LAH features enhanced armaments, including the Chungum air-to-surface missile, which has double the range of current anti-tank missiles, and a 20mm turret gun. It also incorporates advanced survivability equipment, such as a missile warning receiver and radar warning receiver.

The LAH is the second domestically developed helicopter, following the KUH medium-sized utility helicopter, also known as Surion. [Chosun Biz]

In a separate announcement, the DAPA disclosed that a new communication system has been introduced to improve battlefield information sharing. The Soldier Battlefield Visualization System allows users to exchange text messages and target images detected through optical sights with allied forces, compatible with both walkie-talkies and smartphones.

The system is expected to boost individual combat efficiency and survivability by enabling soldiers to fire from concealed positions, reducing exposure to enemy fire. Developed by Hanwha Systems, the system passed combat suitability tests in June 2024, with defense standards finalized in July. Mass production is expected to begin by 2027.

Additionally, the agency completed upgrades to the Air Force's computer-based simulation system, adding 27 new assets, including the F-35A fighter and Taurus missiles. The upgrade expanded the number of simulated operation types from seven to 20, enabling detailed mock operations from mission planning to enemy engagement without deploying actual forces. [The Korea Herald]

Taiwan: Opposition parties reject all Constitutional Court justice nominees

(sk/dql) In a move that could paralyzed Taiwan's Constitutional Court in the near future, all seven justice nominees selected by President Lai Ching-te of the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) were rejected by lawmakers on December 24. None of the nominees – including those nominated for the roles of court president and vice president – secured the required 57 votes in the 113-seat Legislative Yuan, Taiwan's parliament. [Taiwan News]

The rejection was driven by lawmakers from the main opposition party, the Kuomintang (KMT), joined by two KMT-aligned independents and eight Taiwan People's Party (TPP) legislators, who opposed most of the nominees. The KMT cited concerns over perceived partisanship, particularly regarding former lawmaker Yao Li-ming, who had served as the director of Lai's 2024 presidential campaign.

The KMT's stance also aligned with its opposition to the Constitutional Court's September ruling on the death

penalty, which it criticized as effectively abolishing the punishment (see AiR No. 39, September/2024, 4).

One nominee, National Taiwan University law professor Liu Ching-yi, received support from the TPP but was rejected by DPP lawmakers due to her critical comments about the party's leadership, including allegations of corruption against former President Tsai Ing-wen and former Premier Su Tseng-chang. [CNA, in Chinese]

Although the DPP supported the other six nominees, its 51 votes were insufficient to meet the required threshold.

This rejection leaves the Constitutional Court with only eight justices, the lowest number since judicial interpretation began in 1947. It also leaves the Judicial Yuan—one of Taiwan's five branches of government, which oversees the Constitutional Court—without a president or vice president. Recent legislative amendments requiring at least 10 justices to hear cases have effectively immobilized the court (see AiR No. 52, December/2024, 4).

Civil society groups, including the Judicial Reform Foundation, criticized the Legislature for evaluating nominees based on their stance on the death penalty, arguing that the issue is unlikely to be revisited during the nominees' potential terms. [Focus Taiwan]

The Presidential Office expressed "deep regret" over the rejection, noting that it disrupts the operations of the Judicial Yuan and the Constitutional Court. The Office further stated that all nominees had been selected by Lai based on their legal credentials and expertise. It confirmed that a renomination process would begin but did not provide a timeline. [Office of the President, Taiwan, in Chinese]

The rejection marks a preliminary peak in the ongoing power struggle between the opposition parties and the ruling DPP in the Legislative Yuan. This conflict has intensified since the DPP lost its parliamentary majority in the January 13 general election, allowing opposition forces, led by the KMT, to exert greater influence over legislative decisions (see AiR No. 3, January/2024, 3).

Taiwan: Opposition party leader released from incommunicado detention on bail

(dql) Opposition Taiwan People's Party (TPP) Chairman Ko Wen-je has been released from prison on bail a day

after prosecutors indicted him on charges of bribery and embezzlement during his tenure as Taipei mayor (2018–2022) and sought to extend his incommunicado detention under which he had been held since September with, citing concerns about evidence tampering and collusion.

Ko is accused of accepting NTD 17.1 million (USD 520,000) in bribes to benefit Core Pacific Group – a Taiwan-based conglomerate with business interests in real estate development, financial services, retail, and investment – by increasing the floor area ratio of the Core Pacific City redevelopment project and embezzling over NTD 68 million (USD 2 million) in political donations, including funds meant for his presidential campaign. Prosecutors are seeking a 28.5-year prison sentence for multiple charges, including bribery, embezzlement, and breach of public trust. [The New York Times]

However, the Taipei District Court rejected the request, ordering his release on bail of USD 917,000. While Ko is barred from leaving the country or changing his residence, the court permitted limited workplace interactions with defendants and witnesses, prohibiting one-on-one meetings or discussions related to the case.

After posting bail, Ko addressed supporters, denied the allegations, and expressed gratitude for the opportunity to reflect on his life. The TPP denounced the indictment accusing the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) of political persecution and silencing the voices of 3.69 million voters who supported Ko in the 2024 presidential election. [Focus Taiwan 1] [Focus Taiwan 2]

Prosecutors plan to appeal Ko's release and may seek pretrial detention again, citing the risk of evidence destruction or witness tampering.

The court also released four other defendants connected to the Core Pacific City case on bail, including former Taipei Deputy Mayor Pong Cheng-sheng, Taipei City Councilor Angela Ying, Core Pacific Group Chairman Sheen Ching-jing, and Lee Wen-tsung, the finance chief of Ko’s presidential election campaign. [Taipei Times]

In a latest development of the case, the Taipei District Court increased on December 30 the bail for Ko to NTD 70 million (USD 2.1 million) and required him to wear an electronic ankle monitor. This decision came after the Taiwan High Court’s ordered on December 29 to revoke his previous bail and mandate a retrial.

Furthermore, in response to Ko's resignation as TPP chairman last week, the party announced plans to convene a temporary central committee. [Radio Taiwan International]

Taiwan: Parliament passes bill on whistleblower protection

(dql) The Legislative Yuan, Taiwan's parliament, has passed a landmark whistleblower protection law to strengthen safeguards for individuals exposing illegal activities in the public interest. Initially covering corruption and misconduct in the public sector and state-owned enterprises, the law includes a provision to extend protections to private-sector whistleblowers after three years.

Public servants who unlawfully disclose a whistleblower's identity face prison terms of six months to five years while non-public servants may receive up to one year of imprisonment. The law, effective six months after promulgation, also rewards whistleblowers whose reports uncover illegal activities, with bonuses set at a minimum equivalent to the fines imposed on violators.

The Ministry of Justice will oversee the law's implementation through a seven-member whistleblower protection committee chaired by the Justice Minister. [Focus Taiwan]

Taiwan: Cabinet to demand revote on bill on reallocating revenues from central to local government

(dql) The Cabinet has announced that it is likely to request a legislative revote on amendments reallocating an estimated NTD 375.3 billion (USD 11.5 billion) from central to local government revenues, citing significant impacts on the central government.

The amendments, passed on December 20 by opposition lawmakers from the Kuomintang (KMT) and Taiwan People's Party (TPP), have raised concerns among central government ministries over potential disruptions to national defense, social welfare, and other programs (see AiR No. 52, December/2024, 4). However, officials, including Lee and Hsu Yung-yi from the Directorate-General of Budget, Accounting, and Statistics, could not quantify the amendments' exact

impact on the 2025 fiscal budget, still under legislative review.

The Cabinet also indicated a potential challenge of new measures passed by the two opposition parties and requiring a minimum of quorum 10 justices for the Constitutional Court, which could immobilize the current eight-member bench (see AiR No. 52, December/2024, 4). [Focus Taiwan]

Under Taiwan's constitution, the Cabinet, pending presidential approval, can request a legislative revote to delay implementation of the amendments. If the amendments pass the revote for which two-thirds of the Members of the Legislative Yuan, Taiwan's parliament, present at the meeting is required, the president must sign them into law within ten days. [Ministry of Justice, Taiwan]

The move is the latest incident of power politics between the Cabinet, backed by the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), and the opposition-controlled Legislature, where the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Taiwan People's Party (TPP) gained a majority following the January 13 general elections (see AiR No. 3, January/2024, 3).

In October similar legislative actions by the KMT-TPP majority granting broader investigative powers to the Legislative Yuan were overturned by the Constitutional Court after a Cabinet-initiated challenge (see AiR No. 44, October/2024, 5).

Taiwan: Online passport renewal service to be fully implemented in 2025

(dql) The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) announced that its online passport renewal service, launched on a trial basis in September, will be fully implemented starting January 2025.

During the trial, applications were capped at 500 per day. Starting January, the service will operate without limits. The ministry expects it to serve 200,000 to 300,000 applicants annually. [Focus Taiwan]

Taiwan: Ruling party legislator demands tighter regulations on TikTok deepfake videos

(dql) Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) lawmaker Lin Tai-hua has proposed a bill to tighten scrutiny on TikTok following the dissemination of a fake video targeting DPP caucus whip Ker Chien-ming. The altered video, which falsely depicted Ker criticizing his own party, featured audio and subtitles in simplified Chinese, similar to a deepfake video of DPP Legislator Wang Yi-chuan.

Ker and Wang have filed complaints with the Criminal Investigation Bureau and Taipei District Prosecutors' Office, citing defamation, privacy violations, and the spread of false images. Investigators are probing the video's origins, with police suspecting it may have originated abroad.

The proposed amendments to the Anti-Infiltration Act aim to regulate platforms like TikTok, requiring them to comply with local regulations or face a ban. The draft stipulates that such platforms establish local operating entities and databases under Taiwanese jurisdiction and cybersecurity management.

Lin cited TikTok's alleged role in spreading disinformation, privacy violations, and potential threats to national security for her move. She also noted China's cognitive warfare tactics, including the use of deepfakes and disinformation campaigns.

The bill, supported by multiple legislators, will soon be reviewed in committee. [Taipei Times]

Taiwan: Sculptures and figurines manufacturer accused of involvement in suppressing striking workers in Myanmar

(dql) Migrant rights groups protested outside the Taipei office of Wise Unicorn, a Taiwanese sculptures and figurines manufacturer, accusing the company of collaborating with the Myanmar junta to suppress striking workers at its factory in Yangon. The strike began on October 31 after Wise Unicorn failed to pay workers their bonuses, violating contractual obligations.

Over 230 workers are still striking, demanding a wage increase to MMK 9,000 (USD 4.27) per day and MMK 2,000 (USD 0.94) per hour for overtime. The company allegedly responded by deploying Myanmar military forces to intimidate workers, including sending rifle-wielding soldiers to collect names. The rights groups also called for the re-hiring of more than 50 workers laid off during the strike.

The case has been forwarded to the International Labor Organization (ILO) and may be reported to U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), which could lead to a ban on imports from Wise Unicorn if forced labor is confirmed.

In response, Wise Unicorn owner Kao rejected the workers' demands, citing a salary increase in July. She denied any assault by managers and claimed that the company's actions fully complied with Myanmar law. [Focus Taiwan]

Taiwan: McDonald's issued a NTD 1 million fine over handling of sexual assault case

(dql) Taipei's Department of Labor has fined McDonald's NTD1 million (USD 30,535) for violating gender equality laws following a high-profile case that involved the alleged sexual assault of a teenager by a supervisor at a local McDonald's, which led to the teen's suicide.

McDonald's was found in violation the Gender Equality in Employment Act, which requires employers to take immediate and effective action when sexual harassment is reported, including offering counseling and necessary support services. The company failed to provide these services, prompting the fine, which is the maximum allowed under the law. [Focus Taiwan]

Taiwan: Economy sees stable progress in November

(dql) The National Development Council (NDC) reported improved economic indicators in November, driven by AI advancements and gains in traditional manufacturing. The main economic monitoring indicator rose by two points to 34, signaling a yellow-red light for the third consecutive month, indicating a warming economy.

The approaching year-end shopping season positively impacted Taiwan's exports, further boosting economic performance. However, the trend-adjusted leading index dropped by 0.38 percent to 101.58, marking its fourth consecutive decline. [Taiwan News]

The business sentiment in Taiwan's manufacturing sector improved in November after five months of decline, with the Taiwan Institute of Economic

Research (TIER) reporting a rise of 1.77 points to 95.2. The service sector's sentiment index increased by 1.19 points to 93.11, while the construction sector saw a notable jump of 1.03 points to 104.75.

TIER attributes the positive outlook in manufacturing to stronger production in the ICT and electronics industries, accompanied by improved performance in traditional sectors. However, some manufacturers expressed concerns about the next six months due to rising global political and economic uncertainties, particularly regarding U.S. President-elect Donald Trump's return to office.

Retail sentiment grew significantly, boosted by promotions such as the Double 11 shopping festival and the start of major sports events. Additionally, the depreciation of the Taiwan dollar and increased insurance demand contributed to steady growth in the insurance sector.

Despite these positive trends, the property market faced caution from home buyers due to tighter loan conditions imposed by banks, influenced by central government policies. These measures are expected to further affect the housing market in the coming months. [Focus Taiwan]

Taiwan: Construction of TSMC's new fabs in Kaohsiung to commence next year

(dql) Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co. (TSMC) has announced its plans to begin construction of its fourth and fifth wafer fabs (P4 and P5) in the southern city of Kaohsiung in 2025. The two new fabs are part of the firm's expansion program, which includes five fabs in the city. The new facilities aim to advance high-end semiconductor production and address growing global demand.

The Kaohsiung fabs are expected to create 8,000 jobs. The P4 and P5 fabs, located next to the third fab (P3), are scheduled for completion in 2027.

TSMC's first Kaohsiung fab (P1), equipped for the advanced 2nm process, is set to begin mass production in 2025. The 2nm process, an upgrade from the 3nm technology launched in 2022, offers 10-15 percent faster speeds, reduced power consumption, and over 15 percent higher density. The second fab (P2) will also utilize the 2nm process and is slated for completion in 2024, while the third fab (P3), expected to be finished in 2026, will adopt the 2nm process or more advanced technologies.

TSMC did not disclose the specific processes for the P4 and P5 fabs. However, the company revealed strong client demand for the 2nm process, prompting TSMC to expand its production capacity. A trial run for 2nm production is already underway at TSMC's Baoshan facility in Hsinchu, with mass production also planned for 2025.

Additionally, TSMC is developing the A16 process, a next-generation nanosheet-based technology featuring Super Power Rail, aimed at enhancing logic density and performance. Mass production of the A16 process is scheduled for the first half of 2026. [Focus Taiwan]

Taiwan: Plans to extend the high-speed rail network to Pingtung County changed

(dql) Premier Cho Jung-tai has disclosed that the government will alter plans to extend the high-speed rail (HSR) network to Pingtung County, requiring a new environmental impact assessment. The decision follows careful consideration of factors such as the city's development, HSR operations, and safety concerns, Cho emphasized.

The government has opted for the "Kaohsiung proposal" instead of the previously approved "Zuoying proposal." The revised Kaohsiung proposal includes 25.9 kilometers of rail tracks, starting from HSR Zuoying Station, passing through Kaohsiung train station, and ending at a planned HSR Pingtung Station in the Liukuaicuo area. In contrast, the "Zuoying proposal" would have covered 16.8 kilometers without passing through the train station.

The Railway Bureau will now abandon the previous plan and conduct a new environmental impact assessment, a process expected to take three to four years.

The Kaohsiung proposal, one of four considered in 2019, is the most expensive, with an estimated cost of NTD 120 billion (USD 3.65 billion), likely rising due to increased living costs and the addition of a new facility.

Concerns about safety risks, particularly related to rail tracks near a petrochemical plant, led to the abandonment of the "Zuoying proposal." The government did not consider alternatives until earlier this year. [Focus Taiwan]

Taiwan: Allegations of citizens holding Chinese ID cards to be investigated

(dql) Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council (MAC) has announced to investigate into allegations that Taiwanese citizens hold Chinese ID cards. The announcement was made on December 29 following claims made in a documentary by Taiwanese YouTubers. The MAC emphasized that it would take strict action, warning that individuals with ulterior motives should not challenge the law.

Under Taiwan's Act Governing Relations Between the People of the Taiwan Area and the Mainland Area, Taiwanese citizens are prohibited from holding Chinese household registration or passports. Violators may face the cancellation of their Taiwanese household registration, loss of citizenship, and disqualification from elections or public office.

The issue gained attention after YouTubers Pa Chiung and Chen Po-yuan released a 60-minute video on December 28, which had over 1 million views by the following day. In the video, a Taiwanese businessman claimed that Chinese authorities allow Taiwanese citizens to retain their Taiwanese ID card and passport while holding a Chinese ID card. An unnamed source further alleged that around 100,000 Taiwanese citizens hold Chinese ID cards.

Lawmaker Chen Yu-jen from the China-friendly Kuomintang (KMT), the main opposition party, questioned the claims' credibility, suggesting that what was described as a "Chinese ID card" may refer to Chinese residency, akin to holding a U.S. Green Card. She urged the public to avoid spreading fear or misinformation. [Taipei Times] [Focus Taiwan]

Taiwan: Simulation highlights need for better defense coordination between central and local governments

(sk) Taiwan’s National Security Council (NSC) has emphasized the need for better coordination between central and local governments to bolster Taiwan's defense capabilities. This followed a tabletop simulation exercise held at the Presidential Office to assess Taiwan's emergency response mechanisms.

While existing protocols are well established, deficiencies in inter-agency coordination and communication during emergencies, the NSC stated. Individual agencies often address issues in isolation,

failing to enhance their collective response to complex threats. Additionally, the exercise revealed potential manpower shortages within the Ministry of the Interior, responsible for law enforcement and disaster response.

The exercise, the first of its kind, tested Taiwan's readiness "on the verge of conflict" with China, which has intensified gray-zone activities such as military intimidation, cyberattacks, and cognitive warfare. Conducted during the second meeting of the Presidential Office's Whole-of-Society Defense Resilience Committee, the three-hour simulation involved discussions among top officials, including Vice President Hsiao Bi-khim, and committee members. No participants assumed the role of a red team adversary. [Focus Taiwan] [Taipei Times]

Meanwhile, President Lai Ching-te announced that Taiwan's annual Wan An and Min An air-raid and disaster response drills will be restructured into "urban resilience exercises" starting in 2025. These drills will operate independently of military support and incorporate international best practices to strengthen Taiwan's civil defense. Lai underscored that enhancing Taiwan's resilience would encourage greater support from international partners sharing similar values. [Taiwan's Office of the President] [Radio Taiwan International]

Taiwan: Calls for tenders to upgrade C-130 military aircraft opened

(dql) Taiwan's defense ministry has launched a six-year project to upgrade its aging fleet of C-130 transport aircraft, with the program running from 2025 to 2030. A public tender has been announced to procure C-130 propellers for NTD 126 million (USD 3.85 million), with the contract to be awarded on January 8, 2025, and completed by December 2025.

The upgrade program seeks to enhance collision avoidance and sea rescue capabilities, install integrated cockpits, modernize GPS and positioning systems, and acquire C-130 simulators. The project's estimated total costs are NTD 10 billion (USD 304 million).

Equipped with four Allison T56-A-15 turboprops, the C-130Hs are capable of operating on short runways, including the 1,150-meter airstrip on Taiping Island (Itu Aba) in the South China Sea.

Taiwan's Air Force initially purchased 20 C-130Hs and one C-130HE from the United States in the 1980s, with the first batch entering service in 1986. One aircraft was lost in a 1997 crash, leaving 20 operational planes in the fleet, which remains a critical component of the nation's military transport capabilities. [Focus Taiwan]

Separately, the ministry reported detecting three Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) Air Force aircraft and six PLA Navy ships near Taiwan from December 23 morning to December 24 morning. Two combat jets operated near the Taiwan Strait, while a helicopter was observed off Taiwan's east coast.

Additionally, a Chinese-origin balloon passed within 64 nautical miles (118.53km) northwest of Keelung on December 24, flying at an altitude of about 6,706m before disappearing from radar. The ministry responded by deploying fighters, ships, and coastal missile systems to monitor and prepare for any threats. [Taipei Times]

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

Bangladesh: Jamaat-e-Islami, BNP trade allegations over political opportunism amid post-Hasina transition

(lm) Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh Ameer Dr. Shafiqur Rahman and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) Senior Joint Secretary General Ruhul Kabir Rizvi have presented sharply contrasting narratives as the nation grapples with political restructuring following the

ousting of Sheikh Hasina's government on August 5. Both leaders accused each other's parties of prioritizing political opportunism over national interests, reflecting deep divisions within the opposition as Bangladesh navigates its post-Hasina political landscape.

Dr. Shafiqur Rahman, addressing a public meeting in Dinajpur, warned against conspiracies to divide Bangladesh along majority and minority lines, emphasizing that national unity is critical to counter the plots facing the country. He criticized previous governments for corruption and laundering BDT 2.6 trillion (USD 21.8 billion) abroad over 15 years, contrasting this with Jamaat's resilience despite losing 11 senior leaders to what he described as politically motivated executions. Rahman claimed that the post-August 5 environment had ushered in greater freedom of speech and reduced fear, benefiting both Jamaat and the broader populace. [Dhaka Tribune 1]

In stark contrast, BNP's Ruhul Kabir Rizvi accused Jamaat-e-Islami of exploiting the political turmoil for its own gains. He alleged that Jamaat supporters seized control of Islami Bank and other financial institutions following the government transition, engaging in tender manipulation and financial misconduct. Rizvi criticized Jamaat's overtures toward improving relations with India and forgiving Sheikh Hasina, labeling these moves as betrayals of their principles. [Dhaka Tribune 2]

Rizvi further highlighted Jamaat's alleged history of political betrayals, referencing its participation in elections under General Ershad in 1986 and its perceived complicity during the caretaker government in 2007. He contrasted this with the BNP's steadfast commitment to democracy, emphasizing the sacrifices made during the July-August 2024 revolution, which he claimed cost 97 lives to secure Sheikh Hasina's removal. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Massive fire at Secretariat raises sabotage concerns

(lm/mt) A massive fire broke out in Building 7 of the Bangladesh Secretariat in Dhaka on December 26, damaging four floors, destroying critical documents, and displacing operations of several key ministries. The blaze, which took nearly 10 hours to extinguish, prompted concerns of sabotage due to its simultaneous outbreak in three locations within the high-security complex. No casualties were reported,

but documents from the local government and post and telecommunications ministries were lost.

Asif Mahmud Sajeeb Bhuiyan, leader of the Anti-Discrimination Students Movement that helped oust the Awami League government on August 5, alleged that the fire destroyed documents containing evidence of corruption worth millions of dollars during the previous regime. A seven-member investigation committee, led by Additional Secretary Mohammad Khaled Rahim, has been tasked with uncovering the cause of the fire, assessing damages, and proposing preventive measures. Their findings are expected within seven working days. [The Indian Express] [The Daily Star 1]

In response to the fire, authorities imposed strict entry restrictions at the Secretariat, allowing access only to employees with smart cards and temporarily barring visitors and journalists. Journalists are set to regain limited access starting December 30, with new accreditation cards under review. Information and Broadcasting Adviser Nahid Islam noted concerns over misuse of press passes, promising that professional journalists would not face undue barriers. [The Daily Star 2]

The Editors' Council condemned the initial suspension of press access, describing it as an attack on independent journalism. The council also criticized the interim government's unilateral adoption of the Cyber Security Ordinance, 2024, for retaining controversial police powers from the repealed Cyber Security Act. They urged collaboration to identify unprofessional journalists and called for greater transparency and stakeholder engagement. [The Daily Star 3]

The fire exposed severe safety lapses at the Secretariat, including outdated wiring and inadequate fire hydrants. Critics noted that prior fire safety recommendations had been ignored. Ministries displaced by the blaze have relocated operations temporarily, while unaffected offices resumed work after power restoration. [BD News 1] [BD News 2] [BD News 3] [BD News 4]

Bangladesh: Anti-Discrimination Movement seeks to 'bury' 1972 constitution

(lm) The Anti-Discrimination Student Movement, a key group behind the mass protests that resulted in the ouster of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in early August, has called for the replacement of Bangladesh's

1972 "Mujibist" constitution, alleging it has failed to reflect the people's aspirations and instead facilitated external aggression.

"Mujibist" refers to principles and policies associated with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founding leader of Bangladesh and father of Hasina, whose 1972 constitution enshrined secularism, socialism, and democracy as core state principles.

Movement convener Hasnat Abdullah announced that the "Proclamation of the July Revolution," set to be unveiled on December 31, would outline a vision for a new future, aiming to unite anti-fascist forces and inspire the establishment of a Second Republic. The proclamation, developed with input from diverse political and social groups, seeks to address grievances tied to the existing framework and proposes transformative reforms. [The Daily Star 1]

The call to "bury" the 1972 constitution has sparked significant criticism. Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) Standing Committee member Mirza Abbas defended the constitution as a legacy of the Liberation War and a symbol of the sacrifices made by over 3 million martyrs. Speaking at a Dhaka event, Abbas emphasized the importance of addressing misuse and amending flaws rather than discarding the document altogether. He urged student leaders to refrain from divisive language, reminding them of the constitution's historical and symbolic significance. [The Daily Star 2]

Bangladesh: Awami League eligible to contest elections barring legal restrictions, says election commissioner

(lm) Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) AMM Nasir Uddin stated that the Awami League (AL) of ousted Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina faces no legal barriers to participating in the upcoming national elections unless banned by the government or the courts. Speaking at a meeting on voter list updates and preparations for the 13th National Parliament Election at the Chattogram Circuit House, the CEC affirmed the Election Commission's (EC) independence and commitment to ensuring credible elections.

The CEC also expressed determination to address public skepticism surrounding the election process, assuring that this election will differ from previous ones. He called for cooperation from all parties to ensure transparency and credibility. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Judicial reforms needed to ensure High Court integrity

(mt) Law Advisor Asif Nazrul stressed the critical need for appointing qualified, ethical judges to the High Court, emphasizing their role in protecting citizens' rights and justice. Speaking at a judicial reform discussion, he criticized political bias and lack of qualifications in appointments, citing irregularities in promotions and bench allocations. Nazrul urged collective action to enact reforms and ensure transparency, highlighting the importance of constitutional integrity under the guidance of a reform-oriented Chief Justice for meaningful improvements in Bangladesh's judiciary. [BD News]

Bangladesh: Former food secretary shown arrested in graft case

(vk) Former food secretary Islam Hossain has been formally shown arrested in a graft case filed by the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC). The case involves allegations of aiding former food minister Sadhan Chandra Mazumder in corruption and money laundering.

On December 24, Dhaka Metropolitan Sessions Judge Md Ibrahim Miah approved the ACC's request to show Ismail arrested in connection with the case. The ACC alleges that Ismail abetted Mazumder in amassing illegal wealth amounting to BDT 253.4 million (USD 2.13 million) and in laundering BDT 430.4 million (USD 3.63 million) through irregular transactions in Mazumder's bank accounts.

Ismail was apprehended at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport on December 20 and initially held under Section 54 before being formally linked to this case. The ACC filed the original case against Mazumder on December 19, accusing him of corruption and financial improprieties during his tenure as food minister. [Bss News]

Bangladesh: Former police chief interrogated over crimes against humanity

(lm) The Investigation Agency of the International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) is interrogating Chowdhury Abdullah Al-Mamun, a former inspector general of

police, in connection with alleged crimes against humanity.

ICT Prosecutor Abdullah Al Noman confirmed the interrogation but refrained from disclosing details about the allegations or the progress of the inquiry. Further updates are awaited as the investigation continues. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Extremists accused in 2014 murder of Islamic scholar Faruqi

(lm) The Criminal Investigation Department (CID) has submitted a charge sheet implicating six individuals in the 2014 murder of Islamic scholar and TV host Maolana Sheikh Nurul Islam Faruqi. Faruqi, who was affiliated with Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat and the Bangladesh Islami Front, was killed at his East Rajabazar home in Dhaka on August 27, 2014.

The CID identified the motive as ideological differences, with the accused believing Faruqi's teachings on Islam contradicted the Quran and Hadith. The suspects, including Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) member "Jamai Faruque," reportedly targeted Faruqi for propagating what they deemed a "false ideology."

While "Jamai Faruque" and five others were dropped from the charge sheet due to incomplete addresses, six suspects were named. Three are in custody, while the others remain at large.

Two of the accused provided confessional statements detailing the murder's planning and execution. Faruqi's son filed the initial murder case, naming eight to nine unidentified individuals.

Faruqi, 60 at the time of his death, was also a hajj agency owner and a presenter of Islamic programs on private television channels. His killing has been linked to extremist motives stemming from ideological discord. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Postgraduate doctors suspend protests after government pledges stipend increase

(lm) Postgraduate trainee doctors in Bangladesh have suspended their protests following the government's commitment to a phased stipend increase. Under

pressure from demonstrations led by the Doctors' Movement for Justice Society, the government announced a hike in monthly stipends from BDT 25,000 (approximately USD 210) to BDT 30,000 (approximately USD 250) effective January 2025, with a further increase to BDT 35,000 (approximately USD 320) in July 2025.

The protests gained momentum on December 22 when trainee doctors blocked Dhaka's Shahbagh intersection, a major traffic hub known for national demonstrations, demanding a stipend of BDT 50,000 (approximately USD 420). Doctors highlighted financial challenges and stated that earlier increments were insufficient to meet their needs.

The government's revised decision was communicated through a Finance Division circular on December 23, 2024. The circular confirmed the phased stipend increases for trainees who have passed the first part of the FCPS exam at the Bangladesh College of Physicians and Surgeons (BCPS). The decision followed discussions between health officials and a delegation of postgraduate trainee doctors, culminating in an agreement to resume work.

Jabir Hossain, president of the Doctors' Movement for Justice Society, welcomed the decision but warned of renewed protests if the promised July increment is not implemented. He emphasized the long-standing nature of their demands, noting that protests have been the only effective way to secure action. [The Daily Star 1] [The Daily Star 2]

Bangladesh: 129 workers killed in Sitakunda shipbreaking yard accidents from 2015 to 2024

(lm) Between 2015 and 2024, 129 workers lost their lives, and 205 others were injured in accidents at shipbreaking yards in Sitakunda, Chattogram, according to data shared at a meeting organized by the Bangladesh Institute of Labor Studies (BILS).

The most deadly year was 2019, with 23 fatalities and 35 injuries reported. Although accidents have reportedly declined in recent years, safety concerns persist. In 2024, incidents rose sharply in the latter half of the year, including a September accident at Green Shipbreaking Yard, operated by SN Corporation, which claimed six lives and injured six others.

Industry insiders attribute these accidents to unskilled contractors and poor safety enforcement. Foreman Md

Jamal Uddin criticized irregularities in contractor licensing and inadequate compensation for workers. Advocacy groups like YPSA emphasized that compliance certificates alone cannot prevent accidents; consistent adherence to safety protocols is essential. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: 18 laborers abducted in Teknaf

(lm) At least 18 laborers were abducted on December 30 from a forest department nursery at the base of a hill in Teknaf sub district in Cox's Bazar. The laborers were clearing weeds as part of their regular duties when armed individuals targeted the group. While 18 were taken, three managed to escape, and another individual believed to have accompanied them may also have been abducted. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Prothom Alo employee abducted, released after paying ransom

(lm) A Prothom Alo regional circulation manager, Abul Bashar, was abducted last week in Mymensingh and released after his family paid a ransom of BDT 200,000 (approximately USD 1,830).

Bashar was approached by three men who confirmed his employment at Prothom Alo before forcibly abducting him into a private car. The abductors blindfolded, bound, and severely beat him while demanding ATM PINs and mobile payment details.

Initially, the kidnappers demanded BDT 500,000 (USD 4,580) but settled for BDT 200,000, which Bashar's family transferred via nine mobile transactions. After receiving the ransom, the abductors abandoned Bashar near the Bailey Bridge in Trishal, warning him not to report the incident. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Deputy secretary found unconscious on bus, suspected dope gang involvement

(lm) Dilip Kumar Debnath, a deputy secretary in the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, was found unconscious on a Hamza Express bus traveling from Chattogram to Dhaka on December 30. Police suspect

he fell victim to a dope gang, which uses sedatives to incapacitate and rob victims. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Workers protest over failed migration to Malaysia, demand refunds

(lm) Workers who paid significant sums to secure employment opportunities in Malaysia but were unable to migrate by the May 31 deadline protested in front of the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment in Dhaka. The protesters, many of whom paid as much as BDT 400,000 (approximately USD 3,360), demanded refunds and raised a seven-point charter of demands, including accountability for recruiting agencies and government intervention.

The protesters alleged that despite repeated assurances from the government, refunds remain largely unfulfilled. Complaints lodged with the Bureau of Manpower, Employment, and Training (BMET) and the ministry have remained unresolved for months, intensifying their grievances.

Key demands include revoking the licenses of the 100 agencies accused of forming a syndicate, imposing travel bans on agency owners, recovering funds siphoned abroad, and redistributing them among the workers. Protesters also called for halting worker dispatch to Malaysia until the issues are resolved, arresting brokers and agents, and implementing a system where migration costs are deposited in government banks to curb exploitation. Additionally, they demanded cost-free employment opportunities in other countries for those affected and greater government accountability for the failures in ensuring compensation. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Dismissed Armed Forces members protest at Jahangir Gate

(lm) Dismissed or forcibly retired armed forces personnel staged a sit-in at Dhaka's Shaheed Jahangir Gate, a prominent entrance to Dhaka Cantonment, for three hours, demanding reinstatement and judicial reform under a three-point charter.

Their three demands include the immediate reinstatement of dismissed members with full salary and benefits, inclusion in the government pension scheme if reinstatement is not possible, and reform of

the judicial system to address alleged one-sided procedures behind the dismissals. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Oikya Parishad demands release of Chinmoy and 18 others

(lm) The Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Oikya Parishad has demanded the release of former ISKCON leader Chandan Kumar Dhar, also known as Chinmoy Krishna Das Brahmachari, who is currently in custody on sedition charges. The organization also called on the government to withdraw the charges filed against Chinmoy, a spokesperson for the Sammilita Sanatani Jagaran Mancha, and 18 others.

ISKCON, or the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, is a global religious movement founded in 1966, commonly known as the Hare Krishna movement, which promotes the teachings of Lord Krishna as described in Hindu scriptures. Meanwhile, the Sammilita Sanatani Jagaran Mancha is a platform advocating for the rights and unity of Hindu Sanatani (traditional) communities in Bangladesh.

Chinmoy was arrested on November 25 near Dhaka's Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport. The case against him, filed on October 31 in Chattogram, alleges that he and others disrespected Bangladesh's national flag during a rally on October 25. The accusation claims that a saffron-colored flag was placed over the Bangladesh flag at the Shadhinata Sthombho (Independence Pillar) in Chattogram's New Market area.

The complaint was lodged by Firoz Khan, the then-general secretary of Mohora ward of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, who was expelled from the party for "anti-party" activities the following day. Despite appeals for bail, Chinmoy remains detained, with the Oikya Parishad continuing to advocate for his release and the dismissal of all charges. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Interim government focuses on resolving land issues in Chattogram Hill Tracts

(lm) Chattogram Hill Tracts (CHT) Affairs Adviser Supradip Chakma has emphasized the interim government's commitment to addressing land disputes and improving the lives of residents in the region. Speaking at the inauguration of the Bandarban

Sadar Upazila Parishad Complex extension, he called for empathy in addressing the unique challenges faced by the hill communities, highlighting their struggles in voicing concerns.

Chakma assured that government services are being provided equitably and efforts are underway to improve education, development, and public safety in the CHT. He reiterated that ensuring the well-being of the hill residents is a priority.

In discussions after inaugurating the new building of Bandarban Collectorate School and College, Chakma underlined ongoing efforts to operationalize the Land Commission, a critical demand outlined in the stalled CHT Peace Accord. He noted that work is being carried out by the Ministries of Land and Law to resolve longstanding land disputes, aligning CHT land management with national practices.

The Chattogram Hill Tracts (CHT), located in southeastern Bangladesh, are a culturally and ethnically diverse region home to several indigenous communities. The CHT Peace Accord, signed in 1997 between the government and the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS), aimed to end decades of conflict in the area by addressing issues like land disputes, local governance, and autonomy. However, many provisions of the accord, including the establishment of a fully functional Land Commission, remain unfulfilled. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: BNP leader warns Forest Department against evictions in Tangail

(lm) Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) Vice Chairman Advocate Ahmed Azam Khan has warned the Forest Department against continuing its eviction drive targeting homes built on forest land in Tangail's Sakhipur and Mirzapur subdistricts. Speaking at a protest rally in Sakhipur on December 26, Khan accused the department of corruption and threatened to resist further demolitions.

The rally, organized by the Sakhipur upazila BNP, was held in response to eviction activities reportedly initiated by the Forest Department under the Atia Forest Act, 1987. Khan criticized the legal framework, tracing its origins to the Atia Forest Ordinance of 1982, enacted during the regime of former dictator Hussain Muhammad Ershad, and subsequently turned into law with the support of the Awami League in parliament. He labeled the legislation as oppressive and pledged to repeal it if elected to parliament.

Accusing foresters of accepting bribes, Khan declared, "No more brokers, no more bribes. The people of Sakhipur will live in peace." He assured residents of his support, urging them to inform him immediately if eviction attempts were made. He further vowed that no evictions would occur before the upcoming National Parliament Elections.

Tangail Divisional Forest Officer Abu Naser Mohsin Hossain defended the department's actions, stating that the evictions were approved by the Deputy Commissioner and targeted recent encroachments, particularly those occurring after the government transition. He confirmed that similar operations in Mirzapur upazila had already been conducted and that efforts to reclaim forestland would continue. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Deadly fire in Rohingya refugee camp highlights urgent safety concerns

(lm) A devastating fire broke out on December 24 at the Kutupalong Rohingya refugee camp in Cox's Bazar, killing two individuals, including a child, and leaving over 4,000 homeless. The blaze destroyed more than 1,000 shelters, water facilities, and critical infrastructure in the world's largest refugee settlement. Authorities are investigating the cause, suspected to be an electrical short circuit or a gas cylinder explosion.

Rohingya refugees, already grappling with dire living conditions, expressed frustration over delayed relief efforts. Survivors emphasized the community's vulnerability, worsened by a lack of safety education and overcrowded shelters built with flammable materials. Activists have called for better preventive measures, citing frequent fires in the camps, with some suspected to be acts of sabotage.

The United Nations and aid agencies have pledged temporary shelters and food support, but the tragedy underscores the ongoing challenges faced by over 1.2 million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, many of whom fled Myanmar during the 2017 military crackdown described as genocide. Advocates stress the need for long-term safety measures to protect the refugees from recurring disasters. [Voice of America] [Anadolu Ajansı]

Bangladesh: 17 Christian homes set ablaze on Christmas Eve

(lm) Seventeen homes belonging to a minority Christian community in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh were set on fire during the early hours of Christmas Eve, reportedly while many villagers were attending midnight mass at a nearby church.

Initial investigations suggest the incident may be tied to a long-standing rivalry within the same community. Authorities have arrested four individuals, including six rival Christian community members and a Bengali Muslim, based on a complaint filed by a community elder.

The affected village is home to the Christian Tripura community, which has resided there for generations. [Times of India]

Bangladesh: Fire destroys 100 shops at Cumilla market

(lm) A devastating fire destroyed approximately 100 shops at Madhaiya Bazar in Chandina, Cumilla, on December 30. The fire is suspected to have originated from a sweet shop and spread rapidly due to the market's predominantly bamboo and wooden construction with tin-shed roofs. Authorities are investigating the cause of the fire and assessing the extent of the damage. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Dhaka-Chattogram fuel pipeline ready for commissioning in January 2025

(vk) The 250-kilometer Dhaka-Chattogram fuel oil transportation pipeline, the first of its kind in Bangladesh, is set to be commissioned in January 2025, with commercial operations expected to start by April. The project, implemented by the Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC), is projected to save approximately USD 21.7 million annually in transportation costs while ensuring more secure and efficient fuel distribution.

Constructed at a cost of USD 338 million, the pipeline will transport up to 5.4 million tons of diesel annually for 25 years, addressing 65 percent of the country’s diesel demand. It will streamline fuel delivery to Dhaka, which requires 2.7 million tons annually, while

reducing environmental pollution and curbing theft. [Bss News]

Bangladesh: Interim government approves LNG and fertilizer procurements to meet demand

(vk) The Bangladesh interim government has approved separate proposals to procure one cargo of liquefied natural gas (LNG) and 130,000 metric tons of fertilizer to address the country's growing energy and agricultural needs. The decisions were made during the 18th meeting of the Advisers Council Committee on Government Purchase (ACCGP) held at the Bangladesh Secretariat.

Under the Energy and Mineral Resources Division's proposal, Petrobangla will purchase one cargo of LNG from POSCO International Corporation of South Korea at a cost of approximately USD 63.7 million, with each MMBtu priced at USD 14.69. The Bangladesh Chemical Industries Corporation (BCIC), under the Ministry of Industries, will procure 30,000 metric tons of bulk granular urea fertilizer from Karnaphuli Fertilizer Company Limited (KAFCO) for USD 10.3 million, priced at USD 343.25 per ton, and an additional 30,000 metric tons of bulk granular urea fertilizer from SABIC Agri-nutrients Company in Saudi Arabia for USD 10.5 million, priced at USD 349.67 per ton.

The Bangladesh Agricultural Development Corporation (BADC) will purchase 30,000 metric tons of MOP fertilizer from Prodintorg, Russia, at a cost of USD 14.7 million, priced at USD 489.75 per ton, and 40,000 metric tons of DAP fertilizer from OCP Nutricrops SA in Morocco for USD 39.5 million, priced at USD 584.50 per ton. [Bss News]

Bangladesh: Seven injured as workers attack JnU bus in Mohakhali

(lm) Seven people, including the driver of a Jagannath University (JnU) bus, were injured when drivers and helpers attacked the bus near Mohakhali Bus Terminal after a dispute with an Akota Transport bus. Armed with bricks and sticks, the attackers targeted students and the driver, leaving him severely injured and at risk of losing vision in one eye.

The Dhaka District Bus-Minibus Workers' Union condemned the attack, dismissed those responsible,

and pledged compensation: BDT 100,000 (USD 850) for the driver's treatment, BDT 30,000 (USD 255) for other injuries, and BDT 12,900 (USD 109) for repairs. JnU officials are demanding justice, though no arrests have been made. [The Daily Star]

Bhutan: Poor planning and execution slow capital budget utilization

(lm) Bhutan's government utilized only 7 percent of its capital budget in the first quarter (July to September) of fiscal year 2024-25, amounting to BTN 2.73 billion (USD 32.76 million) out of BTN 38.96 billion (USD 467.52 million).

A capital budget, distinct from current expenditure, is allocated for long-term investments such as infrastructure projects, including roads, bridges, and public buildings. These investments are vital for economic development, job creation, and improving living standards.

The slow spending was attributed to poor planning, execution challenges, and climatic constraints in northern regions, delaying progress in critical infrastructure initiatives. The total expenditure utilization rate, combining capital and current budgets, stood at 14 percent, slightly below the previous year's 16 percent for the same period.

The fiscal deficit for FY 2024-25 is projected at BTN 16.09 billion (USD 193.08 million), or 5.34 percent of GDP, due to upward revisions in capital expenditure. The government aims to narrow this deficit to 3.61 percent of GDP in FY 2025-26.

To address these challenges, the finance ministry introduced quarterly fiscal projections, expecting capital budget utilization to accelerate in later quarters, with BTN 7 billion (USD 84.01 million) anticipated in Q2 and BTN 18.75 billion (USD 225.15 million) in Q4. Higher revenue inflows from taxes and grants are also projected to mitigate deficits by year-end. [Kuensel]

Bhutan: National debt rises to USD 3.49 billion, reaching 95 percent of GDP

(mt) As of September 2024, Bhutan's national debt increased to BTN 290.3 billion (USD 3.49 billion), equating to 95.2 percent of the estimated GDP for FY 2023-24, according to the Finance Ministry. This marks

a BTN 5.1 billion (USD 61.36 million) rise since June and a BTN 17 billion (USD 204.63 million) increase compared to September 2023.

The debt comprises external obligations of BTN 266.66 billion (USD 3.21 billion) and domestic debt of BTN 23.6 billion (USD 283.28 million). External debt, primarily driven by hydropower projects and international budgetary support, accounts for 92 percent of the total. Major hydropower-related debts from six projects, including Mangdechhu and Puna-II, decreased by 4 percent to BTN 166.97 billion (USD 2.0 billion), while non-hydro debt rose by 3 percent to BTN 99.69 billion (USD 1.2 billion).

Domestic debt rose by BTN 2.12 billion (USD 25.42 million) due to government treasury bills, while INR-denominated debt accounts for 64.6 percent of external debt at BTN 172.37 billion (USD 2.07 billion). Convertible currency debt stood at USD 1.13 billion (BTN 94.29 billion).

Debt servicing is projected to account for 21.8 percent of domestic revenue for FY 2024-25, remaining within the Public Debt Management Policy 2023 threshold of 35 percent. The central government debt, at BTN 104.12 billion (USD 1.25 billion) or 34.2 percent of GDP, remains below the policy ceiling of 55 percent. [Kuensel]

Bhutan: Economic growth forecast for 2024 revised down to 5 percent amid challenges

(mt) Bhutan's economic growth forecast for 2024 has been revised downward to 5 percent, a reduction of 1.1 percent from earlier projections. The downgrade stems from delays in key infrastructure projects like the Punatsangchhu-II Hydroelectric Project (PHPA-II) and a sluggish recovery in tourism, according to the Ministry of Finance's Macroeconomic Situation report. The PHPA-II project, initially expected to be operational by December 2024, is now set to be completed by June 2025, slowing industrial sector growth.

The tourism sector, a major economic driver, has underperformed in 2024, though optimism remains for a rebound in 2025, with growth forecasted to rise to 9.6 percent due to PHPA-II's completion. Growth is expected to moderate to 6.6 percent in 2026 due to the base effect from the prior year.

Agriculture, a critical sector, continues to struggle, with an estimated growth rate of just 1.5 percent for 2024

and 2025, far below the annual target of 7 percent outlined in the 13th Five-Year Plan. Government initiatives like the Economic Stimulus Programme and Concessional Credit Line have shown limited impact, with agricultural credit representing only 2.4 percent of total loans as of August 2024. The Price Guarantee Scheme aimed at stabilizing prices has yet to deliver significant results.

The industrial sector is projected to grow by 6.2 percent in 2024 and 20.1 percent in 2025, supported by hydropower and mining expansion, which shows growth estimates of 7 percent in 2024 and 14 percent in 2025. However, manufacturing growth remains modest, highlighting the need for job creation and increased production capacity.

The services sector, driven by retail, transport, and tourism, is expected to grow by 5.3 percent in 2024, with hotels and restaurants experiencing over 20 percent growth. However, this pace may slow to 4.4 percent in 2025 due to lower wage growth in public administration. A full recovery in tourism to pre-pandemic levels is anticipated by 2026.

While Bhutan's economy is projected to grow at an average of 7 percent over the coming years, this remains slightly below the 8 percent target needed to achieve high-income status. Economists emphasize the importance of diversifying beyond hydropower investments to enhance productivity in manufacturing and value-added sectors, which would generate meaningful employment and promote long-term economic stability. [Kuensel]

Bhutan: ADGM legal framework adopted to boost Gelephu Mindfulness City investments

(mt) Bhutan's adoption of the Abu Dhabi Global Market (ADGM) legal framework for Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC) marks a significant move to attract foreign investment and support sustainable growth. The ADGM, a financial-free zone in Abu Dhabi established in 2013, operates under English common law, providing a globally recognized and predictable legal environment for businesses.

The framework offers key advantages, including a zero-tax jurisdiction, 100 percent foreign ownership, and streamlined business processes, reducing costs and regulatory barriers. Robust oversight ensures transparency and investor protection, while GMC's

strategic location enhances its appeal as a regional trade hub.

This initiative aligns with Bhutan's "Diamond Strategy," aiming to position the country as a center for trade and investment while fostering innovation and sustainable development. The ADGM framework provides a reliable legal foundation to attract diverse industries, supporting Bhutan's broader economic ambitions for transformative growth in the region. [Kuensel]

Bhutan: Audit reveals mismanagement and defects in public infrastructure

(mt/lm) The Royal Audit Authority (RAA) has disclosed significant mismanagement and defects in Bhutan's construction sector, raising concerns over the effectiveness of the National Construction Industry Policy 2020. Despite the policy's goal of enhancing standards, 139 cases of substandard work and defective infrastructure were reported across 62 agencies and projects.

The audit uncovered outstanding advances of BTN 340.661 million (USD 4.09 million) against contractors or agencies for the fiscal years 2021-22 and 2022-23. These advances stemmed from non-compliance with regulations and inadequate oversight. The RAA has called for immediate recovery or adjustments to prevent further financial discrepancies. Specific cases include inadmissible payments totaling BTN 3.256 million (USD 39,072) for uninstalled materials at quarantine centers and defective rain gutters at the 500-bed quarantine facility in Samtse, compromising the building's quality. Additionally, BTN 115,000 (USD 1,380) in liquidated damages was not imposed on a contractor for delays in a road construction project from Sherichhu to Gongrizomsa.

The Bhutan Construction and Transport Authority (BCTA) reported unrecovered advances amounting to BTN 4.538 million (USD 54,456) related to various projects, including electric vehicle charging sheds. The RAA also noted a lack of detailed records for recoverable amounts from terminated contracts, urging BCTA to expedite recovery processes. [Kuensel 1]

According to observers, the RAA's observations are part of a recurring narrative, with annual reports consistently pointing out similar lapses in financial management and misuse of public funds. Despite calls for accountability and efficiency, including directives

from the Golden Throne, the envisioned transformation in governance remains elusive. Mismanagement and irregularities threaten Bhutan's national priorities, economic growth, and internal stability. [Kuensel 2]

The RAA has urged the immediate recovery and adjustment of advances and stricter enforcement of regulations. Recommendations include prioritizing quality assurance, employing photographic or video documentation, and utilizing CCTV monitoring for public infrastructure projects. The Ministry of Infrastructure and Transport has been tasked with reevaluating the implementation of the National Construction Industry Policy 2020 to address compliance gaps. [Kuensel 1]

Bhutan: Phase II of hydropower projects to add 195 MW to national grid

(lm) Bhutan has initiated Phase II of its small hydropower projects, set to add 195 MW to the national grid, as Druk Hydro Energy Limited (DHyE), a subsidiary of the Druk Green Power Corporation (DGPC), finalized contracts for civil works. The projects include the 90 MW Jomori, 54 MW Gamri-I, 26 MW Druk Bindu I & II, and 25 MW Begana, with a total estimated budget of BTN 20 billion (USD 240 million).

Construction of access roads for Jomori and Druk Bindu I & II began in October 2023, enabling immediate commencement of main civil works. Gamri-I and Begana projects do not require new road infrastructure. Contracts for civil works have been awarded to multiple domestic firms, signaling enhanced capacity for Bhutan's private sector in energy development.

The projects, delayed from their initial October 2024 start, are expected to be completed within four years, furthering Bhutan's renewable energy targets of achieving an additional 20,000 MW in hydropower and solar capacity over the next 15 years. [Kuensel]

Bhutan: Finance ministry terminates direct procurement contract for IT supplies with STCBL

(mt) The Bhutanese cabinet has revoked the State Trading Corporation of Bhutan Limited's (STCBL) direct procurement contract for laptops and desktops for

government offices, citing non-compliance with the Procurement Rules and Regulations (PRR) 2023. The Department of Procurement and Properties (DPP) issued a 30-day termination notice effective December 11, following a cabinet directive on December 6.

STCBL is a government-owned enterprise in Bhutan responsible for managing the supply of essential goods and services to the country, including vehicles, construction materials, and IT equipment.

The DPP is working to establish a new procurement mechanism to streamline the process, with details expected to be shared with budgetary agencies soon. The initial direct contract, awarded by the finance ministry for the fiscal year 2024-25, was intended to standardize procedures, enhance efficiency, and reduce risks of substandard products. However, private IT firms strongly opposed the move, arguing that it violated procurement regulations and denied them fair opportunities.

According to PRR 2023, open tendering is required for procurements exceeding BTN 15 million (USD 180,000) to ensure transparency and fairness. Direct contracts are limited to works up to BTN 10 million (USD 120,000) and goods up to BTN 50,000 (USD 600). Private IT firms have urged the government to adopt an open tendering process to ensure equal participation, including for STCBL, and criticized the lack of consultation during the decision-making process. [Kuensel]

Bhutan: BCCI plans for a stronger public-private collaboration

(mt) The Bhutan Chamber of Commerce and Industry (BCCI) aims to enhance government-private sector partnerships under the 13th Five-Year-Plan, focusing on key areas like agriculture, mining, and digital technologies. The plan targets economic growth to reach USD 4.03 billion by 2029. BCCI's initiatives include establishing sector-specific committees, advocating for business-friendly policies, and fostering investments. However, details on the engagement strategies remain limited. [Kuensel 1]

BCCI highlights progress through initiatives like hydropower project ventures and the Economic Stimulus Plan (ESP), which has disbursed USD 4.75 million in loans. The ESP targets recovery through concessional credit for agriculture and industries, managed by the Bhutan Development Bank Limited (BDBL). The reinvigoration fund, which supported 66

ongoing reviews, faces processing delays, prompting calls for simplified application procedures. [Kuensel 2]

Bhutan: Revised amenity fees in Thimphu spark debate over services and cost of living

(mt) Thimphu residents are voicing concerns over steep increases in amenity fees introduced by the Thimphu Thromde, covering garbage collection, street lighting, and other municipal services. Building owners report hikes exceeding 100 percent, with some paying over BTN 100,000 (USD 1,200) annually. The increases stem from outsourcing waste management to private firms and rising operational costs.

The Thromde cites improved waste collection services and funding constraints as reasons for the hike but has faced criticism over persistent issues like poor road conditions, traffic congestion, and unreliable water supplies. Property owners and tenants are questioning the value of the increased fees, with many considering passing the costs onto tenants.

Advocates argue the fee hike is essential for better services, but residents warn of growing frustration if visible improvements are not delivered. Payments for 2024 have been extended until March 2025, with a monthly payment option available from 2025. [Kuensel 1] [Kuensel 2]

Bhutan: Indian national arrested at Paro airport with 4.6 kilograms heroin

(mt) An Indian national was arrested at Paro International Airport on December 22 after airport security discovered 4.6 kilograms of heroin concealed in his luggage during routine checks. The man, traveling from Bangkok, allegedly acted as a drug mule. Authorities are investigating the supplier and intended recipient of the drugs. This marks the first heroin seizure at the airport, and the case remains under investigation by Paro police. [Kuensel]

India: Former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, architect of economic reforms, dies at 92

(ad/ah) India bid farewell to former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh with a state funeral in New Delhi, attended by national leaders, foreign dignitaries, and thousands of mourners.

Singh, who passed away at the age of 92, served as India's prime minister from 2004 to 2014 and was widely regarded as the architect of India's economic liberalization during his tenure as finance minister in the early 1990s. His reforms transformed India into a global economic power, lifting millions out of poverty and setting the stage for sustained economic growth.

Born in 1932 in a region now part of Pakistan, Singh overcame humble beginnings to earn a doctorate in economics from Oxford University. As a technocrat-turned-politician, he served in roles such as Central Bank governor before being unexpectedly called to lead India through its economic crisis in 1991. His premiership later introduced welfare schemes for rural employment and secured a landmark United States-India nuclear deal, strengthening international partnerships.

Despite his achievements, Singh's tenure faced criticism during his second term, marked by corruption allegations and political challenges within his coalition. This ultimately led to the Indian National Congress (INC) party's defeat in 2014. Current Prime Minister Narendra Modi praised Singh as a "distinguished leader" whose efforts profoundly shaped India's policies and lives. [India Today] [BBC] [Al Jazeera]

However, the state funeral at Delhi's Nigambodh Ghat became a flashpoint for a political dispute. INC leader Rahul Gandhi accused the government of disrespecting Singh by not granting him a designated memorial site. Gandhi highlighted Singh's stature as India's first Sikh Prime Minister and called for greater honors. Union Minister Hardeep Singh Puri rejected the accusations, asserting that Singh received full state honors and a cabinet-approved memorial at Ekta Sthal. He criticized the INC for politicizing the funeral and pointed to their own treatment of former Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao, whose cremation was shifted to Hyderabad in 2004.

Puri further challenged Gandhi's invocation of Singh's Sikh identity, emphasizing that Singh's legacy transcended religion. He accused the INC of lapses in their own arrangements, including their absence during Singh's ash immersion and their limited participation in funeral organization.

INC leader Pawan Khera, meanwhile, criticized logistical mismanagement, citing restricted media

access, inadequate seating for Singh's family, and disruptions caused by a VVIP convoy. Puri dismissed these claims, attributing logistical decisions to heavy rain and practical constraints. [NDTV]

India: Tensions escalate between AAP and INC in INDIA alliance

(lm) The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), a political party that emerged from an anti-corruption movement and currently governs Delhi and Punjab, has threatened to call for the Indian National Congress (INC) party's removal from the INDIA alliance, an opposition coalition of several parties united to challenge the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in national politics.

AAP leaders Sanjay Singh and Delhi Chief Minister Atishi accused the INC of colluding with the BJP to undermine the AAP in the upcoming Delhi Assembly elections. The accusations center on INC leader Ajay Maken, who recently called AAP leader Arvind Kejriwal "anti-national" and released a "white paper" criticizing AAP's governance. Singh alleged that Maken's actions align with BJP interests, further straining ties between the two INDIA bloc members.

Atishi alleged that INC candidates in Delhi were receiving funding from the BJP, intensifying claims of collusion. In response, the INC defended its criticisms, with Maken accusing AAP of failing to deliver on anti-corruption promises and describing Kejriwal as "Farziwal." The INC's "white paper" outlined governance issues under AAP in Delhi and the BJP-led central government, targeting failures in pollution control, civic management, and law and order.

This growing discord underscores tensions within the INDIA alliance, particularly between two parties that have historically been rivals in Delhi and Punjab. AAP's ultimatum for the INC to act against Maken within 24 hours signals a deepening rift, with threats to push for the INC's removal from the alliance if demands are unmet. The Delhi INC has yet to respond. [The Hindu] [NDTV]

India: Supreme Court grapples with controversial High Court remarks in 2024

(lm) The Supreme Court of India spent much of 2024 addressing a series of controversial remarks made by sitting High Court judges, often related to communal,

sexist, or contentious issues. In response, five-judge benches were hastily convened multiple times to mitigate the fallout from these incidents.

A prominent case involved Justice Shekhar Kumar Yadav of the Allahabad High Court, whose remarks during a Vishwa Hindu Parishad event on December 8 drew widespread criticism. Justice Yadav commented on issues such as the Uniform Civil Code, polygamy, and religious practices, leading to a motion for his removal, initiated by 55 parliamentary upper house MPs. The Supreme Court Collegium reportedly summoned him, but the matter has largely been handled discreetly.

Conversely, the Supreme Court dealt openly with allegations against Karnataka High Court judge Justice V. Srishananda, who referred to a Muslim-majority area in Bengaluru as "Pakistan" and made sexist comments to a lawyer during judicial proceedings. Chief Justice of India D.Y. Chandrachud, heading a five-judge bench, rejected calls for in-house procedures, stating, "The answer to sunlight is more sunlight." Although Justice Srishananda issued a public apology, the case highlighted the need for judicial accountability.

Additional controversies included remarks by Punjab and Haryana High Court judge Justice Rajbir Sehrawat, challenging the Supreme Court's authority, and Calcutta High Court judge Justice Abhijit Gangopadhyay, who accused a fellow judge of political bias. The Supreme Court transferred the latter case to itself, after which Justice Gangopadhyay resigned, joined the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, and was elected to the Parliament’s lower house, the Lok Sabha. [The Hindu]

India: Court rejects money laundering charges in coal 'scam' cases

(ad) A Delhi court has dismissed chargesheets filed by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) in cases related to alleged coal allocation irregularities, ruling that anticipating or attempting to acquire proceeds of crime does not constitute money laundering under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA), 2002.

In one case involving the Fatehpur East Coal Block, Special Judge Arun Bhardwaj observed that Visa Power Ltd and others accused, including former coal ministry officials, had not yet derived any undue benefits from the coal block allocation. The judge stated that "undue benefits were yet to be obtained" and concluded that

no offence under Section 3 of the PMLA was made out. The ED had alleged that INR 663.3 million (USD 7.96 million) was infused by Visa Minmetal AG into Visa Power Ltd as equity shares.

Similarly, in a case against Adhunik Corporation Ltd (ACL) concerning the New Patra Para coal block in Odisha, the court held that the infusion of INR 503.7 million (USD 6.04 million) by the accused and related entities as share capital did not qualify as money laundering. The judge emphasized that "an attempt to acquire proceeds of crime" or anticipating benefits does not meet the definition of money laundering, as no actual proceeds of crime existed. [The Indian Express]

India: Coal dependence persists amid rising power demand and capacity expansion

(ad) India, which relies on coal for approximately 75 percent of its electricity needs, has maintained coal-fired capacity installations near a five-year high to meet escalating power demand. Nearly 4 gigawatts (GW) of new coal-fired capacity was added in 2024, matching 2023 levels, according to the Central Electricity Authority. This marks the highest addition since 2019 when 7.4 GW was installed but still falls short of state targets for the required capacity by 2032.

Despite efforts to scale up renewable energy, India's reliance on coal, the most polluting fossil fuel, is expected to continue for years. Globally, coal use is projected to reach record levels through 2027, driven by demand in China and India, according to the International Energy Agency.

In 2023, India's power ministry unveiled an ambitious plan to add nearly 90 GW of coal-fired capacity by 2032, representing a 60 percent increase over previous targets. Achieving this goal would necessitate the addition of at least 9 GW of coal-fired plants annually, underscoring the country's ongoing dependence on coal to meet its growing energy needs. [Business Standard]

India: Forex reserves fall to seven-month low amid rupee weakness

(ad) India's foreign exchange reserves dropped to a seven-month low of USD 644.39 billion as of December

20, 2024, marking a decline for the third consecutive week, according to data from the Reserve Bank of India (RBI). The reserves fell by USD 8.5 billion in the reporting week, recording their largest weekly drop in over a month, following a cumulative decline of USD 5.2 billion in the prior two weeks.

The reduction in reserves is attributed to the RBI's interventions in the forex market to manage rupee volatility and the fluctuations in the value of foreign assets held in reserves. During the same period, the Indian rupee depreciated by 0.2 percent, hitting a then all-time low of INR 85.10 per USD. [NDTV] [Business Standard]

India: SEBI notifies withdrawal of ICEX recognition, marks exit from exchange business

(ad) The Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) has officially notified the withdrawal of recognition granted to the Indian Commodity Exchange Ltd (ICEX), finalizing its exit from the exchange space. This follows SEBI's December 11 approval for ICEX to exit after fulfilling regulatory requirements.

ICEX, based in Surat, Gujarat, was granted permanent recognition in 2009 under the Forward Contracts (Regulation) Act, 1952, transitioning to recognition under the Securities Contracts (Regulation) Act, 1956, after the Forward Markets Commission's 2015 merger with SEBI. However, SEBI derecognized ICEX in May 2022 due to non-compliance with net-worth requirements and infrastructural deficiencies.

Despite temporary relief from the Securities Appellate Tribunal (SAT), ICEX struggled to raise funds under SEBI's shareholding cap of 5 percent. After SEBI rejected its request for a higher equity cap, ICEX voluntarily surrendered its recognition, a resolution approved by its shareholders in May 2023. With all conditions met, SEBI permitted ICEX's exit, formalized through the recent notification. [NDTV]

India: CII calls for fuel excise duty cut and pro-growth measures ahead of budget 2025-26

(ah) The Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) has urged Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman to implement measures aimed at boosting domestic

consumption and supporting lower-income households in the upcoming Union Budget 2025-26. Key recommendations include reducing excise duty on fuel, which currently constitutes 21 percent of petrol and 18 percent of diesel prices, to curb inflation and enhance disposable incomes. Despite a 40 percent fall in global crude oil prices since May 2022, these duties remain unchanged.

CII highlighted the critical role of domestic consumption in India's growth and called for initiatives like increasing payouts under welfare schemes such as PM-KISAN (from INR 6,000 to INR 8,000 annually, equivalent to USD 72 to USD 96). It also proposed enhancing daily wages under MGNREGS from INR 267 (USD 3.20) to INR 375 (USD 4.50). CII estimated the latter would require an additional expenditure of INR 5.04 billion (USD 60 million).

Additional proposals include introducing consumption vouchers targeted at low-income groups to stimulate spending on specific goods and services and raising unit costs for housing schemes like PMAY-G and PMAY-U, which have not been adjusted since their inception.

CII also recommended lowering the highest marginal tax rate for individuals, which stands at 42.74 percent, compared to a corporate tax rate of 25.17 percent, to address inflation's impact on middle-income households. To encourage bank deposits, it suggested reducing tax rates on interest income and shortening the lock-in period for fixed deposits with tax benefits from five years to three years. [NDTV]

India: First commercial flight lands at Navi Mumbai International Airport

(ad) The Navi Mumbai International Airport, a landmark greenfield project under construction since August 2021, saw its first commercial aircraft landing on December 29.

Set to become one of India's largest greenfield international airports, the facility spans 1,160 hectares and is designed to accommodate 60 million passengers and 1.5 million tons of cargo annually. Featuring two parallel runways for independent operations and three passenger terminals, the airport is expected to be fully operational by early 2025. [The Indian Express]

India: Tamil Nadu's Pamban to host nation's first vertical lift sea bridge

(ad) India's first vertical lift sea bridge, connecting Tamil Nadu's mainland to Rameswaram island, is set to open in January 2025, restoring rail connectivity disrupted since December 2022. Prime Minister Narendra Modi laid the foundation stone in November 2019, with construction beginning in February 2020. Although initially planned for completion by December 2021, delays caused by the Covid-19 pandemic extended the timeline. [NDTV]

India: Assam Police avert major terror incident, arrest Al-Qaeda-linked operatives

(ad) The Special Task Force (STF) of Assam Police reported the arrest of two individuals in Kokrajhar district with alleged links to Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), an affiliate of Al-Qaeda. The arrests, along with eight others made earlier in December, reportedly foiled a significant terror attack. Authorities believe the individuals were part of a larger conspiracy to establish sleeper cells across India, particularly in Assam and West Bengal, to execute violent and subversive activities.

The operation uncovered a hideout containing four handmade rifles resembling AK-47s, a ready improvised explosive device (IED), detonator circuits, iron materials for constructing explosive devices, handmade grenades, and live ammunition. Investigators noted evidence of training exercises, including the use of blank cartridges. [The Indian Express]

India: Indian Army unveils Chhatrapati Shivaji statue near India-China border

The Indian Army has installed a statue of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj near Pangong Lake in eastern Ladakh, close to the Line of Actual Control (LAC) with China. Unveiled by Lt. Gen. Hitesh Bhalla, General Officer Commanding of the 14 Corps, the statue symbolizes the Maratha king's legacy of valor, vision, and justice, resonating with India's enduring spirit and strength.

Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj (1630–1680) was a legendary Maratha warrior king known for establishing the Maratha Empire in western India. Celebrated for

his military acumen, governance, and efforts to protect Indian sovereignty, Shivaji remains a symbol of resistance against foreign oppression and a beacon of courage in Indian history. [newsx]

The unveiling follows recent progress in disengagement efforts between Indian and Chinese troops at the Demchok and Depsang friction points, concluding a prolonged border standoff that began in May 2020.

India: Defence Minister visits Mhow after 24 years, lauds Indian Army's training institutes

(lm) Defence Minister Rajnath Singh visited Mhow, Madhya Pradesh, marking the first such visit by a defence minister in 24 years. Mhow, officially known as Dr. Ambedkar Nagar, is a cantonment town in central India renowned for its military heritage, including premier training institutes of the Indian Army such as the Army War College, Infantry School, and Military College of Telecommunication and Engineering.

Singh praised these institutes for their significant contributions to shaping military strategies and enhancing warfare skills. During his visit, he reviewed advancements at the Advanced Incubation and Research Centre and observed the Army Marksmanship Unit's role in national sports. Singh also toured the Infantry Museum, which showcases the history and modernization of the infantry.

Addressing troops, Singh lauded their dedication to securing India's borders and emphasized the importance of remaining vigilant amid geopolitical and internal challenges. He highlighted the armed forces' pivotal role in achieving the government's vision of making India a developed and self-reliant nation by 2047.

Singh also paid homage to Dr. BR Ambedkar at Bhim Janm Bhoomi, his birthplace in Mhow. Dr. BR Ambedkar, a Bharat Ratna awardee, was the principal architect of India's Constitution, a social reformer, and an advocate for the rights of marginalized communities. Singh described him as a symbol of selfless service and a champion of equality and empowerment. [Zee News]

Maldives: President Muizzu announces cabinet reshuffle, merges ministries

(lm) President Dr. Mohamed Muizzu has restructured his cabinet, merging ministries and reallocating portfolios. The Ministry of Finance has been expanded to include planning, now known as the Ministry of Finance and Planning, led by Minister Moosa Zameer. The housing and construction ministries have been consolidated into the Ministry of Construction, Housing and Infrastructure, headed by Minister Dr. Abdulla Muththalib.

Dr. Ali Haidar, formerly the Housing Minister, now serves as Minister of Higher Education, Skill Development and Labour. Meanwhile, Dr. Maryam Mariya, who temporarily managed the Agriculture Ministry, is appointed as Minister of Agriculture and Animal Welfare. This marks the second cabinet reshuffle under President Muizzu's current term. [the edition]

Maldives: High Court reverses decision, accepts case against Abdulla Jihad

(lm) The High Court has reversed its earlier decision to reject a case against former Vice President Abdulla Jihad, now accepting the charges. Jihad, currently Chairperson of the Maldives International Financial Service Authority (MIFSA), faces allegations stemming from his tenure as Finance Minister in 2013, related to a joint venture agreement for developing Fushidhiggaru Falhu. The deal controversially granted the government only a 25 percent stake, contrary to government advice.

The Criminal Court initially dismissed the case due to investigative errors, leading the Prosecutor General's Office to appeal. The High Court had earlier refused to accept the appeal due to missed deadlines and difficulties summoning Jihad, who was abroad. However, the court reconsidered, citing unavoidable circumstances for the delay, and ruled in favor of accepting the case earlier this month. Meanwhile, the State has also appealed the earlier rejection of the case at the Supreme Court. [the edition]

Maldives: Information Commissioner orders disclosure of dismissed political appointees

(lm) Information Commissioner Ahmed Ahid has mandated the disclosure of details regarding 248 political appointees dismissed under President Dr. Mohamed Muizzu's Economic Reform Agenda, aimed at reducing state expenditures. The Commissioner ruled that while personal details such as permanent addresses remain confidential, the names, designations, salaries, and dismissal dates of these appointees must be revealed within five working days.

The decision follows a Right to Information request, which the President's Office initially denied, citing privacy concerns. Commissioner Ahid clarified that such information, as political appointees are appointed under constitutional provisions, cannot be withheld. The President's Office has a 30-day window to appeal the ruling at the High Court if desired. [the edition]

Maldives: Investigations intensify into Binveriya and Gedhoruveriya housing schemes

(lm) Maldives authorities are conducting extensive investigations into alleged irregularities in the Binveriya and Gedhoruveriya housing schemes, with multiple agencies including the Maldives Police Service, Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), and the Prosecutor General's Office involved.

A dedicated portal launched on December 21 has received information from 16 individuals regarding the schemes, with four submitting supporting documents. Police have assured confidentiality and urged the public to report irregularities either anonymously or with contact details. [the edition 1]

In the Binveriya case, the Police seized mobile phones from individuals linked to alleged fraud, including former Housing Development Corporation (HDC) Managing Director Ibrahim Fazul Rasheed and his brother, Maldives Water and Sewerage Company Deputy MD Mohamed Fazeel Rasheed. The brothers are accused of unlawfully acquiring land plots under the scheme. Electronic equipment was also confiscated during searches, and 20 individuals, including the Rasheeds, initially had their passports seized. Travel bans for nine of them were recently lifted after consultations with the Prosecutor General. [the edition 2] [the edition 3]

The Gedhoruveriya scheme is similarly under scrutiny, with ACC findings indicating only 20 percent of initial flat recipients were eligible. Allegations of undue allocations have led to charges against four senior

officials, including former Housing Ministry State Minister Akram Kamaluddeen and current Director General Ahmed Vishan Naseem. The ACC is expediting charges in coordination with the Prosecutor General. [the edition 4]

The investigations have also prompted organizational changes at HDC. Fifteen employees, initially dismissed over suspected involvement, were reinstated but placed under suspension pending the outcome of inquiries. HDC Chairman Ahmed Nasif reaffirmed the corporation's commitment to cooperating with the investigations. [the edition 5]

Maldives: High Court halts reinstatement and compensation for former IAS deputy MD

(lm) The High Court has temporarily halted the Employment Tribunal's decision to reinstate Aishath Jennifer, former Deputy Managing Director of Island Aviation Service (IAS), and award her compensation. Jennifer, appointed during former President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih's administration in 2018, was dismissed by the IAS Board in January 2024.

The Employment Tribunal ruled her dismissal wrongful, ordering her reinstatement and compensation equivalent to one month's salary and allowances, amounting to MVR 56,000 (USD 3,640). However, IAS appealed the ruling, prompting the High Court to suspend the tribunal's decision until the appeal is resolved. [the edition]

Maldives: Prosecutor General declines to revise charges against Kings Capital executives

(lm) Prosecutor General Abbas Shareef has decided not to amend the charges against Kings Capital Company's Managing Director Alhan Fahmy and his brothers, Shazban Fahmy and Shahban Fahmy. The three face 13 charges related to an investment scheme accused of collecting funds from multiple individuals.

Kings Capital had requested a review of the charges following the new PG's statement that such requests would be considered. However, the Prosecutor General's Office (PGO) announced that after reviewing the case, no grounds were found to revise the charges.

The case has also involved legal disputes over the company's bank accounts, which were previously seized but later ruled to have been seized illegally by the Civil Court. [the edition]

Maldives: Former FENAKA MD charged with corruption over Blazon Inc. case

(lm) Ahmed Saeed, the former Managing Director of FENAKA Corporation—a state-owned utility company providing electricity, water, and sewerage services across the Maldives—has been charged with corruption alongside Mariyam Dheena, the company's former procurement head. Prosecutors allege they authorized an MVR 848,000 (USD 55,120) payment to Blazon Inc. in 2018 without verifying project completion, resulting in undue benefits.

If convicted, Saeed and Dheena face a prison sentence of one year, seven months, and six days. The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) has also been investigating Saeed, with his passport confiscated as part of ongoing inquiries into allegations of corruption during his tenure under former President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih's administration. Critics have accused the ACC of inaction on several corruption cases involving FENAKA.[the edition]

Maldives: ACC investigates financial irregularities involving Maldives Basketball Association

(lm) The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) has initiated an investigation into financial irregularities involving the Maldives Basketball Association (MBA) following a complaint lodged by a private individual connected to basketball. The allegations claim that the MBA deceptively obtained funds twice from the Sports Ministry for similar activities.

The complaint highlights discrepancies in the MBA's financial reports. It alleges that the association received MVR 195,371.40 (USD 12,699) from the Sports Ministry on December 11, 2022, purportedly to cover accommodation and food costs for two Sri Lankan clubs participating in the national tournament. However, no foreign teams competed in that event. Additionally, for the Zahir Naseer Memorial Invitational Tournament held in January 2023, the MBA reportedly secured another MVR 195,371.40 (USD 12,699) for

similar expenses, raising concerns about the wrongful acquisition of funds.

The MBA has denied the allegations. General Secretary Visham Rasheed stated that no foreign teams were brought in for the national tournament and refuted claims of seeking funds for such purposes. The ACC is now reviewing the evidence to determine the validity of the accusations and potential misuse of public funds. [the edition]

Maldives: Police intensify investigation into RDC corruption case, seize electronics

(lm) Maldives Police have seized electronic devices during searches of locations linked to former Road Development Corporation (RDC) Managing Director Moosa Ali Manik and former Chief Financial Officer Yasir Hassan, as part of a corruption investigation dating back to former President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih's administration. The case centers on allegations of misappropriated RDC funds amounting to MVR 14 million (USD 910,000) funneled through personal accounts between 2018 and 2022.

The Maldives Monetary Authority's Financial Intelligence Unit flagged suspicious deposits into Yasir's account totaling MVR 13 million (USD 845,000). Investigators allege that the funds, linked to 216 transactions involving various individuals and companies, were misappropriated for personal use. Of the total amount, MVR 11 million (USD 715,000) was tied to a single account, with smaller amounts deposited into others.

Police have reported that the seized electronics will be analyzed to aid in the ongoing investigation. Both Moosa and Yasir deny the allegations, with Moosa criticizing the investigation and maintaining that no corruption occurred.

The criminal court has also ordered the seizure of Moosa's and Yasir's passports, citing intelligence reports suggesting Moosa's financial capacity to live abroad could hinder evidence collection. The probe has previously implicated other individuals, including former Economic Minister and Maldivian Democratic Party Chairman Fayyaz Ismail, who was questioned earlier this year for allegedly receiving funds tied to RDC. Fayyaz claimed the payment was a loan. Investigations are ongoing. [the edition 1] [the edition 2]

Maldives: Allegations of falsified party switching spark concerns

(sl/lm) The main opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) has raised alarm over alleged falsifications in party membership transfers, accusing the ruling People's National Congress (PNC) of using fraudulent methods to boost its registry.

The Elections Commission (EC) has acknowledged receiving complaints about unauthorized switching of individuals to different political parties, including the PNC, but stated that such cases remain infrequent. EC Member Hassan Zakariya assured that the reported incidents are being investigated.

The MDP claims to have received numerous complaints from members, including national council members, alleging they were wrongfully listed as PNC members without their consent. In a press statement, the opposition party accused the PNC of forging membership forms and exploiting personal data obtained from government databases. The MDP has urged the EC to enhance safeguards against such practices and investigate the use of falsified forms. Additionally, they called on authorities to take strict action against those responsible for these alleged violations.

One high-profile case involves Mohamed Thoriq, a long-time MDP member and former Heritage State Minister, who filed a police report asserting that his signature was forged to register him as a PNC member. Thoriq's letter to Police Commissioner Ali Shujau, outlining the allegations, has gained traction on social media, further fueling public discourse on the issue. [the edition 1] the edition 2]

Maldives: Indian laborers appeal for repatriation as authorities and Indian High Commission intervene

(lm) A group of Indian construction workers employed by Renaatus, a Maldives-registered Indian company, has sought help through a video message citing unpaid wages and harsh conditions. The workers, brought to work on the USD 17 million (MVR 262 million) Gan International Airport development project financed by India's EXIM Bank, include 35 from Odisha and 4 from Tamil Nadu, who were dismissed effective December 5.

The Labour Relations Authority (LRA) confirmed that approximately 40 workers have not received wages for

one month and ten days. Both the LRA and the Indian High Commission are working to resolve the issue. Renaatus has assured the High Commission that outstanding salaries will be settled shortly, and repatriation arrangements will follow. Reports indicate that Renaatus employs 196 Indian laborers in total, and the Indian High Commission is facilitating the return of those seeking repatriation. [the edition 1] [the edition 2]

Maldives: Islamic Ministry reiterates ban on celebrating non-Islamic festivals

(lm) Prior to Christmas, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs in the Maldives has reminded the public that celebrating festivals of other religions is illegal in the country. A circular issued by the ministry urged employers of foreigners and those involved in tourism to ensure compliance with the Religious Unity Regulations.

The regulations prohibit public religious activities by non-Muslims and bar Maldivians from participating in such events. The ministry emphasized that only Islamic practices are permitted in public spaces and called on guesthouse operators to ensure tourists adhere to social norms, including appropriate dress codes. [the edition]

Maldives: Immigration detains 25 expatriates in operations targeting illegal residency

(lm) Maldives Immigration, in collaboration with the police, detained 25 expatriates living and working illegally during operations at Heenaamage Parking Area and the Local Market, areas known for high expatriate presence. The raids were conducted following tips received via the Immigration Watch portal.

Immigration Controller Mohamed Shamaan Waheed and Deputy Controller Ahmed Ashfan participated in the operations. This follows a similar operation earlier in the week, where 23 expatriates were detained at the Local Market. [the edition]

Maldives: Police investigate allegations of journalist being forced to delete arrest photos

(lm) The Maldives Police Service has launched an investigation into allegations that officers forced a journalist to delete photos taken during an arrest in Male' on December 29. Shama Shuaib, a journalist with Aslu TV, reported being compelled to delete the images despite displaying a valid press card. They claimed officers threatened arrest if they did not comply, raising concerns about press freedom violations. [the edition]

Maldives: Zakat Fund achieves record income of USD 6.37 million in 2024

(lm) The Maldivian Zakat Fund has collected a record MVR 98 million (USD 6.37 million) this year, the highest income ever recorded, according to Islamic Minister Dr. Mohamed Shaheem Ali Saeed. The minister attributed the increase to public awareness and the establishment of a dedicated Zakat Agency by President Dr. Mohamed Muizzu's administration in December 2023.

The fund provides financial aid for medical treatment, higher education, and humanitarian assistance. This year, it supported Thalassemia patients' bone marrow transplants abroad and contributed USD 100,000 to aid people in Gaza. The Islamic Ministry aims to surpass MVR 100 million next year to enhance support for beneficiaries in accordance with Shari'ah principles. [the edition]

Maldives: Inflation rises in Q3, with further increases predicted for next year

(lm) The Maldives Monetary Authority (MMA) reported a rise in inflation during the third quarter of 2024, with rates increasing from 0.3 percent in Q2 to 1.3 percent in Q3. Food, healthcare, and energy prices saw significant hikes, with fish prices rising by 10.4 percent and vegetable prices by 17.4 percent due to supply shortages of items like onions, peppers, and lemons. Healthcare costs increased due to higher consultation fees, though medicine prices declined. In the energy sector, electricity prices rose by 4.7 percent, contributing to a 3.3 percent increase in energy costs, despite a drop in petrol prices.

The MMA predicts inflation will exceed the Finance Ministry's forecast of 3.9 percent in 2025, expecting rates to peak at 5.2 percent in Q2 before declining slightly to 4.7 percent in Q3. Rising commodity prices

driven by changes in subsidies are expected to be a key factor in the inflationary trend. [the edition]

Maldives: Tourism Minister targets 15 percent increase in arrivals for 2025

(lm) Tourism Minister Ibrahim Faisal has set a goal to boost tourist arrivals to the Maldives by 15 percent in 2025, following a record-breaking year for the country's tourism sector. The announcement coincided with the arrival of the two millionth tourist, marking a historic milestone.

Minister Faisal highlighted key achievements, including February's record of 217,000 arrivals, the highest monthly total in the nation's history, and the fastest attainment of the one million tourist mark. Despite earlier challenges, such as a decline in the Indian market, collaborative efforts by the Tourism Ministry, Maldives Marketing and Public Relations Corporation (MMPRC), and other stakeholders have revitalized the sector.

MMPRC CEO Ibrahim Shiury emphasized plans to diversify the Maldives' appeal beyond honeymoon tourism, targeting sports and educational tourism to expand market reach and achieve next year's ambitious target. The initiative aligns with President Dr. Mohamed Muizzu's vision to further elevate the Maldives as a global tourism destination. [the edition]

Maldives: Muli Airport to begin operations in March 2025 following final preparations

(sl) During the administration of President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, a contract was awarded to the Maldives Transport and Contracting Company (MTCC) for MVR 212 million (approximately USD 13.8 million) to develop Muli Airport on Meemu Atoll within a year. However, budgetary constraints delayed the project beyond the initial timeline.

Ahmed Mubin, managing director of the regional airports company, stated that all construction work at the airport has been completed. He added that final finishing work on the terminal and control tower is ongoing, with operations, including test flights, scheduled to begin on March 1, 2025. The government recently transferred the management of Muli Airport to the regional airports company. [the edition]

Maldives: Illegal vessel intercepted using drone technology

(lm) A foreign vessel illegally operating in the Maldivian Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) was intercepted during a special operation. The Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF) located the vessel using an Air Corp drone, leading to its capture by the Coast Guard. Details regarding the vessel's origin or its exact location within the EEZ were not disclosed.

This marks the second instance of a drone-assisted interception in Maldivian waters within a month. The military's drone operations, headquartered in N. Maafaru, began in March 2024, with plans to expand military bases to Sh. Funadhoo and Addu City. [the edition]

Nepal: Ruling Nepali Congress, CPN-UML begin discussions on constitution amendment, security delivery

(lm) Nepal's ruling parties, the Nepali Congress and the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist) (CPN-UML), have initiated discussions on amending the country's constitution. This move fulfills a key commitment made during the formation of the coalition government in July. The proposed amendments aim to address the challenges identified in the constitution's decade-long implementation.

The two parties are exploring the creation of a political or non-political task force to identify areas for constitutional revision. Home Minister Ramesh Lekhak emphasized the importance of inclusiveness and political stability in the amendment process, which will involve a comprehensive review and consultations with opposition parties.

In parallel, Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli held a meeting with the CPN-UML secretariat, where he briefed party leaders on the current political landscape, government performance, and his recent visit to China. Discussions focused on improving government service delivery and preparing for the party's central committee meeting, scheduled for January 5-6. A six-member task force has already been formed to provide policy recommendations on service delivery, while another team is tasked with advancing pending bills in Parliament.

The ruling coalition's seven-point agreement includes a commitment to review the constitution, improve

governance, and address critical legislative issues. Meanwhile, the Maoist Centre, the main opposition party, is also preparing its stance on the constitutional amendment, with discussions expected to intensify in the coming months. [The Kathmandu Post 1] [The Kathmandu Post 2]

Nepal: RSP chair Rabi Lamichhane suspended as lawmaker over money laundering charges

(lm) Rabi Lamichhane, chair of the Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) and former home minister, has been suspended from his parliamentary position following charges under Nepal's Money Laundering Prevention Act 2008. The allegations link Lamichhane to the Suryadarshan Cooperative fraud case, which embezzled over NPR 2.7 billion (USD 19.71 million). If convicted, he faces up to 15 years of imprisonment along with hefty fines. [The Kathmandu Post 1]

The Kaski District Attorney's Office has filed charges against Lamichhane and 30 others, accusing them of cooperative fraud, organized crime, and money laundering. Prosecutors allege Lamichhane collaborated with Gitendra Babu Rai, chairman of Suryadarshan Cooperative, to divert funds from multiple cooperatives, including Swarnalaxmi and Sahara. Lamichhane is accused of using the misappropriated funds for personal and business ventures, including the Gorkha Media Network, with which he maintained financial ties despite claiming disassociation. [The Kathmandu Post 2] [The Kathmandu Post 3]

Gitendra Babu Rai is further accused of channeling NPR 184.8 million (USD 1.35 million) into cryptocurrency through platforms like Binance, facilitated by accomplices Lila Pachhai and Bishwabikram Rai, a non-resident Nepali in Malaysia. Investigators claim the funds were used for property acquisitions and digital asset transactions, violating money laundering laws and cooperative regulations. [The Kathmandu Post 4]

The Federal Parliament Secretariat has formalized Lamichhane's suspension following notification from Kaski police. The RSP has appointed Vice-Chair DP Aryal as acting chair and is preparing to select a new parliamentary leader. Prosecutors are seeking penalties for all involved, including 2 to 15 years of imprisonment for money laundering, additional jail terms for organized crime, and fines double the

embezzled amounts. Asset confiscations are also being pursued. [The Kathmandu Post 5]

Nepal: National Assembly leaders emphasize strengthening federalism

(lm) Leaders and lawmakers from Nepal's National Assembly, along with experts, convened in Kathmandu to discuss challenges and improvements in implementing the federal system adopted in 2017. The event, titled “Federalism, National Assembly and the Tasks Ahead,” highlighted shortcomings in the system and emphasized enhancing provincial and local governance.

National Assembly Chair Narayan Prasad Dahal acknowledged gaps in fulfilling the expectations of economic prosperity and social justice under federalism. Vice-Chair Bimala Ghimire stressed the upper house's role in empowering provinces. Presentations and discussions by officials and experts, including former lawmaker Khim Lal Devkota, focused on addressing provincial issues and improving federal practices. Participants called for collaborative efforts to strengthen Nepal's federal structure. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Government withdraws controversial bill to grant amnesty for political-criminal offenses

(lm) The Nepalese government has withdrawn a contentious provision from the ‘Bill to Amend Some Nepal Acts’ that aimed to allow the withdrawal of criminal cases committed under political cover. The amendment, proposed in Section 116 of the Criminal Procedure Code-2017, sought to enable case withdrawals for individuals associated with violent political protests who are now operating peacefully under constitutional law.

Law Minister Ajay Kumar Chaurasiya cited concerns about fostering impunity as the rationale for the withdrawal. The provision faced backlash, including from the National Human Rights Commission, which warned it could enable conflict-era human rights violations to be politically justified. Main opposition Maoist Centre lawmakers, however, criticized the move, arguing it undermines past agreements with political groups.

The bill had stirred controversy due to suspicions that it targeted insurgency-era cases, including crimes involving Maoist Centre leaders and security forces. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Supreme Court blocks 'People's War' terminology in government documents

(lm) The Supreme Court of Nepal has issued an interim order banning the use of the term 'janayuddha' (People's War) in government documents, marking the second legal setback for the main opposition Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre) this year. The Constitutional Bench ruled that the term contradicts the spirit of Nepal's Constitution, which refers to the 1996-2006 Maoist insurgency as an 'armed conflict.'

The decision follows a petition filed by an insurgency victim, who argued that the term glorifies violence. The ruling affects references in national and provincial budgets and aligns with a previous decision annulling the declaration of Falgun 1 as 'People's War Day.' The Maoist Centre has criticized the decision, calling it undemocratic, while the court plans a final hearing before issuing a definitive verdict. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Lawmakers advocate ban on politically-affiliated trade unions in civil service

(lm) Lawmakers from multiple parties have called for the dissolution of politically-affiliated trade unions in Nepal's civil service, proposing instead the establishment of a single umbrella trade union to represent all civil servants. Speaking at the State Affairs and Good Governance Committee, Nepali Congress chief whip Shyam Kumar Ghimire emphasized the need to prevent political influence within the bureaucracy, arguing that trade unions tied to political parties undermine societal benefit.

Rastriya Prajatantra Party whip Bina Lama went further, suggesting the complete abolition of trade unions in the civil service to enhance bureaucratic efficiency. Experts, however, noted Nepal's international obligations to allow trade unions and proposed a unified, non-partisan trade union model as seen in countries like Germany.

The discussion, part of deliberations on the draft Federal Civil Service Act, also touched on term limits for reservation quotas in civil service appointments and a two-year cooling-off period for retiring government officials seeking roles in other organizations. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: CPN-UML expels Bhim Rawal, suspends two leaders over land donation dispute

(lm) Nepal's ruling Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist), or CPN-UML, has expelled senior leader and former vice-chair Bhim Rawal over alleged actions against the party's official line. The expulsion stems from Rawal's opposition to the party's acceptance of land donated by Min Bahadur Gurung, owner of Bhatbhateni Supermarket, for its headquarters. The land donation, initially challenged in court, was cleared by the Supreme Court.

In addition to Rawal's expulsion, the party suspended leaders Binda Pandey and Usha Kiran Timilsina for six months for similar dissent regarding the donation. [The Kathmandu Post 1]

Rawal condemned his expulsion as undemocratic and pledged to launch a nationwide campaign to expose Chairman KP Sharma Oli's "authoritarian repression." He accused Oli of sidelining dissenting voices within the party. Rawal hinted at the possibility of forming a new political party after concluding his campaign. The CPN-UML Secretariat defended the decision, claiming Rawal's actions weakened the party's unity. [The Kathmandu Post 2]

Nepal: Experts recommend cooling-off period for retired bureaucrats seeking constitutional roles

(lm) During discussions on the Federal Civil Service Bill under review in Nepal's House of Representatives, experts proposed introducing a mandatory cooling-off period for retired civil servants before they can assume constitutional or government roles. Former officials emphasized that such a provision would uphold the integrity of appointments and prevent constitutional commissions from becoming post-retirement positions for bureaucrats.

Recommendations included a three-year cooling-off period, transparency in asset declarations, and stricter rules for officials with foreign permanent residency. Critics highlighted that the draft bill replicates older laws, undermining federal principles and prioritizing employee benefits over public accountability. Experts also called for predictable transfer policies, retirement at 60, and age limits for entry into the civil service. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: NHRC questions political influence in transitional justice appointments

(lm) The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) criticized the current recommendation committee structure, dominated by political party representatives, for failing to ensure merit-based selection of office bearers for Nepal's transitional justice commissions. The committee, tasked with recommending a chairperson and members for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Commission of Investigation on Enforced Disappeared Persons, failed to finalize the selection within its two-month tenure.

The impasse stems from political interference, with major parties pushing for their affiliates in key positions. Critics argue that such practices undermine the commissions' integrity and Nepal's peace process. Victims' groups expressed mixed reactions, with some accusing the committee of negligence, while others supported its refusal to endorse politically motivated candidates.

The failure leaves two options: forming a new recommendation committee or extending the tenure of the existing one. International stakeholders, including the United Nations, are engaging with Nepalese authorities to address the deadlock. The NHRC suggested that it could independently select qualified office bearers if given the responsibility. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Shekhar Koirala launches bid for Nepali Congress presidency ahead of 15th general convention

(lm) Senior Nepali Congress leader Shekhar Koirala has unofficially started his campaign for the party presidency, targeting the 15th general convention scheduled for December 2025. Koirala began his campaign in Sudurpaschim Province, a stronghold of

current party president Sher Bahadur Deuba, signaling his intent to gain support from Deuba's camp.

Koirala, who lost to Deuba in the 2021 election, aims to consolidate his position as the race intensifies. General Secretary Gagan Kumar Thapa is also considered a potential contender but has not officially declared his candidacy. Internal delays, including unresolved issues in active membership distribution, cast doubt on the convention happening on time.

Both Koirala and Thapa are working to attract leaders from the Deuba faction as shifting alliances reshape party dynamics. While Deuba remains noncommittal, other candidates, including Dr. Shashanka Koirala, could emerge. Calls for unity within the Koirala-Thapa faction persist, as leaders stress the need to maximize influence in the party's central bodies during the next election. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: NID officer under scrutiny in police office assistant's murder

(lm) Police are investigating the murder of a 40-year-old police office assistant, found shot dead in a car in Jitpur Simara Sub-Metropolitan City. The vehicle belonged to an inspector in the National Investigation Department, who is under surveillance but not in custody.

The case has sparked protests from his family and villagers, demanding a thorough investigation. Authorities continue to investigate, with no arrests yet made. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Delays in Pokhara and Gautam Buddha Airport probe reports raise suspicions

(lm) Two subcommittees of Nepal's Public Accounts Committee, formed six months ago to investigate alleged irregularities in the construction of Gautam Buddha International Airport and Pokhara International Airport, have yet to finalize their reports. Allegations include inflated land acquisition costs and irregularities in the tender process, implicating major political parties.

The construction of Gautam Buddha International Airport cost USD 76.1 million, excluding land acquisition, with funding from the Asian Development

Bank, OPEC Fund, and the government. Originally scheduled for completion in 2017, it was delayed to 2021. Pokhara International Airport was funded by a USD 215.96 million loan from China EXIM Bank and faced similar delays, with costs escalating to NPR 25.34 billion (USD 184.98 million).

While panel leaders cite technical delays, some members allege deliberate stalling due to high-level political involvement. The Commission for Investigation of Abuse of Authority is also reviewing documents. Despite being labeled projects of national pride, both airports struggle to attract regular international flights. Reports are now expected by mid-January. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Public debt reaches USD 18.3 billion as interest payments surpass development budget

(rs) Nepal's public debt has reached NPR 2.5 trillion (USD 18.3 billion), constituting 43.69 percent of the country's GDP, according to the Public Debt Management Office's latest report. In the first five months of the fiscal year, an additional NPR 58.31 billion was added to the debt, with debt service payments amounting to NPR 170.49 billion (USD 1.25 billion) as of mid-December 2024.

The government allocated NPR 402 billion (USD 2.94 billion) for debt servicing in the current fiscal year, surpassing the NPR 352.35 billion (USD 2.58 billion) allocated for development projects. Debt servicing expenditures are nearly 4.5 times higher than capital spending, which stands at NPR 40.8 billion (USD 298 million) as of December 15.

International debt accounts for NPR 1.22 trillion (USD 8.92 billion), or 21.34 percent of total debt, while external debt obligations represent NPR 1.27 trillion (USD 9.29 billion), or 22.35 percent. The government has mobilized NPR 192.29 billion (USD 1.41 billion) in loans so far this fiscal year, meeting 35.15 percent of its annual target of NPR 547 billion (USD 4 billion).

Debt servicing now eclipses development spending, raising concerns about the sustainability of Nepal's fiscal strategy and its ability to prioritize infrastructure and growth-oriented projects. [The Rising Nepal]

Nepal: Education budget allocation raises questions about efficiency and decentralization

(rs) Nepal's Ministry of Education allocated NPR 203.66 billion (USD 1.48 billion) for the fiscal year 2024-25, with 28.33 percent directed to federal programs, 2.26 percent to provinces, and 69.41 percent to local governments. However, spending patterns reveal significant inefficiencies and limited flexibility.

At the federal level, the University Grants Commission received the largest share, primarily for operational activities rather than research and innovation. The budget also prioritized pensions (32.93 percent) and centralized projects like the President's Education Reform Programme, which has faced criticism for bypassing local decision-making and favoring certain constituencies.

Provinces, receiving only 2.26 percent of the budget, saw most funds directed toward vocational education and technical training through the Council for Technical Education and Vocational Training (78.4 percent). Meanwhile, local governments, managing 69.41 percent of the total education budget, spent 78.21 percent on teacher salaries, leaving minimal resources for infrastructure, digital learning, or innovative programs.

Programs addressing student retention and malnutrition, such as day meal initiatives, received only 5.99 percent of the local budget, while textbook grants accounted for 2.7 percent. Less than 2 percent was allocated to school construction and modernization, constraining efforts to improve educational quality.

The rigid budgeting structure, with over 91 percent of funds locked into predefined programs, limits local governments' autonomy to address specific community needs. Experts argue for a more diversified and flexible allocation model, aligning with international best practices, to enhance the efficiency and equity of Nepal's education system. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Bagmati Province struggles with low budget utilization in first five months of fiscal year

(rs) Bagmati Province has spent only 11.42 percent of its allocated NPR 64.54 billion (USD 472.74 million) budget for the fiscal year 2024/25 during the first five

months, according to the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Planning. This represents NPR 7.37 billion (USD 54.56 million), with capital expenditure significantly lagging behind recurrent spending.

The Ministry of Physical Infrastructure Development, which received the largest allocation of NPR 22.64 billion (USD 167.53 million), spent only 6.64 percent (NPR 1.50 billion, USD 11.10 million) of its budget in the first five months. Provincial Legislature and the Office of the Attorney General reported the highest expenditure rates among provincial entities.

Historical trends in Bagmati Province show slow spending until April, with over half of the budget typically expended in the final quarter. Delays in project approvals, multi-year guidelines, and bidding processes were cited as key reasons for the low expenditure, alongside challenges related to project implementation and site conflicts. [The Rising Nepal]

Nepal: Tribeni Municipality spends millions on temporary bridges washed away annually

(lm) Tribeni Municipality in Bajura remains isolated from the national road network every monsoon due to the lack of a permanent bridge over the Budhiganga River. The municipality spends NPR 3 million (USD 21,900) annually to construct temporary wooden bridges, which are swept away during the rainy season. Over the past seven years, this has totaled NPR 21 million (USD 153,300).

Despite a 2021 agreement with BKOI Builders Private Limited under the Mahakali Bridge Project to construct a permanent bridge for NPR 160 million (USD 1.17 million), the contractor has yet to begin work, causing frustration among residents and local officials. The absence of a reliable bridge affects pregnant women, the elderly, and those needing emergency care, while traders face increased costs due to transportation challenges. Local leaders continue to cite the bridge as a political priority, but progress remains stalled. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Farmers in Chumnubri struggle with wildlife attacks on livestock

(rs) Farmers in Chumnubri Rural Municipality, Gorkha, face escalating challenges as snow leopards, wolves,

and bears attack their domesticated animals. Over the past 15 months, 39 horses, 52 yaks, and chauris were killed by predators, with snow leopards and wolves identified as the main culprits. The attacks, concentrated in areas like Samagaun and Chhekampar, have led to significant financial losses, discouraging farmers from raising livestock.

The Manaslu Conservation Area, spanning 1,663 square kilometers, is home to a diverse range of wildlife, including snow leopards whose population is reportedly increasing in the region. Despite this, farmers say authorities have neither implemented adequate protective measures nor provided sufficient compensation. Relief payments, capped at NPR 60,000 per animal, fall short of market values, exacerbating farmers' struggles.

In fiscal year 2023-24, wolves killed 53 livestock, snow leopards claimed 23, and bears accounted for five deaths. This follows similar figures from 2022-23, reflecting a persistent issue. [The Kathmandu Post]

Pakistan: Tensions persist amid government-PTI negotiations on political and judicial reforms

(an/lm) Efforts to resolve Pakistan's prolonged political crisis remain fraught with tension as the government and the opposition Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party continue negotiations over political and judicial reforms. Central to the dispute are the events of May 9, 2023, when protests led to attacks on military and government installations, and the subsequent imprisonment of PTI leader Imran Khan.

The government, represented by a negotiation committee led by Senator Irfan Siddiqui, insists that May 9's violence was "unforgivable." Information Minister Ataullah Tarar reiterated that convictions, including that of Khan's nephew, were based on fair trials, though military court proceedings have faced scrutiny from international organizations. [Arab News 1]

The PTI has denied seeking concessions for Khan during negotiations. Senior PTI leader Shibli Faraz asserted that Khan remains committed to his principles, rejecting any proposals for his release while political prisoners remain detained. Khan himself, in a message from prison, rejected a backchannel offer of house arrest in exchange for political negotiations. He urged overseas Pakistanis to suspend remittances as a

protest against what he described as an assault on democracy. [Arab News 2] [Arab News 3]

The PTI has demanded the formation of judicial commissions to investigate the May 9 and November 26 protests, alongside the release of political prisoners. The party has set a January 31, 2025, deadline for reaching an agreement, warning of potential civil disobedience if the government fails to meet their demands. [DAWN]

The government has called for written demands from the PTI to ensure clarity in the negotiation process. While the first round of talks was described as positive, both parties remain deeply divided. The next round of negotiations is scheduled for January 2, 2025, as the government seeks to address the crisis without conceding to PTI's ultimatums.

Pakistan: President Zardari, Prime Minister Sharif pledge cooperation amid coalition strains

(an/lm) Amid tensions within Pakistan's ruling coalition, President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif met in Islamabad to reaffirm their commitment to legislative reforms and collaboration with political stakeholders. The meeting, attended by key figures, addressed pressing political, economic, and security challenges. Both leaders emphasized the importance of unity and legislative progress for national development.

However, the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), led by Chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari, expressed dissatisfaction over unmet agreements and coalition dynamics. Prime Minister Sharif has formed a committee, led by Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar, to address the PPP's grievances, as concerns about a potential withdrawal from the coalition linger. [DAWN]

Most recently, Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari criticized the federal government's Internet restrictions, highlighting inconsistent explanations ranging from "firewall testing" to "infrastructure issues." Speaking in Larkana, he called for a "digital bill of rights" to protect Internet freedoms. Since June, the government has implemented a national firewall to combat "anti-state propaganda" and "blasphemous content," slowing Internet speeds and tightening regulations on virtual private networks (VPNs). These measures have disrupted freelancers and online businesses, raising concerns about their impact on Pakistan's digital economy.

Critics, including PPP leaders, argue the restrictions disproportionately target dissent, especially from supporters of former Prime Minister Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). Freelancers, who contributed USD 397.3 million in foreign remittances during the fiscal year 2021-22, have struggled to complete assignments due to connectivity issues. Minister of State for IT and Telecom Shaza Fatima Khawaja defended the measures, citing national security concerns, but assured efforts to minimize industry disruptions. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Madrasa registration law finalized amid JUI-F pressure and political bargaining

(lm) Pakistan's President Asif Ali Zardari has signed the long-delayed Societies Registration (Amendment) Bill 2024 into law, addressing contentious issues surrounding madrasa registration. The bill, which mandates all religious seminaries to register within specific timelines, had been a focal point of negotiations between the government and the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI-F), a key coalition partner. The legislation, initially passed by parliament in October, faced delays due to the president's reservations about its potential international implications.

Key amendments to the law allow seminaries the flexibility to register with either the local Deputy Commissioner's office or the Directorate General of Religious Education (DGRE). The revisions also shift regulatory oversight from the education ministry to the DC offices, addressing demands from JUI-F. This development stems from a political deal in which the JUI-F supported the government's 26th Constitutional Amendment in exchange for these concessions.

Despite initial resistance and threats of protests from JUI-F leader Maulana Fazlur Rehman, the government moved swiftly to finalize the ordinance, signaling its commitment to preserving coalition stability. The amended law was signed following the federal cabinet's approval and is expected to come into force in the federal capital through a presidential ordinance. Parliament now has 120 days to ratify the ordinance into permanent law.

The debate over madrasa registration highlights deeper divides among clerics. While proponents of the DGRE model, including the Pakistan Ulema Council, argue that seminaries, as educational institutions, should remain under the education ministry, JUI-F and its allies pushed for decentralized control, citing

autonomy and religious sensitivities. This clash underscores the competing narratives over who should regulate Pakistan's estimated 18,600 madrasas, which educate over 2.2 million students. [Arab News] [DAWN]

Pakistan: Divisions among legal fraternity over 26th Constitutional Amendment intensify

(an/lm) The 26th Constitutional Amendment has sparked sharp divisions within Pakistan's legal community, with opposing factions debating its impact on judicial independence and the judiciary's structure.

The 26th Constitutional Amendment in Pakistan, enacted in October 2024, introduced significant reforms to the judicial appointment process, altering the traditional seniority-based selection of the Chief Justice of Pakistan (CJP). Under the new law, a Special Parliamentary Committee nominates the CJP from the three most senior Supreme Court judges, with the appointed CJP serving a fixed three-year term.

The All-Pakistan Lawyers Action Committee (APLAC) has demanded that petitions challenging the amendment be heard by a full court bench, asserting that this step is a constitutional necessity to preserve public confidence in the judiciary. The APLAC has criticized the amendment's implementation by what it calls an "executive-dominated" Judicial Commission of Pakistan (JCP), arguing that it violates Article 175(3) of the Constitution, which enshrines judicial independence.

The APLAC also rebuked statements from the Supreme Court Bar Association (SCBA) and Sindh High Court Bar Association (SHCBA), describing their defense of the amendment as misleading and factually inaccurate. The APLAC maintained that its signatories, including prominent former SCBA and bar council leaders, are legitimate representatives of the legal community, chosen through democratic processes. It warned that discrediting these senior lawyers undermines the unity of the profession and the principles of democracy and representation that bar associations uphold. [DAWN] [Pakistan Observer]

In contrast, the SCBA, led by President Mian Rauf Atta, has endorsed the amendment and expressed confidence in the JCP and the Constitutional Bench. The SCBA dismissed APLAC's criticisms as politically motivated and emphasized that the amendment aims to enhance judicial transparency.

The debate over the amendment reflects deeper tensions about the role of executive influence in judicial matters. The APLAC pointed to historical lessons from Pakistan's Lawyers' Movement of 2007, warning that executive interference could lead to a judicial crisis. The SCBA, however, maintains that the amendment strengthens governance within the judiciary. [The Express Tribune]

Pakistan: Consensus reached in violence-hit Kurram district; solidarity protests in Karachi

(lm) Efforts to end tribal and sectarian violence in Kurram district, a volatile region in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, have advanced as rival factions reportedly reached a consensus on contentious issues. A formal agreement, mediated by a grand jirga of political and tribal elders, is expected to be signed in the coming days. This development follows weeks of clashes that began in November, killing at least 136 people and causing severe humanitarian crises, including road closures that restricted access to food, medicine, and fuel.

The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government has initiated measures to stabilize the region, including dismantling private bunkers and establishing a special police force to secure the Parachinar-Peshawar road. A helicopter service has been deployed to deliver aid and evacuate stranded residents. However, concerns remain about the durability of the peace agreement, with fears of sabotage by vested interests. [Arab News 1]

Meanwhile, solidarity protests organized by the Majlis Wahdat-e-Muslimeen (MWM), a Shia organization, have paralyzed Karachi for over a week. Demonstrators have blocked 13 key roads, disrupting daily life and causing significant traffic congestion. Protesters aim to draw attention to the humanitarian crisis in Kurram, demanding immediate government intervention to reopen the Tall-Parachinar Highway, which has been closed for three months, cutting off over 100 areas in Upper Kurram from the rest of the country. [Arab News 2] [Geo News]

Pakistan: Authorities arrest human smuggler linked to Indian agent in Europe migration network

(mra/lm) Pakistan's Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) has dismantled a human smuggling network linked to illegal migration to Europe, arresting key operatives involved in coordinating routes from Azerbaijan to Poland. The suspects were found to charge migrants USD 5,028.89 per person, with an advance of USD 898.02.

The arrests follow a tragic boat capsizing near Greece earlier this month, which claimed the lives of five Pakistani nationals. This incident has drawn parallels to last year's disaster off Pylos, Greece, where hundreds, including 262 Pakistanis, lost their lives. [Arab News]

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, in a high-level meeting, directed authorities to arrest all individuals involved in human smuggling within a week and enforce stricter visa checks and travel regulations. A committee, led by Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi, has been tasked with proposing sustainable solutions to counter human trafficking.

Sharif emphasized the importance of holding complicit government officials accountable and stressed the urgent need to repatriate the remains of the victims from Greece. [DAWN]

Pakistan: Pipeline explosion, Kuwaiti investment withdrawal surround oil industry

(sn) Pakistan's gas industry has endured an eventful week, beginning with an explosion that burst a gas pipeline in the Balochistan province on December 25, which suspended gas supply to a significant area of Pakistan's largest province. Following the attack, officers revealed that a bomb was found planted along the 18-inch pipeline, though the responsible party is yet to be identified. Attacks on Balochistan province pipelines are not uncommon, as militant groups and separatists fight against what they believe is the exploitation of natural resources by the government. The government denies these claims and has sought to develop the area with significant development works in response, though insurgency continues. [Arab News] [Dawn]

The sector suffered an additional setback as the Kuwait Foreign Petroleum Exploration Company began selling its assets, worth approximately USD 60 million, from Pakistan's oil and gas sector. The disinvestment is associated with an increasing frustration with the gas sector's fluctuating circular debt, which has reached USD 9.7 billion, and policy amendment delays that

spanned up to 12 months. The sale will be distributed to various Pakistani investors as the company looks to direct its investment outside of Pakistan. [Minute Mirror]

Pakistan: Atomic Energy Commission secures license for Chashma-5 nuclear plant

(mra) Pakistan's Atomic Energy Commission (PAEC) has received approval from the Pakistan Nuclear Regulatory Authority (PNRA) to construct the Chashma Nuclear Power Plant Unit 5 (C-5), the country's largest nuclear power facility.

The USD 3.7 billion project has a projected lifespan of 60 years and follows the success of two similarly designed Karachi Nuclear Power Plants (K-2 and K-3), which are already operational. The plant has also been approved by the National Economic Council's executive committee. [DAWN]

Pakistan: Cabinet approves policy guidelines for carbon market trade

(lm) Pakistan's federal cabinet has approved new policy guidelines for trading in carbon markets, aimed at establishing a regulatory framework for both voluntary and compliance-based carbon trading activities.

Carbon markets, mechanisms for trading greenhouse gas emission credits, serve as tools to mitigate climate change by channeling financial resources into emission reduction initiatives. Compliance markets are regulated, requiring participants to meet specific emissions obligations, while voluntary markets involve non-state actors such as companies and regions opting to offset emissions independently.

The guidelines align Pakistan’s approach with international standards and promote investment in eco-friendly technologies across sectors like energy, agriculture, and forestry. These efforts are consistent with Article 6 of the Paris Agreement, which enables developing countries to host emissions reduction projects and trade carbon credits internationally to generate revenue and attract investment for ambitious climate actions. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Prime Minister orders swift smart meter installation amid broader power sector reforms

(mra/lm) Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has announced comprehensive measures to address Pakistan's persistent energy challenges, focusing on both gas and electricity sectors. Amid complaints of gas shortages during winter, Sharif directed urgent reforms in the gas distribution system, emphasizing uninterrupted supply to domestic consumers. Officials reported improvements in load management, with gas supply hours extended to 5 AM–10 PM. However, regions like Balochistan, Pakistan's main gas-producing province, face disruptions due to militant attacks on pipelines, including a recent explosion near Quetta. [Arab News 1]

In parallel, Sharif ordered the swift installation of smart meters nationwide to enhance billing transparency and curb overbilling in the power sector. He condemned electricity theft and urged merit-based recruitment in power distribution companies to rebuild consumer trust. Power Minister Sardar Awais Ahmed Khan Leghari provided an update on broader reforms, including renegotiating Independent Power Producer (IPP) agreements. This has saved PKR 411 billion (USD 1.48 billion) so far, with projected savings of PKR 481 billion (USD 1.73 billion). Average electricity tariffs have dropped from PKR 48.70 (USD 0.17) per unit to PKR 44.04 (USD 0.16), benefiting domestic and industrial users alike. [Arab News 2]

In related updates, Power Minister Sardar Awais Ahmed Khan Leghari provided a comprehensive overview of the government’s ongoing power sector reforms, which aim to address longstanding inefficiencies and reduce consumer costs. A key initiative includes shifting the burden of circular debt from electricity bills to the national debt to alleviate the financial strain on consumers. Leghari emphasized the government's focus on privatizing electricity distribution through concession models, starting with the appointment of independent directors on the boards of distribution companies.

One of the most impactful reforms has been renegotiating agreements with Independent Power Producers (IPPs), which has already resulted in national savings of PKR 411 billion (USD 1.48 billion) in the first phase, with projected savings of PKR 481 billion (USD 1.73 billion) in subsequent negotiations. These efforts have contributed to significant tariff reductions. The average electricity price has decreased from PKR 48.70 (USD 0.17) per unit in June 2024 to PKR

44.04 (USD 0.16) per unit, offering relief to domestic consumers. Industrial tariffs have also been reduced from PKR 58.50 (USD 0.21) per unit to PKR 47.17 (USD 0.17) per unit, boosting industrial growth and job creation.

To further assist consumers, the Bijli Sahulat Package introduces special tariffs for households, industries, and commercial users. This initiative offers savings ranging from PKR 5.72 (USD 0.02) to PKR 26.00 (USD 0.09) per unit, demonstrating the government's commitment to reducing electricity costs. In Balochistan, the solarization of 27,000 agricultural tube wells at a cost of PKR 55 billion (USD 197.81 million), with 70 percent federal funding, aims to promote renewable energy and enhance agricultural productivity in the region.

The government is also prioritizing the modernization of the transmission network by establishing three specialized entities to manage energy infrastructure, ensure efficient transmission, and foster a competitive electricity market.

Looking to the future, the government plans to introduce an electric vehicle (EV) policy that will include special tariffs for EV charging. This policy aims to reduce reliance on imported fuels, lower greenhouse gas emissions, and foster economic growth through local manufacturing and infrastructure development. [DAWN]

Pakistan: Five-year economic transformation plan to be launched on December 31

(lm) Pakistan will launch its National Economic Transformation Plan on December 31, aiming to address critical economic challenges and lay the groundwork for sustainable growth. The plan is structured around the 5Es framework—exports, energy, economic growth, education, and equality—identified as key pillars for achieving long-term stability and progress.

Planning Minister Ahsan Iqbal emphasized the need for an export-driven economy, highlighting the importance of sectors like automation, nanotechnology, and artificial intelligence in reshaping future economic landscapes. Speaking at a ceremony in Lahore, he urged civil servants to prioritize efficient public management, describing civil service as a significant responsibility.

The plan comes as Pakistan struggles with persistent macroeconomic crises. Inflation peaked at 38 percent in May 2023 due to rising food and fuel prices, a depreciating currency, and historically low foreign exchange reserves. A USD 3 billion bailout from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 2023 narrowly averted sovereign default and stabilized the economy temporarily.

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has called for enhanced collaboration in trade, defense, and agriculture to attract foreign investment. Pakistan has strengthened its trade relations with countries like Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Russia, and Central Asian states to boost economic recovery. The transformation plan aims to capitalize on these efforts, promoting exports and fostering innovation as cornerstones of national economic development. [Arab News]

Pakistan: JI jirga advocates expanding trade with Iran, Afghanistan to support Balochistan's economy

(lm) Political and tribal leaders in Balochistan have called for expanding trade with neighboring Iran and Afghanistan to address unemployment and boost the local economy. Meeting at a jirga—a traditional assembly of tribal and community leaders used to resolve disputes and address issues—organized by Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) Balochistan in Quetta, participants highlighted the reliance of border communities on cross-border trade and emphasized the importance of a stable and open trade environment.

Leaders, including Maulana Hidayat-ur-Rehman of JI Balochistan, expressed concerns over the province's deteriorating security situation, citing rising target killings and law-and-order issues. They also pointed to shortages of basic services such as water, electricity, and gas, which they argued contribute to public hardship.

The jirga advocated resolving Balochistan's challenges through peaceful dialogue and the traditional jirga system, rather than conflict. Leaders further called for the removal of security checkposts on highways, which they said impede trade and mobility.

Criticizing the perceived neglect of Balochistan, the participants urged the government to ensure equitable resource allocation and address the province's pressing economic and social issues. [Business Recorder]

Pakistan: World’s third largest sesame exporter

(sn) Pakistan has become the third-largest exporter of sesame globally, as the Minister for National Food Security and Research, Rana Tanveer Hussain, announced that annual exports had reached 1.1 million tons. Hussain also announced the 366 percent increase in sesame export value over five years and a current annual export value of USD 1 billion. The success was attributed to Pakistan's agricultural and ministerial collaborations, highlighting Pakistan's ability to continue bolstering the industry. [Pakistan Observer]

Pakistan: Military reports nearly 400 soldiers, over 900 militants killed in 2024 counter-terrorism operations

(lm/mra) In 2024, Pakistan's military reported the deaths of 383 soldiers and 925 militants during extensive counter-terrorism operations across the nation, marking a significant year in its fight against escalating militant violence. Officials stated that security forces conducted 59,775 intelligence-based operations, achieving the highest annual militant kill count in five years. Among those killed, 73 were identified as "high-value targets."

The resurgence of violence, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Balochistan provinces, has been attributed to groups like Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and separatist ethnic militants. The TTP has intensified attacks following the breakdown of a fragile truce in November 2022. Balochistan, a critical area for China’s Belt and Road Initiative projects, has also experienced separatist strikes, which the government attributes to unfounded grievances over resource distribution. [Arab News]

In related updates, Pakistani security forces conducted an intelligence-based operation (IBO) in the Sararogha area of South Waziristan, killing at least 13 believed terrorists. The operation targeted militants reportedly involved in numerous terrorist activities, including attacks on security forces and the killing of civilians.

This operation follows a deadly confrontation in the Makeen district of South Waziristan on December 21, during which 16 Pakistani soldiers were killed while repelling a militant attack on a security checkpoint.

Eight militants were killed in the exchange. [DAWN] [The Express Tribune]

Pakistan: Two more Polio cases reported; 67 in 2024

(sn) Pakistan has reported two new polio cases, one in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Tank district and another in Sindh's Kashmore district, bringing the total to 67 cases in 2024. This includes 27 cases in Balochistan, the highest among provinces, followed by 19 cases each in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Sindh, and one case each in Punjab and Islamabad. Alongside Afghanistan, Pakistan remains one of the last two polio-endemic countries globally, facing persistent challenges in eradicating the disease. [The News International]

In response to the escalating situation, Pakistani health authorities launched a week-long anti-polio vaccination campaign in Balochistan on December 30. The campaign aims to immunize over 2.6 million children under the age of five across the province. More than 11,000 vaccination teams have been deployed to ensure door-to-door coverage. Officials have called on parents, citizens, and media outlets to support the effort.

Earlier this month, a sub-national polio vaccination campaign immunized over 42 million children across Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Azad Jammu and Kashmir, Gilgit-Baltistan, and Islamabad. Despite these efforts, misinformation about vaccines, opposition from religious hard-liners, and militant attacks on vaccination teams have continued to hinder progress. [Arab News]

Sri Lanka: Tamil Progressive Alliance plans independent contest in local government polls

(lm) The Tamil Progressive Alliance (TPA), a coalition representing Tamil and upcountry communities in Sri Lanka and an ally of the main opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), has announced its intent to contest Sri Lanka's upcoming local government elections under its own party symbol. TPA senior member and MP Palani Digambaram stated that while discussions will initially be held with the SJB to negotiate candidate slots in districts such as Badulla, the alliance is prepared to contest independently if a favorable arrangement is not reached.

Digambaram expressed concerns over the SJB's practice of prioritizing its own organizers as candidates, potentially sidelining TPA members. He emphasized that contesting independently could enhance TPA's chances of securing more seats in local bodies, particularly in districts like Badulla, where the party has a significant support base. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Cabinet of Ministers approves drafting of legislation against illegal poaching in territorial waters

(raa) Sri Lanka's Cabinet of Ministers has approved the drafting of a new bill to address illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing activities in the nation's territorial waters and high seas. This initiative will repeal and replace the Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Act No. 2 of 1996, which has been amended eight times but deemed insufficient to tackle current challenges.

A preliminary draft for the new legislation has been prepared by a committee comprising officials from the Ministry of Fisheries, the Department of Legal Drafting, the Attorney General's Department, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with technical support from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

The proposal, submitted by the Minister of Fisheries, Aquatic, and Marine Resources, aims to strengthen the legislative framework to combat IUU fishing effectively. The Legal Draftsman has been instructed to finalize the bill based on the prepared draft. [Ada Derana]

Sri Lanka: High-level discussion on framework for combating money laundering and terrorist financing

(raa/lm) Sri Lanka is advancing its efforts to combat money laundering and terrorism financing (AML/CFT) while upgrading the Financial Crimes Investigation Division (FCID) into a fully-fledged investigative arm, reflecting a comprehensive strategy to enhance financial security and law enforcement.

A high-level meeting, chaired by President Anura Kumara Dissanayake on December 23, 2024, reviewed preparations for the upcoming Mutual Evaluation (ME) by the Asia/Pacific Group on Money Laundering (APG). The Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU) presented an urgent action plan involving 24 institutions, focusing on

legal reforms, capacity building, enhanced inter-agency cooperation, and maintaining records to align with the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) standards.

The FATF is an international organization setting global benchmarks to combat money laundering, terrorist financing, and financial crimes. Sri Lanka is currently on the FATF "grey list," indicating enhanced monitoring for deficiencies in its AML/CFT frameworks. Removal from this list is critical to bolstering international confidence and attracting foreign investment.

To strengthen investigations, the government has announced a restructuring of the FCID. Public Security Minister Ananda Wijepala detailed plans to elevate the FCID to operate under a Senior Deputy Inspector General (DIG), alongside the Criminal Investigation Department (CID). A new Central Crime Investigation Bureau (CCIB) will be established to oversee all investigative units nationwide. This restructuring aims to address a backlog of 29,000 complaints while creating specialized provincial crime divisions for efficient case management.

President Dissanayake emphasized collaboration, accountability, and robust outcomes in the AML/CFT evaluation. The reforms, including the enhanced FCID and inter-agency coordination, are expected to streamline investigations and contribute to Sri Lanka's removal from the FATF grey list, thereby securing financial stability and fostering international trust.

Key stakeholders, including cabinet ministers, ministry secretaries, Central Bank officials, and the FIU, participated in the discussions. [Daily News] [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: SJB urges government to halt arbitrary transfers in public sector

(raa) The main opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) has urged the government to cease all arbitrary transfers occurring within both central and provincial government sectors without delay. In a statement released by SJB General Secretary and MP Ranjith Madduma Bandara, it has been observed that there appears to be a systematic strategy for transferring state officials across various divisions based on unreasonable and unjustifiable criteria.

This troubling trend reportedly affects critical positions, including Assistant Commissioners of Local Government, Secretaries of Local Government institutions, and Co-operative Assistant Development

Commissioners. The statement underscored that these arbitrary actions stand in stark contrast to the Government's stated commitment to maintaining the autonomy of the public service.

In response to these developments, the SJB has established a special investigative unit to review these incidents and has encouraged public participation in reporting incidents, whether anonymously or attributed. [Daily News]

Sri Lanka: CID summons Yoshitha Rajapaksa over government land ownership inquiry

(lm) The Criminal Investigation Department (CID) has summoned Yoshitha Rajapaksa, the second son of former President Mahinda Rajapaksa, to provide a statement regarding the ownership of a government-owned land in Kataragama.

The development follows a statement recorded on December 27 from Major Neville Wanniarachchi, the former personal security officer of Mahinda Rajapaksa, as part of the ongoing investigation. Yoshitha has been scheduled to appear before the CID on January 3, 2025. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: NPP MP Dr. Kaushalya Ariyarathne files CID complaint over false claims

(lm) National People's Power (NPP) MP Dr. Kaushalya Ariyarathne has lodged a complaint with the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) regarding false information circulated on social ion media. The misinformation includes personal attacks and baseless claims aimed at damaging her reputation.

Ariyarathne criticized the actions as an attempt to deter women from participating in politics, emphasizing that such tactics would not succeed. She affirmed her commitment to continue her political work, urging those behind the smear campaigns to "try harder." Authorities are now expected to investigate and take action against those responsible. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Health Ministry transfer raises procedural concerns

(lm) The Ministry of Health's decision to transfer a medical specialist from Sri Jayewardenepura General Hospital to the Castle Street Hospital for Women has raised questions over potential procedural violations.

The specialist, previously stationed at Elpitiya Base Hospital, was appointed to a senior role at Sri Jayewardenepura in September 2024 by former Health Minister Dr. Harini Amarasuriya. The three-year appointment, which became effective immediately, left an acting specialist in charge at Elpitiya.

The transfer to Castle Street Hospital has sparked criticism for bypassing the standard annual transfer list. Critics argue that no urgent need justifies the move, and the appointment reportedly lacks approval from the Public Service Commission (PSC). Without PSC clearance, serving simultaneously at a semi-government and a government hospital is considered irregular. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: 62 CEB employees reinstated after protest suspension

(lm) 62 employees of the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB), who were previously suspended for protesting against the privatization of the organization, have been reinstated following an order by Energy Minister Engineer Kumara Jayakody. The reinstatement includes the removal of all charges and penalties, including the cancellation of the requirement to pay eight months' salary arrears.

The employees had participated in a trade union protest in January, alleging plans to privatize the CEB. At that time, the then Power and Energy Minister, Kanchana Wijesekera, had instructed that action be taken against the protesting employees, including suspending those who caused inconvenience to consumers by refusing to work, despite electricity being declared an essential service. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Former provincial councilor arrested for alleged bribery

(raa) Former Western Provincial Councilor Salochana Gamage, affiliated with the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), and an entrepreneur were arrested

by the Bribery Commission in Pitakotte over a LKR 9 million (USD 30,600) bribery allegation.

The pair were reportedly apprehended at a restaurant in Pita Kotte while receiving the bribe from a businessman. The alleged bribe was intended to expedite compensation payments for a plot of land belonging to the complainant's relative, which had been seized by the Urban Development Authority.

According to the Bribery Commission, the suspects planned to use their influence to fast-track the compensation process. Investigations into the case are ongoing. [Daily News]

Sri Lanka: Excise chief shifts focus to major offenders in 2025

(lm) The newly appointed Excise Commissioner General, U. L. Udaya Kumara Perera, has directed officials to prioritize targeting large-scale offenders in the illicit liquor and narcotics trade, moving away from smaller cases that have minimal societal impact. He announced the cancellation of the traditional performance evaluation system, which required officers to meet quotas of 250 to 300 court cases annually, often leading to minor arrests.

Perera emphasized the need to dismantle major illicit liquor operations and narcotics networks, describing this shift as essential for maintaining law and order. Officers' performance will now be assessed based on the significance and impact of their operations rather than the quantity of cases filed.

Additionally, the Excise Department plans to revise its incentive system for officers conducting major raids. Previously, only those directly involved received a 25 percent allowance. The new system will reward entire units, mirroring the Sri Lanka Customs' reward structure, to encourage teamwork and impactful results. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Government yet to decide on assigning official vehicles to MPs

(lm) The Sri Lankan government has not yet determined when to assign official vehicles to the Members of Parliament (MPs), although a policy decision has been made to do so. Public Security Minister Ananda Wijepala explained that the

government is currently auctioning luxury vehicles, with most MPs using their personal vehicles for now.

While the decision to provide vehicles has been made, the Minister stated that the government has not yet decided when the vehicles will be assigned and clarified that no new vehicles would be imported for this purpose. Additionally, the government has decided to reduce benefits for MPs, including the discontinuation of permits for duty-free vehicle imports. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Minister highlights prior agreements on restructuring 99 percent of external debt

(lm) Minister of Labour Anil Jayantha Fernando stated that 99 percent of Sri Lanka's external debt restructuring agreements were achieved under the previous government, with the current administration handling only the remaining 1 percent, amounting to USD 300 million. This included restructuring debts with creditors such as Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Pakistan.

The bilateral debt restructuring was managed by the Official Creditor Committee (OCC), co-chaired by France, India, and Japan, and included China Exim Bank, China Development Bank, and other creditors. Key milestones included the OCC's agreement on terms in June 2024 and China's restructuring of loans in October 2023.

Regarding International Sovereign Bonds (ISBs), valued at USD 14.2 billion with USD 1.7 billion in interest, the previous government had reached agreements in principle in September 2024. The current administration finalized the ISB restructuring on December 20, 2024, issuing new bonds in exchange for existing ones.

The Minister credited these efforts with restoring economic stability, earning acknowledgment from rating agencies through upgraded credit ratings. He emphasized the government's commitment to steering the nation towards financial stability, with tangible improvements expected by the end of 2025. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Government to refund withholding tax for low-income depositors

(lm) The Sri Lankan government is developing a mechanism to refund the recently imposed 10 percent withholding tax for depositors earning less than LKR 150,000 (USD 510) in monthly deposit interest. The initiative seeks to address concerns about the financial burden on lower-income groups.

Currently, the 10 percent withholding tax is applied to all depositors. However, the forthcoming mechanism aims to exempt low-income depositors from the tax and refund amounts already collected from those below the income threshold. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Tourist arrivals surpass 2 million in 2024, marking significant recovery

(lm) Sri Lanka has achieved over 2 million tourist arrivals in 2024; this marks the fourth time in the country's history that annual tourist numbers have exceeded 2 million, with prior achievements in 2016, 2017, and 2018. With 195,127 tourists arriving in the first 26 days of December alone, the total is projected to exceed 250,000 by the month's end.

Sri Lanka's tourism sector has rebounded from challenges posed by the 2019 Easter attacks, the COVID-19 pandemic, and an economic crisis. The government's measures, including free visas for citizens of 39 countries, enhanced tourist safety, and streamlined online visa processes, have contributed to this recovery. Over 515,192 tourists have visited in the past three months, and efforts are underway to attract 3 million tourists annually by 2025. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Government employees to receive salary increase by next year

(lm) Deputy Minister of Economic Development, Anil Jayantha Fernando, confirmed that government employees, including teachers, will receive a salary increase by next year. The full details of the salary increments will be outlined in the 2025 budget proposals. Fernando emphasized that the increase is necessary due to the significant hardships faced by the public amidst the country's current economic challenges.

He stated that the decision is not politically motivated but is driven by the need to address the insufficiency of current salaries. Highlighting the impact of the

previous administration's economic policies, Fernando assured that the current government is committed to improving the situation, assuring citizens of a definite salary increase by next year. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Excise proposes 50 percent settlement for W. M. Mendis to restore production license

(lm) The Sri Lanka Excise Department has proposed a solution to the tax arrears issue of W. M. Mendis and Co. Ltd., a major liquor manufacturer, offering to restore its suspended production license if 50 percent of its defaulted tax arrears, amounting to LKR 5.8 billion (USD 16.3 million), is paid. Excise Commissioner General U. L. Udaya Kumara Perera introduced this proposal, which would require the company to settle LKR 3 billion (USD 8.15 million) to reactivate its license, which was suspended due to tax non-payment.

This decision takes into account the livelihoods of the company's 600 employees and their 1,500 dependents. Perera emphasized the need for a practical approach to reviving the business while recovering the arrears, ensuring economic stability. The company now has the opportunity to present a repayment plan, and upon settling the first installment, the production license will be reinstated, with an agreement to regularly settle new taxes. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Government to regulate private hospitals

(lm) The Sri Lankan government has begun efforts to regulate private hospitals following concerns about difficulties faced by patients seeking treatment. Minister Dr. Nalinda Jayatissa, speaking at a weekly briefing, stated that discussions have been initiated with relevant stakeholders, including private hospital owners.

Dr. Jayatissa acknowledged that while some gazette notifications had been issued regarding the regulation of private hospitals, their implementation had not been fully effective. He emphasized that the government has the authority to regulate both private hospitals and medical centers and assured that measures would be taken to ensure proper regulation in the future. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: New commanders appointed for Army and Navy; CDS role under review

(raa/lm) Sri Lanka has announced significant leadership changes within its armed forces. Major General Lasantha Rodrigo has been appointed as the 25th Commander of the Sri Lanka Army, succeeding Lieutenant General Vikum Liyanage, who retired after a distinguished career. Major General Rodrigo, a veteran leader, previously served as Deputy Chief of Staff and Commandant of the Defence Services Command and Staff College, highlighting his extensive military experience.

Similarly, Rear Admiral Kanchana Banagoda will take over as the 26th Commander of the Sri Lanka Navy on January 1, 2025, replacing Vice Admiral Priyantha Perera. Rear Admiral Banagoda, who became Chief of Staff in August 2024, has held key positions, including Director of Naval Training and Commander of multiple naval areas, showcasing his deep expertise in naval operations. [Ada Derana] [Daily Mirror 1]

Meanwhile, General Shavendra Silva, the 8th Chief of Defence Staff (CDS), will retire from active service on December 31, 2024, concluding over 40 years of distinguished military service. His tenure as CDS began in June 2022, with a reappointment in June 2024 by then-President Ranil Wickremesinghe. Before his role as CDS, General Silva served as the 23rd Commander of the Army and was the first four-star General to lead the Army.

The Sri Lankan government has yet to decide on the future of the CDS position. Discussions are ongoing about whether to retain or abolish the role following General Silva's retirement. [Daily Mirror 2]

Sri Lanka: SLPP criticizes reduced security for Mahinda Rajapaksa, plans legal action

(lm) Former President Mahinda Rajapaksa has reportedly received death threats from ISIS and LTTE groups, raising significant security concerns. ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) is a terrorist organization known for its extremist ideology and global attacks, while LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) was a militant separatist group involved in Sri Lanka's decades-long civil conflict until its defeat in 2009.

Vice President of the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) Lawyers' Association, Manoj Gamage, criticized

the government's decision to replace military personnel in Rajapaksa's security detail with police officers, arguing it is inadequate given the severity of the threats. [Daily Mirror 1]

In response, the SLPP announced plans to pursue legal action over the reduced security. National Executive Member Ravindra Jayasinghe stated that cutting the security force under the guise of cost-saving measures was unjustifiable and compromised Rajapaksa's safety. He also dismissed recent claims by NPP Parliamentarian Nilanthi Kottahachchi as baseless, suggesting they aimed to mislead the public. [Daily Mirror 2]

Sri Lanka: President Dissanayake calls for modernized anti-smuggling measures at airports

(raa) President Anura Kumara Dissanayake recently held a meeting with key officials from the Department of Immigration and Emigration, Sri Lanka Customs, and Airport and Aviation Services. The meeting focused on several critical issues, including preventing the entry of narcotics and other prohibited substances into the country, combating corruption and fraud, addressing procedural irregularities at points of entry, and reducing unauthorized departures.

To enhance operational efficiency, President Dissanayake proposed the implementation of an integrated surveillance system that would feature a centralized observation room. This system would facilitate unified monitoring among the Department of Immigration and Emigration, Sri Lanka Customs, and Airport and Aviation Services, thereby strengthening inter-agency coordination and improving border security.

The President also called for a fundamental overhaul of current anti-smuggling measures, advocating for the introduction of advanced scanning technologies to replace outdated equipment. [Ada Derana]

Sri Lanka: 385 inmates released under Christmas State pardon

(lm) The Department of Prisons announced that 385 inmates, including four women, were released under a special State pardon in observance of Christmas. The release included 48 inmates from Mahara Prison, 45

from Wariyapola Prison, and 41 from Welikada Prison. Prison authorities confirmed that none of the pardoned inmates were convicted of drug-related offenses. [Daily Mirror]

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

Brunei: RBPF organizes charity donation for orphans

(ga) The Royal Brunei Police Force (RBPF) held a charity donation ceremony for 76 orphans of RBPF officers and members on December 26 at the RBPF Mess Banquet Hall, Gadong. The event, organized by the Welfare Body of the Police Wives and Families Association (PEKERTI), was attended by Datin Sabrina Aziemah binti Abdullah Chong, spouse of the Acting Commissioner of Police and Chairwoman of PEKERTI, who presented the donations. She was joined by Dayang Rokiah binti Joly Julai, Chairwoman of the PEKERTI Welfare Body, and other PEKERTI Executive Committee members.

The PEKERTI Orphan Fund, established in 2007, is supported by contributions from RBPF personnel, private donors, and public donations. The initiative aims to help orphans of RBPF officers and members who have passed away. This year's ceremony focused on alleviating the financial burden on single mothers and guardians as they prepare for the 2025 school year. The donation ceremony is part of PEKERTI's annual efforts to assist RBPF families in need. [Borneo Bulletin]

Brunei: RBPF conducts nationwide roadblock operations

(ga) The Royal Brunei Police Force (RBPF), in collaboration with the Land Transport Department, Royal Customs and Excise Department (RCED), and Narcotics Control Bureau, conducted joint roadblock operations nationwide on December 25.

The roadblocks identified multiple violations under the Road Traffic Act, such as driving without a license and using unauthorized tinted windows. Additionally, RCED personnel seized contraband items, including cigarettes. The initiative is part of ongoing year-end efforts to enhance road safety and crime prevention. The RBPF reminds the public to comply with traffic regulations, maintain vigilance, and secure their homes before leaving for extended periods. [Borneo Bulletin]

Cambodia: Prime minister vows to protect territorial integrity amid Koh Kut dispute

(mfr) Prime Minister Hun Manet reaffirmed Cambodia's commitment to safeguarding its territorial integrity amid concerns over Koh Kut, a disputed island claimed by both Cambodia and Thailand. Speaking at a December 26 graduation ceremony, he emphasized that the government's lack of public response on Facebook does not indicate inaction

Opposition groups, particularly abroad, have criticized the government over the issue, with plans for a "Defend Koh Kut" protest in Long Beach, California, on January 19. The demonstration seeks clarity on Koh Kut's status and calls for the government to formally assert it as Khmer territory or escalate the matter to the International Court of Justice.

Pa Chanroeun, president of the Cambodian Institute for Democracy, highlighted public concerns due to limited information, urging transparency and regular updates on the issue. Yang Peou, secretary-general of the Royal Academy of Cambodia, stressed unity in addressing territorial disputes, cautioning against politicization or actions that could harm Cambodia's national interests. [The Phnom Penh Post]

Cambodia: Khmer Rouge-related draft law to be finalized

(mfr) Cambodia is finalizing two draft laws addressing the Khmer Rouge (KR) era. The first law criminalizes the denial, trivialization, or glorification of crimes committed during the Democratic Kampuchea regime, including genocide and crimes against humanity, as recognized by the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia. This updated law, which will replace the 2013 legislation, aims to prevent historical distortion and provide justice for victims. Punishments will target individuals disputing the authenticity of KR-era atrocities.

The second draft law establishes a framework for managing assets seized during criminal investigations. Comprising four chapters and 15 articles, it details the procedures and conditions for handling seized items to protect public and private interests while preserving their economic value.

Both laws were reviewed at the Office of the Council of Ministers and are expected to be approved by early 2025. [Khmer Times]

Between one and three million people were killed under the Khmer Rouge regime from 1975 to 1979. The updated laws align with Cambodia's commitment to justice, the rule of law, and the protection of human rights. [The Phnom Penh Post]

Cambodia: Introducing injectable HIV prevention drug

(mfr) Cambodia will introduce injectable pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) for HIV prevention by 2025, according to the Ministry of Health. Chhim Khin Dareth, Secretary General of the National AIDS Authority, stated that this injectable form, effective for two months per dose, will provide an alternative to the current oral PrEP pills. The new treatment will be implemented through a structured Standard Operating Procedure in early 2025.

Soth Peosamnang, Coordinator of the Young Key Populations Network, praised the development, noting that Cambodia will be the first country in the Asia-Pacific region to offer injectable PrEP. He emphasized that the two-month injectable option would provide more choices for individuals who struggle with daily adherence to oral medication, particularly among young key populations at risk of HIV.

Peosamnang also called for the government to plan for the long-term sustainability of the injectable PrEP initiative, especially if future support from

development partners decreases. He expressed hope that the Cambodian government would ensure continued access to this critical HIV prevention tool. [Khmer Times]

Cambodia: Royal pardons granted to 13 Filipino surrogates

(mfr) Thirteen Filipino women convicted in Cambodia for attempting illegal surrogacy returned home on December 29, following a royal pardon granted by King Norodom Sihamoni. The women were arrested in September and sentenced to four years in prison, with two years suspended, under Cambodia's anti-human trafficking laws. [The Phnom Penh Post]

The royal pardon was granted after a request by the Philippine embassy in Phnom Penh. Cambodian officials emphasized that the pardon does not reflect leniency toward human trafficking offenses. [Khmer Times]

Cambodia banned commercial surrogacy in 2016, following similar actions by neighboring Thailand, though demand persists, primarily from Chinese clients. The Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs reminded its citizens that surrogacy is illegal in Cambodia and warned of severe penalties for violations. Justice Secretary Jesus Crispin Remulla called the women's repatriation a significant victory in the fight against human trafficking. [South China Morning Post]

Cambodian: Opposition leader sentenced to two years in prison for initiating disorder

(mfr) Cambodian opposition leader Sun Chanthy has been sentenced to two years in prison after being convicted of inciting social disorder. The president of the Nation Power Party was also fined KHR 4 million (USD 1,000) and permanently banned from voting or running for office. The charges stemmed from his social media posts and comments made during a meeting with Cambodian workers in Japan, where he criticized the government and called for greater freedom for opposition parties.

Sun Chanthy, a former senior member of the dissolved Cambodia National Rescue Party, was arrested in May upon returning to Cambodia. His remarks about

government policies, including the distribution of social welfare cards, were cited as the cause of the incitement charges. The court also claimed Sun had spread false information regarding the welfare program, alleging it favored members of the ruling Cambodian People's Party. [The Guardian]

The case against Sun Chanthy reflects ongoing tensions in Cambodia, where critics argue that the government uses the judiciary to silence opposition. The authorities have denied that the case is politically motivated, despite a history of legal actions targeting political opponents and activists.

Sun Chanthy's arrest follows a broader crackdown on political dissent, including the dissolution of opposition parties and the imprisonment of other critics. Despite these actions, Prime Minister Hun Manet's administration maintains that it upholds the rule of law and supports electoral democracy. [ABC News]

Cambodia: Supreme court confirms sentence of former CNRP activist

(mfr) The Supreme Court has upheld the six-year prison sentence of Voeung Samnang, a former Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP) activist, convicted for conspiring and inciting an overthrow of the government in 2021. Samnang, 40, was sentenced by the Phnom Penh Municipal Court on November 25, 2023, and fined KHR 4 million (around USD 1,000), along with a five-year ban on voting and standing for election.

Samnang, the deputy chief of CNRP's Chaktomuk commune branch, was arrested in Thailand on October 10, 2021, following a warrant issued by Cambodian authorities. The charges stemmed from his support of self-exiled opposition leaders, including Sam Rainsy, and his alleged role in inciting the public and military to join their movement. Samnang denied involvement with the plot after the CNRP was dissolved in 2017.

His appeal to the Phnom Penh Appeal Court was rejected in June 2023, and the Supreme Court has now confirmed the initial ruling. Before his political involvement, Samnang had been a Buddhist monk for 13 years. [Khmer Times]

Cambodia: National guidelines for gender-based violence survivor support units

introduced

(mfr) Cambodia has officially launched guidelines for establishing "One-Stop Service Units" (OSSUs) to support survivors of gender-based violence (GBV). Announced on December 23, the initiative aims to strengthen multisectoral responses and provide comprehensive services nationwide for women and girls affected by GBV. [The Phnom Penh Post]

Developed by the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA) and the Ministry of Health (MoH) with technical and financial backing from the Australian Government's ACCESS 2 Program through UNFPA, the guidelines support the 3rd National Action Plan to Prevent Violence Against Women (2019-2023).

OSSUs will offer survivors medical care, legal assistance, psychological support, and safety in a single location. This integrated model aims to reduce barriers to access, ensure confidentiality, and streamline the recovery process. The guidelines emphasize ethical, trauma-informed, and survivor-centered care, detailing steps for hospital setup, roles of service providers, and case documentation processes. [Khmer Times]

To guide implementation, the Standard Operating Procedure for OSSUs will be disseminated to 25 provincial governors and relevant institutions. The MoH plans to integrate this initiative into its forthcoming strategic health plan. Meanwhile, the MoWA will work alongside local authorities, civil society, and provincial police to expand services nationwide. [Xinhua]

Connor Floyd, Second Secretary at Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, affirmed Australia's commitment to survivor-centered approaches. At the same time, UNFPA Representative Sandra Bernklau emphasized the OSSU model as a critical step toward improving survivors' access to quality services.

The launch marks a significant step toward providing coordinated, effective, and accessible support for GBV survivors across Cambodia. [UNFPA Cambodia]

Cambodia: Study reveals waste mismanagement in urban poor settlements

(mfr) A recent study by Sahmakum Teang Tnaut revealed significant challenges in waste management in Phnom Penh, particularly in poor urban settlements. The report "Phnom Penh Solid Waste Management 2024" compared waste management in these areas to other residential zones, highlighting inefficiencies in collection services, lack of waste disposal facilities, and low public awareness about waste separation.

The survey of 203 families found that 26 percent lacked adequate waste bins, and only 30% of respondents regularly separated wet and dry waste. More than 70 percent reported irregular garbage collection schedules, raising concerns about public health and sustainable urban development.

The study recommended targeted improvements in urban poor settlements and called for the National Solid Waste Management Strategy to prioritize these areas. It also suggested using digital tools like GPS tracking for waste trucks and clear collection schedules to improve efficiency. However, Dor Samphors, a spokesperson for the Phnom Penh Municipal Administration, declined to comment on the findings. [Khmer Times]

Cambodia: Fisheries and aquaculture output rises in 2024

(mfr) Cambodia's total fisheries and aquaculture output for 2024 reached 926,934 tons, marking a 7 percent increase from the previous year, according to the Fisheries Administration (FiA). This included 467,344 tons from freshwater fisheries, 139,310 tons from marine fisheries, and 320,280 tons from aquaculture.

Efforts to combat illegal fishing saw 3,194 violations recorded in 2024, a rise attributed to increased enforcement and community involvement. Challenges persist, including illegal activities in protected areas and encroachment on mangrove forests. [The Phnom Penh Post]

Cambodia: Construction of border ring road fast-tracked

(mfr) Cambodia is fast-tracking the construction of a 250-kilometer border ring road in the northeastern provinces, aiming for completion by April 2027. Funded by the Foundation for Border Infrastructure

Development, the project seeks to enhance territorial integrity and foster regional development. Over USD 26.96 million was raised from 720,000 contributors within 66 days to support the initiative.

The road will improve access to remote areas in Mondulkiri and Ratanakkiri, with ongoing clearance of unexploded ordnance ensuring safe construction. [The Phnom Penh Post]

Prime Minister Hun Manet announced upcoming policies and incentives to attract agro-industry investments along the northeastern border. These measures aim to transform border regions into economic hubs, complementing the government's withdrawal from the Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam Development Triangle Area to focus on independent development. [Khmer Times]

Cambodia: Phnom Penh inaugurates first police DNA laboratory

(mfr) Cambodia has officially inaugurated its first National Police DNA laboratory in Phnom Penh, marking a significant advancement in crime-solving capabilities. The laboratory, established through collaboration between the Police Technical and Scientific Department and the Cambodia-China Law Enforcement Cooperation Office, will help identify perpetrators, victims, and familial relationships, aiding in criminal investigations and judicial decision-making. National Police Chief General Sar Thet emphasized its role in enhancing the speed and accuracy of investigations, reducing baseless accusations, and providing vital scientific evidence for the justice system.

General Thet called for ongoing support from the Lancang-Mekong Integrated Law Enforcement and Security Cooperation Centre to further develop forensic skills and improve the laboratory. He also recommended regular inspections of police departments and continuous DNA training for officers. The Cambodian government is committed to using this facility to combat transboundary crime in the Mekong region, including human trafficking, and strengthen regional security cooperation.

This initiative is part of the broader Mekong Lancang Cooperation, which includes six countries along the Mekong River. The cooperation focuses on enhancing trade, security, and environmental protection and combating cross-border crimes. [Khmer Times]

Indonesia: More than 15,800 inmates granted remissions

(gk) The Ministry of Immigration and Corrections has granted remissions to 15,807 inmates across Indonesia in celebration of Christmas 2024. Among them, 15,691 received sentence reductions, while the remaining 116 were immediately released. Juvenile offenders were also granted remissions, with 166 receiving sentence reductions and three released immediately.

North Sumatra recorded the highest number of inmates receiving remissions, with 3,196 beneficiaries, followed by East Nusa Tenggara with 1,894 and Papua with 1,447. North Sumatra and West Papua each reported 23 juvenile offenders receiving remissions, the highest numbers among all provinces.

Minister Agus Andrianto explained that the remissions were granted to inmates who demonstrated good behavior, complied with rules, actively participated in correctional programs, and exhibited reduced risks. This approach aligns with the correctional system's focus on rehabilitation, emphasizing repentance and accountability. [Antara 1]

The Ministry also noted that these remissions are expected to save the state budget approximately USD 500,00. [Antara 2]

Indonesia: Survivors of Aceh earthquake and tsunami mark its 20th anniversary

(gk) Hundreds of survivors from Lambung village in Banda Aceh gathered for prayers to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the devastating earthquake and tsunami that struck on December 26, 2004.

On December 26, 2004, Indonesia and 13 other countries bordering the Indian Ocean experienced a tsunami that remains one of the deadliest natural disasters in modern history. Triggered by an earthquake exceeding 9.0 in magnitude off the west coast of Aceh province, the massive tidal wave claimed over 200,000 lives across 14 countries, with nearly half of the fatalities occurring in Indonesia. [Antara]

Indonesia: Ruling party secretary general named suspect in bribery case

(gk) The Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) has named Hasto Kristiyanto, the Secretary-General of the ruling Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP), as a suspect in a bribery case involving the appointment of Harun Masiku as a legislator.

The case revolves around collusion to secure a seat in the House of Representatives (DPR) for Harun Masiku, a PDIP member, following the death of Nazaruddin Kiemas, an elected legislator from the same party. The bribery scheme was uncovered after the 2019 elections. The KPK has named six suspects in this case: Hasto Kristiyanto; Agustiani Tio Fridelina (former PDIP cadre and ex-member of the Election Supervisory Agency); advocate Donny Tri Istiqomah; Yasonna H. Laoly (former Minister of Law and Human Rights); Saeful Bahri (former PDIP cadre and lawyer); and Wahyu Setiawan (former General Elections Commission member).

Hasto and the other suspects are accused of bribing Wahyu Setiawan to appoint Masiku as an interim replacement for the deceased lawmaker Nazaruddin Kiemas in the 2019 elections. Between December 16 and 23, 2019, a bribe of USD 38,350 was reportedly paid. Ronald Paul Sinyal, a former KPK investigator who handled the case, stated that almost 50 percent of the bribe money given by Harun Masiku to Wahyu Setiawan is believed to have originated from Hasto.

Further allegations include Hasto and his associates obstructing the investigation multiple times. These actions reportedly included tipping off Masiku during a KPK sting operation, submerging mobile phones to evade investigators, and instructing witnesses to provide false statements to authorities.

Currently, Hasto Kristiyanto and Yasonna H. Laoly are subject to overseas travel bans. In connection with this case, Saeful Bahri was sentenced to 20 months in prison but has since been released. Bribery recipient Wahyu Setiawan was granted parole after serving a seven-year prison term in Semarang, Central Java.

Harun Masiku, the former PDIP legislative candidate, has been on the KPK's wanted list since 2020 and remains at large. [Antara 1] [Antara 2] [Tempo] [Indonesia Business Post] [Jakarta Globe]

Indonesia: Former executive of state gold miner PT Antam Tbk sentenced in corruption case

(gk) The Jakarta Corruption Court has sentenced Abdul Hadi Aviciena, former General Manager of the state-owned gold mining company PT Antam Tbk, to four years in prison for corruption related to the sale and purchase of gold bullion.

Abdul Hadi was found guilty of causing state losses amounting to IDR 92.25 billion (approximately USD 5.71 million). These losses stemmed from his failure to ensure the proper implementation of quarterly stock inventories at all Antam boutiques, including the Surabaya 01 Precious Metal Gold Boutique (BELM). This negligence led to a significant increase in gold sales at BELM in 2018 and a physical shortage of 152.8 kilograms of Antam gold at the boutique, ultimately resulting in substantial state losses. [Antara]

Indonesia: Previous administration's lecturer allowance regulation to be reassessed

(lp) The Ministry of Higher Education, Science, and Technology is reviewing a ministerial regulation issued by the previous administration regarding lecturer incentives, including performance allowances. Former minister Nadiem Makarim signed Ministerial Regulation No. 44/2024 in September, providing a legal framework for lecturers' salaries and career advancement. However, current minister Satryo Soemantri Brodjonegoro has postponed its implementation, citing insufficient budget allocations to cover the performance allowances.

Satryo noted that the financial burden of implementing the regulation now falls on his administration and has requested additional funding from the Finance Ministry to address the shortfall. The ministry's budget has been impacted by the division of the former Education, Culture, Research, and Technology Ministry into three separate entities under President Prabowo Subianto's administration.

In a Dec. 17 circular, Satryo stated that recommendations from stakeholders in the higher education sector prompted an interim evaluation of the regulation. The policy mandates various allowances for lecturers, including performance, functional, and honorary allowances, the latter subject to specific eligibility criteria. It also introduces competency tests as a requirement for promotion, replacing the previous credit score system. [The Jakarta Post]

Indonesia: Government partners with digital platforms in free meals program

(lp) Indonesia's Ministry of Communication and Digital Affairs (Komdigi) has partnered with digital platform companies to support the Free Nutritious Meals programme, a key initiative of President Prabowo Subianto's administration aimed at improving nutrition in vulnerable communities. The programme seeks to address nutritional gaps while leveraging technology for efficiency and transparency.

Pilot projects in various regions have been conducted, involving 1,500 students and 126 teachers, with a focus on technology use, hygiene, and nutritional standards. These trials have provided valuable insights into logistics, food safety, and real-time monitoring, which are expected to help refine the national strategy.

The program also promotes community engagement through awareness campaigns aimed at educating parents, teachers, and students about balanced nutrition's role in development.

Digital technologies, including e-wallet platforms, are key to ensuring transparency and accountability, enabling real-time transaction monitoring and reducing administrative burdens.

Set to launch in January 2025 with a budget of IDR 71 trillion (approximately USD 1 billion), the program targets schoolchildren, pregnant women, breastfeeding mothers, and toddlers, aiming to reduce malnutrition and improve overall health. [OpengovAsia]

Indonesia: Huawei to work with energy ministry to enhance solar panel safety standards

(lp) The CEO of Digital Power Huawei Indonesia, Jing Song, has announced that the company will collaborate with the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources to enhance safety and security standards for the installation of solar power plants.

He further emphasized that the collaboration will primarily focus on the electrical aspects, particularly design, installation, and maintenance, due to the high voltage involved in solar power plants. The partnership will leverage digital technology to revamp the safety and security design of the installations. [Void]

Wahyudi Joko Santoso, Coordinator of Technical Feasibility and Electrical Safety (K2) at the Directorate General of Electricity in the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources, added that Huawei Indonesia will organize workshops to help professionals in the green energy sector improve their understanding of these safety standards. [Teknostyle]

Indonesia: Karawang high-speed railway station officially inaugurated

(gk) Coordinating Minister for Infrastructure and Regional Development, Agus Harimurti Yudhoyono, and Minister of Transportation Dudy Purwagandhi, officially inaugurated the Karawang High-Speed Railway Station in Karawang, West Java.

Purwagandhi noted that Karawang, being one of the largest industrial centers, now has modern transportation access, connecting industrial areas, tourist destinations, business centers, and residential areas. He noted that the presence of High-Speed Railway station at Karawang will ensure time efficiency, reducing the Jakarta-Karawang trip to only about 15 minutes and Karawang-Bandung to around 20 minutes.

He also hoped that people would be encouraged to use public transportation, thus reducing private vehicles and ultimately overcome traffic congestion, reduce carbon emissions and support the vision of environment-friendly transportation. [Antara]

Indonesia: Down streaming coal and mineral commodities to help achieve 8 percent economic growth target

(gk) Indonesia aims to increase its GDP and per capita income and achieve its 8 percent economic growth target by using a new breakthrough strategy: down streaming of coal and mineral commodities.

Based on the Strategic Investment Down streaming Roadmap, the government has projected a total investment of USD 618 billion, which will be allocated across 28 downstream commodities. Roughly 91 percent of the investment will focus on the energy and mineral resource sector, particularly on coal, mineral commodities and oil and gas. [Antara]

Indonesia: Government pushes for community-based salt production

(lp) Marine Affairs and Fisheries Minister Sakti Wahyu Trenggono has emphasized the potential of community-based salt production in Indramayu district, West Java, to help Indonesia achieve self-sufficiency by 2027. The district, along with Karawang, Cirebon, and Pangandaran, is a key salt-producing region, with salt production spread across four sub-districts. Currently, Indramayu has 1,445 hectares of productive salt farms, yielding 135,891 tons annually, or about 94 tons per hectare.

Much of the production in Indramayu is still managed traditionally, relying on tides, which affects both volume and quality. To improve this, Trenggono called for a revitalization program, with the Ministry of Marine Affairs and Fisheries proposing a budget of IDR 500 billion (USD 30.8 million) to modernize production methods.

The government aims to achieve food self-sufficiency, including in industrial salt, by 2027. As part of this effort, it will stop importing industrial salt by 2025, except for the Chlor Alkali Plant (CAP). The ministry is also working on initiatives such as salt pond extensification and intensification to modernize salt production technology. [Antara News]

Indonesia: Authorities foil human trafficking attempts

(gk) Indonesian authorities prevented the departure of eight prospective migrant workers who were attempting to leave through an illegal channel.

Indonesian Minister of Migrant Workers' Protection, Abdul Kadir Karding, explained that the individuals had fallen victim to economic pressures. They were promised wages of over USD 555 and had their passports seized. One suspect has been apprehended.

The victims were reportedly on the verge of departing for Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. [Antara]

Indonesia: Five suspected terrorists arrested in West Java

(gk) The Indonesian National Police's counterterrorism unit, Densus 88, arrested five suspected members of a

terrorist network in separate operations in West Java on December 27.

Authorities have not disclosed further details about the suspects' affiliations or evidence collected, but assured the public that the situation remains under control, especially ahead of the New Year's celebrations. [Jakarta Globe]

Indonesia: 14 international drugs syndicates dismantled in 2024

(lp) In 2024, the National Narcotics Agency (BNN) successfully identified and dismantled 14 international drug syndicates. These networks primarily used air transportation for smuggling drugs, including the Gregor Haas network, linked to the Mexican-based Sinaloa Cartel. The BNN also highlighted the use of ships, particularly traditional wooden vessels, for drug trafficking into Indonesia, with some operations tied to Malaysia-based groups.

Additionally, drug smuggling attempts were intercepted at the West Kalimantan border, seizing 100 kilograms of crystal methamphetamine and ecstasy. Six Indonesians and three foreigners were arrested in connection with these efforts. The agency also uncovered a drug syndicate controlled by Indonesians abroad, with Dewi Astuti listed as a wanted suspect.

In 2024, the BNN also exposed 13 other national drug syndicates operating across various islands and provinces, involving diverse ethnic and social groups. [Antara News]

Laos: Businesses struggle to comply with new minimum wage rules amid rising costs

(cc) Despite a nationwide increase in Laos's minimum wage, many employers are not complying with the new standards, continuing to pay workers below the mandated amount.

The Ministry of Labor and Social Welfare raised the monthly minimum wage from LAK 1.6 million (USD 75) to LAK 2.5 million (USD 114), effective October 1, 2024, to help workers cope with rising costs and inflation.

Employers argue that wages should reflect workers' skills, claiming that many lack the qualifications to

justify higher pay.

For unskilled workers without graduation certificates, employers must also provide a subsistence allowance of LAK 900,000 (USD 41), ensuring their total earnings meet the new minimum wage.

Minister of Labor and Social Welfare Baykham Khattiya acknowledged the difficulties in improving workers' living conditions and workplace standards. She noted that low wages are driving many workers to seek better-paying jobs abroad, particularly in Thailand.

The Minister urged businesses to adhere to the new wage law and offer better welfare benefits to attract and retain workers. However, inflation and rising living costs continue to outpace salary adjustments, posing a significant challenge for the government. [The Laotian Times]

Laos: EV infrastructure firm LOCA establishes 40 fast-charging stations in 2024

(cc) In 2024, LOCA, a leading electric vehicle (EV) infrastructure company in Laos, established 40 fast-charging stations nationwide, concentrating on major cities and key routes to promote EV adoption and sustainability. These stations offer charging capacities between 120-240 kW, enabling EVs to achieve a full charge within 20-30 minutes.

LOCA's expansion received support from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) Frontier Fund and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), providing financial and technical assistance to advance clean energy initiatives in Laos.

The EV market in Laos has experienced significant growth, with 2,101 EVs imported in 2023, representing 25.1 percent of all new vehicle registrations. By October 2024, EV imports increased to 4,437, indicating a strong consumer shift toward electric vehicles due to cost efficiency and environmental concerns.

LOCA plans to expand its fast-charging network to 100 stations by 2026, aiming to accommodate the growing number of EV users and encourage widespread adoption of electric vehicles throughout Laos. [The Laotian Times]

Laos: Government pledges USD 960 million for 2025 development initiatives

(cc) The government of Laos has committed USD 960 million to development projects in 2025, prioritizing infrastructure, agriculture, trade, and public services. This substantial investment aims to drive economic growth, improve living standards, and align with the country's long-term development strategy.

Prime Minister Sonexay Siphandone emphasized the importance of strategic investments to enhance transportation networks, modernize agriculture, and strengthen Laos' position as a regional trade hub. The funding will also support healthcare and education improvements, fostering sustainable development and poverty alleviation. [The Laotian Times]

Laos: Rising school dropout rates challenge Vientiane's education sector

(cc) Vientiane, the capital of Laos, has witnessed a concerning increase in school dropout rates during the 2023-2024 academic year, highlighting pressing challenges in the country's education sector. According to a report by the Vientiane Department of Education and Sports, the dropout rate reached 4.3 percent, a significant rise from 3.2 percent recorded in the previous year.

The report attributes this troubling trend to several factors, including financial hardships faced by families, particularly in rural and economically disadvantaged communities. Many students are forced to leave school to contribute to their families' income, often engaging in informal labor. Other challenges include limited access to quality education, insufficient school resources, and a lack of incentives to keep students enrolled.

The data further reveals that dropout rates are higher among secondary school students, a demographic particularly vulnerable to economic and social pressures. In addition to economic factors, long distances to schools and inadequate transportation infrastructure exacerbate the problem, especially in remote areas. [The Laotian Times]

Malaysia: Rembia assemblyman joins Melaka State opposition bloc

(ga) Rembia assemblyman Muhammad Jailani Khamis has been moved from the government bloc to the Opposition in the Melaka legislative assembly. Speaker Ibrahim Durum explained that this decision followed a review of Jailani's membership in the PAS party (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia).

Ibrahim stated that although he had sought confirmation from PAS Secretary-General Datuk Seri Takiyuddin Hassan, he had received no response. The only evidence of Jailani's membership was his own vague claim of being a PAS member.

Takiyuddin confirmed on July 16 that Jailani joined PAS in June 2023, prior to the enactment of the anti-party hopping law in July of that year. As a result, the government bloc now has 25 members, while the Opposition has three.

Jailani, who won the Rembia seat in the 2021 state election as a Barisan Nasional candidate, was suspended from UMNO (United Malays National Organisation) in July 2023 for allegedly undermining the party by attending the announcement of the Perikatan Nasional candidate for the Simpang Jeram by-election. [The Star] [Bernama]

PAS is currently part of the opposition Perikatan Nasional (PN) coalition in Malaysia. UMNO is key component of the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition which joined Pakatan Harapan (PH), along with other allied parties, to form the ruling government under Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim.

Malaysia: Housing minister defends himself after PAS files charges

(oc) Nga Kor Ming, the Housing and Local Government Minister, has reiterated his full commitment to fostering racial and religious harmony in Malaysia after the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) pressed charges over remarks he made.

PAS Secretary-General Takiyuddin Hassan accused Nga of spreading false accusations and defamatory comments. Hassan claimed that Nga referred to PAS as "deviant" and alleged that the party was spreading these deviant teachings by "blocking Christmas celebrations."

Hassan also criticized Nga for participating in a Christmas event, stating that since Malaysia's independence, ministers have never organized religious celebrations other than Islamic ones. The

Deputy PAS Youth Chief, Hanif Jamaluddin, echoed Hassan's view, arguing that the Christmas event should not have taken place.

Nga defended his actions, explaining that he was celebrating all festivals, including Hari Raya, Deepavali, and Chinese New Year, as a reflection of Malaysia's multicultural society, rather than deviating from Islamic principles.

Nga characterized PAS's comments as extreme and an example of bigotry. Despite these claims from PAS, he vowed to continue championing the freedom that Malaysia's multicultural society offers. However, PAS has pledged to hold the minister accountable for his comments and any unrest they may cause. [Malay Mail]

Malaysia: Bersatu's women wing files police report against Youth Minister Hannah Yeoh

(oc) The women's wing of the opposition party Bersatu (Malaysian United Indigenous Party) has filed a police report against Hannah Yeoh, the Minister of Youth and Sports, over statements made in her book "Becoming Hannah: A Personal Journey." The wing claims that Yeoh, a member of the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and a unity government official and an openly Christian politician, made evangelical Christian remarks in her autobiography.

Nolee Ashilin Radzi, a member of the wing, went further, asserting that Yeoh's recent lawsuit against former Inspector General of Police Musa Hassan reflects her "Christianization agenda." Radzi warned that this could threaten Malaysia's social harmony and called for the book to be banned and for Yeoh to be removed from her Cabinet position.

In response to these police reports, Yeoh warned that she would file her own reports in response to what she described as malicious accusations. [Free Malaysia Today]

Yeoh's recent lawsuit against Husan centers around accusations made by Musa regarding Yeoh's involvement in a police investigation. Musa had alleged that Yeoh was linked to an alleged plot to assassinate former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad.

Malaysia: Public caning under Syariah law case sparks debate on punishment ethics

(oc/ga) The state of Terengganu recently conducted its first public caning under Syariah law, sparking discussions on the scope and ethics of such punishments. [Reuters]

On December 27, a 42-year-old laborer received six strokes of the cane for repeated “close proximity” offenses, which involve situations where unmarried men and women are in close, private contact that could lead to illicit sexual behavior or actions considered sinful under Islamic law.

The punishment was carried out in accordance with procedures designed to minimize harm and align with Islamic principles, including medical evaluations and restricted attendance, according to the Malaysian Syariah Judiciary Department, the government agency responsible for overseeing the administration of Islamic law (Syariah law) in Malaysia. Authorities emphasized the corrective and educational intent of public caning rather than punitive measures, with attendance limited to authorized individuals to prevent public sensationalism. [The Star 1]

In contrast, Perlis State Mufti Datuk Mohd Asri Zainul Abidin criticized public caning for khalwat offenders, stating that it is not stipulated in Islamic law. He argued that caning should be limited to adultery under strict conditions, as specified in the Quran, and warned against turning individual sins into public spectacles. Mohd Asri’s stance highlights differing interpretations within the Syariah framework, further fueling debates on the application of Islamic law in Malaysia. [The Star 2]

The Human Rights Commission of Malaysia condemned the court’s decision to allow caning, arguing that this type of punishment contradicts basic human rights. In a December 19 statement, it called the practice "inhuman." [Suhakam]

Malaysia: Anti-corruption agency to prioritize grand corruption eradication and asset recovery in 2025

(ga) In 2025, the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) will focus on tackling grand corruption, procurement-related corruption, and enforcement inefficiencies, with the goal of bolstering the economy, reducing leakages, and recovering

misappropriated national assets and funds. MACC Chief Commissioner Azam Baki outlined plans for a transformation within the commission, including improving departmental functions and expanding officers' roles for greater effectiveness.

The governance investigation process will be strengthened by rebranding the Inspection and Consultancy Division to the Governance Investigation Division, which will ensure that investigation outcomes are enforced by the relevant departments.

The commission is also set to receive an increased budget allocation of MYR 360 million (USD 80.55 million) in 2025, up from MYR 338 million in 2024, alongside the recruitment of 200 additional officers. These efforts will enhance MACC's operational capabilities, particularly in addressing money laundering and high-profile corruption cases. The commission will also review and refine its standard operating procedures to tackle increasingly complex corruption cases. [Bernama]

Malaysia: Police and multimedia regulator intensify crackdown on pornography and child abuse

(ga) The Royal Malaysia Police (PDRM) and the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) have intensified efforts to track individuals involved in the possession, storage, and distribution of pornography and child sexual abuse materials (CSAM).

Operations under 'Op Pedo' will continue, with PDRM investigating potential syndicates and individuals involved in such activities, as confirmed by PDRM Inspector-General Razarudin Husain confirmed.

A joint operation across six states led to the arrest of 13 men, including a 74-year-old suspect, and the seizure of over 40,000 CSAM and adult materials, along with several electronic devices. Authorities encourage the public to report any related information to assist ongoing investigations. [Bernama]

Malaysia: FAMA to import more coconuts from Indonesia to address domestic shortage

(ga) To address the coconut shortage, the Federal Agricultural Marketing Authority (FAMA) has increased imports of old coconuts from Indonesia to 320 metric tons, up from 180 metric tons. This move aims to stabilize the market, particularly during festive seasons when demand is high. The shortage, which has caused coconut prices to rise, resulted from adverse weather conditions affecting local and export supplies.

The imported supply has helped balance prices, and FAMA expects the situation to improve by January 2025. They continue to monitor supply levels and collaborate with various stakeholders, including the Malaysian Quarantine and Inspection Services (MAQIS), to prevent smuggling. [Bernama]

Malaysia: Government urged to use AI and IoT for improved flood disaster management

(ga) The Malaysian IoT Association (MY-IoT) has recommended the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) and the Internet of Things (IoT) for smarter flood disaster management. MY-IoT illustrated that a smart flood detection system combining multiple data sources, such as river water levels, rainfall, tidal data, and satellite images, would improve flood forecasting and risk detection.

This model, already successfully used by the Indian Meteorological Department, can provide early warnings up to 48 hours before a disaster. MY-IoT further suggested phased implementation, beginning with high-risk urban areas, and emphasized that AI's ability to continuously update predictions would enhance long-term accuracy.

The association also advised collaboration with the National Flood Forecasting and Warning Centre (PRABN) and the use of satellite data to support urban planning. [Bernama]

Malaysia: Terengganu State police seize 244kg of meth in major bust

(ga) Terengganu police seized 244kg of methamphetamine worth MYR 7.8 million (USD 1.72 million) in their largest drug bust, believed to supply 1.2 million addicts.

Authorities are tracking two suspects. [Bernama]

Myanmar: Cardinal Archbishop Charles Bo hosts coup leader for Christmas dinner

(tl) Cardinal Charles Maung Bo's meeting with Myanmar coup leader Min Aung Hlaing has sparked widespread outrage among the Catholic community in the predominantly Buddhist nation. On December 23, the military chief visited the archbishop's residence in Yangon for a Christmas event where the two cut a Christmas cake, and Min Aung Hlaing donated USD 11,000 to church funds. Cardinal Bo called for peace, unity, and dialogue in his message, echoing Pope Francis' 2017 appeal for peace in Myanmar.

Junta-controlled state media reported his blessings for the military leader, his family, and Myanmar citizens. Meanwhile, the opposition National Unity Government (NUG) highlighted the junta's targeting of religious sites and leaders, citing the destruction of over 300 religious buildings, arrests of over 200 religious figures, and 270 casualties since the coup.

Independent Catholics for Justice in Myanmar (ICJM) condemned the meeting, stating it does not reflect the views of Catholics opposed to any ties with the regime. [Union of Catholic Asia News][The Irrawaddy]

Myanmar: Christmas mass celebrated in Karenni refugee camps

(sc) For the fourth consecutive year, Christmas in Myanmar was marked by displacement, fear, and resilience as communities endured the aftermath of the 2021 military coup. Across Chinland, Karenni State, and beyond, families celebrated in refugee and Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps under the shadow of ongoing conflict.

In southern Chinland, the Chin Brotherhood recently captured Mindat and Kanpetlet, though fears of aerial attacks remain. Chinland Defense Force members stayed on high alert during the holiday, praying for peace in a region rife with insecurity. Meanwhile, in Karenni State, where 85 percent of the population is displaced, modest Christmas prayers and songs were held in caves and camps. Despite the hardships, IDPs shared moments of joy with their children, clinging to hope for peace and a return to their homes. [Democratic Voice of Burma]

The scale of Myanmar's humanitarian crisis continues to grow. Over 3.5 million IDPs and 13.3 million food-insecure individuals highlight the challenges of daily survival. Organizations like Karenni Hope hosted small festivities for children to provide a semblance of normalcy, while the Karenni Interim Executive Council estimated 350,000 displaced persons in their territories alone.

In his Christmas address, National Unity Government Acting President Duwa Lashi La expressed deep concern for displaced civilians, reiterating the urgency of international support. For Myanmar's Christian minority and others affected by the conflict, Christmas served as a poignant reminder of resilience amidst adversity and a longing for peace. [Democratic Voice of Burma]

Myanmar: Rising military tensions in Sittwe drive surge in flight demand to Yangon

(anl) Many residents are trying to leave Sittwe Township in Rakhine State due to escalating military tensions, leading to a surge in demand for flights to Yangon. On December 28, locals rushed to purchase tickets out of safety concerns. A Sittwe-Yangon ticket, priced at just over MMK 500,000 (USD 238 USD) on December 27, soared to MMK 700,000 (USD 333) the next day.

The heightened tensions come after recent shelling exchanges between the Arakan Army (AA) and the military regime in Sittwe. The junta has also intensified airstrikes on villages along the border of Sittwe and neighboring townships, as well as increased shelling in Pauktaw Township. Since June, many Sittwe residents have fled to AA-controlled areas, while others have turned to flights to Yangon, as road and water transport face strict regime restrictions. [DMG]

Myanmar: Garment industry crumbles amid labor shortages and rights violations

(sc) Myanmar’s garment industry is reeling from a mass exodus of workers triggered by the junta’s Conscription Law and worsening economic conditions. Factories report a 20 percent drop in production as skilled workers leave for jobs abroad, citing forced military recruitment and rising living costs. Factory owners struggle to meet orders, with smaller factories

forced to close and larger ones overburdened by labor shortages and electricity rationing. “Demand keeps coming, but we lack the workforce,” said one factory owner, warning that canceled orders risk losing long-term business. The situation is compounded by the junta’s currency controls, which force businesses to convert earnings at undervalued rates, making it difficult to increase worker wages. [The Irrawaddy]

Labor rights violations are rampant, with child workers replacing skilled staff and remaining employees forced into excessive, often unpaid, overtime under threat of dismissal. Fears of conscription have prompted women to join the exodus, while monthly strikes are erupting across factories, highlighting the frustration of workers whose grievances are ignored by the junta’s Labor Ministry. “Employers exploit workers instead of addressing their needs,” said Ma Ei of the Federation of General Workers Myanmar. As the garment sector collapses, the crisis underscores the junta’s inability to stabilize the economy or protect labor rights, leaving the industry and its workforce in turmoil. [The Irrawaddy]

Myanmar: Tourism plummets in 2024

(anl) Myanmar has experienced a steady decline in tourist arrivals due to political instability and ongoing conflicts. According to the junta’s Ministry of Hotels and Tourism, tourist arrivals from January to September 2024 totaled just over 470,000, down from nearly 900,000 during the same period in 2023. The civil war has kept border gate entries low, while international arrivals via airports are also declining, impacted by high airfares and domestic security concerns.

Political unrest and armed conflicts since the coup have prompted many countries to issue travel advisories against visiting Myanmar, further reducing tourist numbers. On December 7, the British Foreign Office issued a travel alert advising against travel to 68 countries, including Myanmar. Similarly, the Nepalese government recently warned its citizens about traveling to Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos due to human trafficking risks.

In response, the junta has attempted to revive foreign tourism by targeting countries with which it maintains good relations, such as China, Russia, and Thailand, and by relaxing visa requirements. However, the tourism industry reports that while some Chinese and Thai tourists have visited, arrivals from other countries remain minimal. [Mizzima]

Myanmar: Resistance forces claim 85 percent of Chin state

(sc) Ethnic Chin and Rakhine resistance forces now control 85 percent of Myanmar's Chin State, with plans to capture the remaining key township of Falam from junta forces, according to the Chin Brotherhood Alliance (CBA). The CBA, along with the Chinland Defense Force (CDF) and the Rakhine Arakan Army (AA), has seized five of Chin's nine townships, including Mindat, Matupi, Kanpetlet, Tonzang, and Paletwa.

The CBA's recent offensive drove junta troops from Kanpetlet, while CDF forces in Mindat declared the town secure after weeks of intense fighting, during which they captured military outposts, freed political prisoners, and claimed the surrender of 123 junta soldiers. [Radio Free Asia]

While residents hope to return home, ongoing airstrikes by junta forces in Mindat and Kanpetlet have delayed their plans. The CDF is working to clear landmines and secure the areas before allowing resettlement. The CBA highlighted the strategic importance of these towns, which open trade routes to India and Bangladesh, promising a potential economic boost for the region.

The capture of Chin towns also paves the way for offensives in neighboring Magway region. [Radio Free Asia]

Myanmar: Captured junta general urges troops to surrender in Rakhine

(sc) A captured Myanmar junta brigadier general, Kyaw Kyaw Than, has called on military personnel in Rakhine State to surrender to the Arakan Army (AA), citing the junta's "incompetent leadership" and urging them to avoid unnecessary deaths. In a video released by the AA on December 26, the former Western Command chief described how his troops were abandoned without food, ammunition, or medical supplies during the AA's capture of Ann Township. He emphasized that the AA guarantees the safety of those who surrender and urged commanders and soldiers to raise white flags and lay down their arms immediately. [Arakan Army]

The AA has now seized 14 of Rakhine's 17 townships, with Sittwe, Kyaukphyu, and Manaung remaining

under junta control. Brig-Gen Kyaw Kyaw Than also urged junta leader Min Aung Hlaing to acknowledge the loss of Rakhine, halt airstrikes, and prevent further harm to civilians and troops. The AA claims to be treating surrendered personnel and their families humanely, providing food, shelter, and medical care. In its message to junta forces, the AA reiterated: “The sooner you raise the white flag, the sooner you will get to safety, see your families, and celebrate the new year.” [Arakan Army] [The Irrawaddy]

Myanmar: Scorched earth tactics near Mandalay as junta pushes back

(sc) Myanmar's military has razed villages north of Mandalay, targeting areas previously occupied by pro-democracy and ethnic resistant forces. According to research group Data for Myanmar, eight villages in Madaya township and one in Thabeikkyin township were burned to the ground, displacing thousands. Residents report troops setting entire villages ablaze, leaving communities too fearful to return. This scorched-earth approach follows the withdrawal of People’s Defense Forces (PDFs), who had threatened Myanmar's second-largest city but retreated amid intensified military offensives during the dry season. [Radio Free Asia]

The military’s operations come as it regains footing after significant territorial losses to resistance forces earlier this year. With support from ceasefires pressured by China in Shan State, the junta has focused its offensives on central regions like Mandalay, Sagaing, and Magway.

Since the 2021 coup, over 105,000 homes have reportedly been destroyed nationwide, exacerbating a humanitarian crisis affecting 18.6 million people, including 6 million children, who face displacement, food insecurity, and malnutrition. Residents and human rights groups warn that the military’s tactics are compounding the suffering of an already devastated population. [Radio Free Asia]

Myanmar: Junta troops raid and torch villages in Yesagyo Township

(anl) On December 19, the Yesagyo Township Information Committee reported that junta troops raided villages in the Yay Lal Kyun area of Yesagyo Township in the central Magway Region. Residents

confirmed that the troops looted homes, stole public property, and set houses on fire. The arson destroyed 41 houses in the area.

This incident is not the first instance of such brutality in the region. In October 2023, local defense forces reported that junta troops had burned hundreds of houses, killed two local women, and seized public property. [Mizzima]

Myanmar: Arakan Army reports ARSA ambush on passenger bus in Maungdaw

(anl) The Arakan Army (AA) has reported that the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) ambushed a passenger bus carrying 16 people in Maungdaw Township, Arakan State. The attack, which occurred on December 24 while the group was returning from purchasing goods in Taungpyo Town, resulted in one death and several injuries. The injured are receiving medical care, and AA soldiers are actively searching for the perpetrators.

Muslim armed groups, including ARSA, the Rohingya Solidarity Organization (RSO), and the Arakan Rohingya Army (ARA), are active in Maungdaw and Buthidaung townships and along the Mayu mountain range. These groups are known for acts of violence, including arrests, killings, abductions, shootings, and extortion of local residents. The ongoing threats from these groups severely disrupt the socio-economic lives and daily mobility of locals in Maungdaw District. The AA has declared it will not allow any other armed organization to establish itself in Arakan State. [DMG]

Myanmar: Rakhine conflict displaces nearly 570,000

(tl) The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) reported that ongoing conflict in Myanmar's Rakhine State has displaced an additional 360,000 people, raising the total number of displaced individuals in the region to nearly 570,000. Since November 2023, fighting has affected 16 of Rakhine's 17 townships and forced residents of Paletwa Township in Chin State to flee as well.

Across Myanmar, conflicts have displaced approximately 3.5 million people in the northwestern and southeastern regions, an increase of 1.5 million over the past year. UNOCHA highlighted the worsening

security situation, particularly in southern Rakhine, where clashes between the Arakan Army (AA) and Myanmar's military persist. The agency urged all parties to adhere to international humanitarian law, protect civilians, and ensure the safety of aid workers. [VOA in Burmese][Mizzima News]

Myanmar: Junta launches largest indigenously built frigate

(sc) The junta launched its largest indigenously built frigate, "King Thalun", on December 24 during a ceremony at Thanlyin's Naval Training Command Headquarters. State Administration Council Chairman and Commander-in-Chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, along with other high-ranking officials, presided over the event, which marked the Navy's 77th anniversary. In his address, Min Aung Hlaing highlighted the Navy's transformation into a Three-Dimensional Combat Ready Navy tasked with protecting the exclusive economic zone of the junta's territorial waters. He emphasized the need to develop a regional navy capable of producing advanced warships to secure adjacent seas. [Office of the Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services]

Admiral Htein Win, the Navy's service chief, unveiled the 135-meter frigate, named after King Thalun, a historic figure known for defending the country and fostering progress. Construction began in 2017, and the frigate boasts stealth technology, advanced armaments, and a displacement of 3,500 tons, with a top speed of 30 knots. The lead ship of the Thalun-class frigates, it features enhanced air defense capabilities, radars, and an extended operational range. Armed with HQ-16 surface-to-air missiles, Kh-35E anti-ship missiles, torpedoes, and more, the ship also accommodates a Ka-28 helicopter and UAVs. The ceremony also saw the commissioning of two 63-meter submarine destroyers. [Office of the Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services]

Philippines: President Marcos Jr. signs record 2025 budget, vetoes some funding

(lm) President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. signed the Philippines' 2025 national budget, amounting to PHP 6.33 trillion (USD 109 billion), after vetoing PHP 194 billion (USD 3.35 billion) in allocations deemed inconsistent with government priorities. The record budget represents a 10 percent increase in

government spending, focusing on economic growth and poverty reduction.

Key allocations include PHP 1.053 trillion (USD 18.14 billion) for education, the largest share, and PHP 1.034 trillion (USD 17.81 billion) for public works. However, the budget faced scrutiny for cuts in education and health insurance subsidies, while increased funding for public works drew criticism from business groups and advocates. President Marcos emphasized the budget's alignment with the Philippine Development Plan 2023–2028, focusing on social services, infrastructure, agriculture, and economic development.

The Ayuda sa Kapos ang Kita Program (AKAP) will be implemented conditionally. AKAP is a government initiative providing cash aid to low-income families to alleviate poverty and improve living standards. This conditional approach aims to prevent misuse and duplication of benefits.

The Makati Business Club (MBC), a prominent organization representing senior executives of the country's top companies, expressed concerns over specific provisions, particularly increased funding for public works and additional allocations to Congress. The MBC urged rigorous budget scrutiny to ensure fiscal responsibility, citing potential implications for midterm elections and the need to balance public spending with economic priorities. [Business Standard] [Presidential Communications Office] [mint]

Philippines: Ombudsman affirms graft indictment against former BFAR official

(lm) The Office of the Ombudsman has rejected the motion for reconsideration filed by former Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) director Eduardo Gongona, upholding his indictment for violating the Anti-Graft and Corrupt Practices Act. The decision, signed by Ombudsman Samuel Martires on October 2, stated that Gongona failed to provide new evidence to overturn the ruling, emphasizing that his arguments would be better addressed during the trial.

The indictment, which also implicates former BFAR director Demosthenes Escoto and Simon Tucker, CEO of the UK-based SRT Marine Systems Solutions, stems from allegations of irregularities in BFAR's Integrated Marine Environment Monitoring System Project Phase II (PHILO). The project, intended to monitor commercial fishing vessels and curb illegal fishing, faced accusations of financial mismanagement, including the loss of French government funding, an

excessive purchase of transceivers, and a payment of PHP 722.639 million (USD 12.7 million) to SRT-UK without complete documentation.

The controversy centers on the cancellation of a EUR 28.52 million (USD 30.9 million) French loan, which required bidders to be French companies or joint ventures involving French firms. SRT-France, a subsidiary of SRT-UK, won the initial bid despite being ineligible, as it lacked business activities in France. Gongona reportedly canceled the loan without clear justification, leading to domestic funding of PHP 2.09 billion (USD 36.8 million) from the Department of Budget and Management.

The Ombudsman noted that Gongona was aware of SRT-France's ineligibility during the bidding process and rejected his defense of relying on recommendations from BFAR committees. [Rappler]

Philippines: N. Mindanao parents urged to register for ‘i-Registro’ program

(elr)The Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) has called on pregnant women and parents of children under two years old in Northern Mindanao to register for the "i-Registro" system. Registration is essential to qualify for cash grants under the Kalusugan Mag-Nanay Act starting in January 2025.

Eligible participants will receive a monthly grant of PHP 350 (USD 6.15) to support the critical first 1,000 days of infant growth and development, as mandated by the act. The program aims to ensure proper early childhood development and improve maternal and child health in the region. [Philippine News Agency]

Philippines: Agriculture department to remove brand labels on imported rice to curb price manipulation

(elr) The Department of Agriculture (DA) plans to remove brand labels from imported rice varieties to address price manipulation in local markets. Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. announced the initiative, stating that "premium" and "special" labels are being used by some traders to inflate prices unfairly.

The measure, set for implementation next year, will exclude locally produced rice to protect farmers and domestic traders. This decision follows joint market inspections with the Department of Trade and Industry, which revealed potential profiteering by rice importers.

To further stabilize prices, the DA is considering invoking a food security emergency under the amended Rice Tariffication Law to release National Food Authority buffer stocks and exploring direct rice importation by Food Terminal Inc. Additionally, legal actions against profiteering under the Price Act are being reviewed. [Philippine News Agency]

Philippines: CICC requests greater funding to increase fight against cybercrimes

(elr) The Cybercrime Investigation and Coordinating Center (CICC) is seeking additional funds for 2025 to enhance its fight against cybercrimes, including ransomware and cyberfraud. Deputy Executive Director Mary Rose Magsaysay highlighted the need for cost-effective tools and ongoing support from the Department of Science and Technology (DOST) for research initiatives.

A PHP 15 million (USD 265,000) anti-smishing program, developed with De La Salle College of Saint Benilde and funded by the DOST, employs AI to detect phishing attempts. The CICC also plans to expand its digital forensics laboratory, the first globally dedicated to combating online sexual abuse and exploitation of children. Philipine News Agency]

Philippines: Magnitude 5.6 earthquake strikes Luzon

An earthquake of magnitude 5.6 struck Luzon, Philippines, on December 30, with its epicenter in Bangui, Ilocos Norte province. The quake occurred at a depth of 10 kilometers. While Phivolcs does not anticipate significant damage, aftershocks are likely given the quake's shallow depth.

The Philippines frequently experiences earthquakes as it lies within the Pacific Ocean's "Ring of Fire," a region known for intense seismic and volcanic activity. [Arab News]

Philippines: State of calamity declared in Baco due to severe flooding

(elr) The municipality of Baco in Oriental Mindoro has been declared under a state of calamity after extensive flooding caused by Tropical Depression Romina (locally known as Pabuk). The heavy rains triggered overflowing rivers, submerging homes, farmlands, and low-lying areas, and causing significant damage to roads, bridges, and utilities, leaving communities isolated.

Over 2,000 residents have been evacuated to shelters, with many in urgent need of food, clean water, and medical aid. Agricultural losses, including destroyed rice fields, threaten food security and economic stability in the region. [Manila Bulletin]

The state of calamity declaration enables access to emergency funds, price controls on essential goods, and accelerated relief efforts. Mayor Allan Roldan reported that nearly all barangays have been affected. While the local government and agencies have provided some aid, Roldan appealed for additional national government assistance, citing the enormity of the damage. [Mindoro Today]

Singapore: Prime Minister Wong to deliver Budget speech on February 18, 2025

(fi) Prime Minister Lawrence Wong will deliver Singapore's 2025 Budget statement on February 18, 2025, in Parliament. This will be his first Budget as prime minister, and it is expected to address key issues such as job security and the cost of living, which have been significant concerns for many Singaporeans.

In preparation for the Budget, Prime Minister Wong, who is also the Finance Minister, outlined four broad themes to be discussed, including economic strategies, opportunities for skills upgrading and job creation, support for Singaporeans across different life stages, and strengthening national solidarity as the country celebrates SG60.

Public consultations on these issues are ongoing, with feedback channels open through various platforms. The consultations will continue until January 12, 2025, with a public engagement session scheduled for January 16. [The Straits Times]

Singapore: POFMA action against Bloomberg, other media outlets

(fi) On December 23, Singapore's Ministry of Law issued a correction direction to Bloomberg and several other media outlets under the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA). This follows a Bloomberg article published on December 12 that raised concerns about the transparency of property transactions involving Good Class Bungalows (GCBs) in Singapore.

The government claimed that the article contained several false statements that undermined the transparency and regulatory framework surrounding property transactions. It was asserted that the article wrongly suggested that Singapore lacks proper public records for GCB transactions and fails to ensure transparency regarding the beneficial ownership of such properties. In fact, the government clarified that information on property ownership and transfers, including for GCBs, is available through the Integrated Land Information Service portal, and strict regulations require disclosure of all relevant details in property transactions, regardless of whether a caveat is lodged.

Bloomberg's article also implied that the government was not taking sufficient action to combat money laundering in property transactions, a claim the Ministry of Law refuted. The government emphasized that it is responsible for combating money laundering, and stringent anti-money laundering regulations are enforced through various sectors, including property agents and financial institutions.

As a result of these false claims, the Ministry directed Bloomberg to issue a correction notice on its website and social media platforms, including Facebook and X. Bloomberg complied but expressed disagreement with the correction, reserving its right to appeal. Additionally, The Edge Singapore, which had republished the Bloomberg article, was also required to carry the correction notice and remove the original piece. The Independent Singapore and The Online Citizen, which had further disseminated the false claims, were similarly instructed to post corrections.

Further legal action was considered by Law and Home Affairs Minister K. Shanmugam and Manpower Minister Tan See Leng, who were both named in the article, accusing them of involvement in non-transparent property dealings. They have since issued letters of demand to Bloomberg and other media outlets involved, and The Edge Singapore published an apology to the ministers, acknowledging that the

allegations were false and causing distress. [Singapore Government] [The Straits Times]

Singapore: Core inflation drops to lowest in nearly three years

(fi) Singapore's core inflation fell to 2.1 percent in October 2024, marking its lowest level since December 2021. This represents a sharp decline from 2.8 percent in September, outpacing expectations of 2.5 percent from economists polled by Bloomberg. The drop was attributed to slower price increases in services, electricity and gas, and retail goods, according to the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS) and the Ministry of Trade and Industry (MTI).

Overall inflation, which includes transport and housing costs, also eased to 1.4 percent year-on-year in October, the lowest since March 2021. This decline was driven by a steeper fall in private transport costs and moderated housing rents.

MAS and MTI highlighted easing global inflation, a stronger Singapore dollar, and slowing wage growth as key factors contributing to the inflation drop. Core inflation is expected to average 2.5 to 3 percent for 2024, down from 4.2 percent in 2023, and is projected to decline further to 1.5 to 2.5 percent in 2025. Overall inflation is similarly forecasted to drop, averaging 2.5 percent for 2024 and between 1.5 to 2.5 percent in 2025.

A significant factor in October's decline was the sharp drop in services inflation, which fell to 2.3 percent from 3.3 percent in September, due to smaller increases in holiday and healthcare expenses. Inflation for electricity and gas also dropped significantly, while retail goods inflation saw a steeper decline, notably in clothing, footwear, and health products.

Economists noted that these developments provide MAS with greater flexibility in monetary policy. While some analysts suggest that MAS may slow the strengthening of the Singapore dollar as inflation stabilizes, others caution against easing too soon, citing global uncertainties. Upcoming policy shifts, including Singapore’s 2025 Budget, are expected to address cost-of-living challenges and job security, further shaping the economic outlook. [ChannelNews Asia] [The Straits Times]

Singapore: Port handles record of over 40 million shipping containers in 2024

(lm) In 2024, Singapore's largest port operator, PSA, handled over 40 million shipping containers, or twenty-foot equivalent units (TEUs), marking a record-breaking feat. This surpasses the 2023 record of 39.01 million TEUs. The port, which includes terminals operated by both PSA and Jurong Port, is also set to achieve new records for total cargo throughput and bunker sales for the year.

The strong tripartite partnership and pro-business approach in the maritime sector have been credited for this achievement. PSA's previous record of 38.8 million TEUs was set in 2023. Transport Minister Chee Hong Tat acknowledged the milestone, emphasizing efforts to continue growing the maritime industry in 2025 and beyond to attract investments and create more jobs.

PSA also highlighted the construction of a new USD 647.5 million Tuas warehousing facility, which will be completed by 2027, further enhancing Singapore's port capabilities. When fully operational, Tuas Port will become the world's largest automated port with the capacity to handle 65 million TEUs.

This achievement reinforces Singapore's status as a key global trade hub, although the Port of Shanghai remains the busiest globally with over 50 million TEUs handled annually in 2024. [The Straits Times]

Singapore: Authorities investigate job listings linked to Chinese Communist Youth League

(fi) Singapore's Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) is investigating job listings allegedly posted by a supposed Ngee Ann Polytechnic branch of the Communist Youth League of China (CYLC), the youth wing of the Communist Party of China. The listings, published on LinkedIn on December 20, advertised roles for a party branch secretary and deputy branch secretary. Both the listings and the account responsible for posting them have since been removed.

Ngee Ann Polytechnic, one of Singapore's leading institutions of higher education, focuses on providing diploma-level courses across various fields, including engineering, business, and the arts. The alleged "branch" referenced in the listings does not exist, and

the polytechnic has clarified that it has no affiliations with any political parties.

The Chinese embassy in Singapore also labeled the job postings as fraudulent, noting that the organization referenced in the listings does not exist in China. [Asia One]

Thailand: Pheu Thai and Bhumjaithai reaffirm coalition unity amid challenges

(lm) The Pheu Thai Party and its coalition partner, the Bhumjaithai Party, have reiterated their commitment to maintaining government stability despite ongoing challenges. Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra and Interior Minister Anutin Charnvirakul, leader of Bhumjaithai, dismissed concerns of instability, emphasizing the coalition's ability to navigate differences and govern effectively. Anutin praised the government's strong majority in the House of Representatives and downplayed criticism suggesting the coalition was formed out of necessity rather than shared objectives. He reaffirmed that the coalition remains focused on fulfilling its electoral mandate.

Tensions between coalition partners have been highlighted by the Khao Kradong land dispute in Buri Ram, where the State Railway of Thailand (SRT) and the Department of Lands (DoL) are locked in a legal battle over 5,083 rai (approximately 814 hectares) of land. The controversy implicates the Chidchob family, influential in Bhumjaithai's stronghold province. Anutin urged patience as the Administrative Court deliberates on the matter. Pheu Thai's Transport Minister Suriya Jungrungreangkit has called for the revocation of 900 land title deeds linked to alleged malfeasance by the DoL. [Bangkok Post 1]

Amid these challenges, Prime Minister Paetongtarn denied rumors of a potential House dissolution, expressing confusion over their origin. The speculation gained traction after her father, former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, mentioned it during a campaign event in Chiang Mai. Thaksin, often regarded as Pheu Thai's de facto leader, called for unity among coalition parties, stressing the importance of cooperation to ensure the government completes its term, which runs until May 2027. [Bangkok Post 2]

Thaksin also dismissed rumors of a cabinet reshuffle and downplayed the likelihood of street protests despite criticism from former Yellow Shirt leader Sondhi Limthongkul over a 2001 maritime agreement between Thailand and Cambodia. Addressing critics,

Thaksin warned that while he has grown more measured with age, he would respond firmly to excessive attacks. He expressed confidence in the government's ability to address key issues such as household debt, drug trafficking, call center scams, and PM2.5 pollution, particularly in Chiang Mai.

Thaksin urged voters in Chiang Mai to support Pheu Thai in the upcoming Provincial Administrative Organization (PAO) election on February 1, 2025. He characterized a victory as a signal of Pheu Thai's broader resurgence in the province and encouraged former Move Forward Party supporters to realign with Pheu Thai in future elections. He also highlighted a government housing initiative offering affordable 99-year leases with monthly payments starting at THB 4,000 (USD 117.07), underscoring the administration's commitment to addressing public concerns. [Bangkok Post 3]

Thailand: Former 'Yellow Shirts' protest leaders plan new protests over 2001 MoU with Cambodia

(lm) Sondhi Limthongkul, a prominent Thai media tycoon and co-founder of the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), has announced plans for renewed demonstrations against the government over its handling of a 2001 memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Cambodia. The MoU concerns overlapping territorial claims in the Gulf of Thailand and is regarded by Sondhi's group as a threat to Thailand's sovereignty and marine resources.

Known for his pivotal role in leading large-scale protests against former prime ministers Thaksin Shinawatra and later Yingluck Shinawatra, Sondhi gained prominence in Thai politics during the mid-2000s. The PAD, also referred to as the "Yellow Shirts," was influential in Thailand's political crises, including the 2008 protests that culminated in the seizure of Bangkok's airports. Despite his media and political influence, Sondhi's reputation faced challenges following his conviction on financial charges in 2012, for which he later received a royal pardon.

In the current issue, Sondhi's group is pressuring the government to revoke the 2001 MoU signed between then-Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and his Cambodian counterpart Hun Sen. The agreement, which focuses on shared resource development, has been criticized by Sondhi's group for allegedly undermining Thai sovereignty in areas with overlapping maritime claims.

The group has accused the government, led by Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra, of inaction despite their demand to repeal the MoU and initiate Constitutional Court review. They argue that the agreement potentially validates Cambodia's territorial claims, which overlap with Thailand's rights to marine resources in the Gulf of Thailand.

Sondhi's group plans to escalate their campaign with rallies outside the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, parliament, and the Royal Thai Navy headquarters early next year to exert pressure on the government. Meanwhile, the prime minister has urged patience, asserting that the government is consulting relevant parties to address the sensitive issue prudently while protecting Thailand's negotiating position with Cambodia. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Ex-Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra may avoid prison if sentence reduced

(msz) Former Thai Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra – auntie of incumbent premier Paetongtarn Shinawatra – could qualify for out-of-prison detention if her five-year jail sentence is shortened by one year, according to the Department of Corrections. Sahakarn Phetnarin, the department's director-general, stated that new regulations set to take effect next month would apply to convicts with jail terms of four years or less. If Yingluck enters prison, she could petition for a royal pardon to have her sentence reduced, potentially allowing her to avoid incarceration.

Under the proposed rules, detainees on out-of-prison detention would be monitored using CCTV and, in some cases, electronic devices, except for individuals convicted of sexual offenses, violence, or serious narcotics crimes. Yingluck, who fled Thailand in 2017 to avoid sentencing for dereliction of duty in a rice-pledging scheme that resulted in losses of at least THB 500 billion (approximately USD 14.6 billion), remains a fugitive. A warrant for her arrest in the case is still active.

Her elder brother, ruling Pheu Thai Party supremo and former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who returned to Thailand last year and was paroled shortly after beginning his sentence, recently expressed optimism that Yingluck might return in April next year. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Parliament to review charter reform proposals in January 2025

(lm) Thailand's parliament is set to review multiple charter amendment proposals, including section-specific revisions and the People's Party (PP) bill to amend Section 256, during mid-January 2025. The proposals aim to address contentious aspects of the 2017 constitution. Parliament President Wan Muhamad Noor Matha confirmed that discussions with government, opposition, and Senate whips on January 8 will prioritize the review order, with initial readings scheduled for January 14-15.

The PP's proposed bill seeks to establish a charter-drafting assembly (CDA) and streamline the charter rewrite process by reducing the required referendums from three to two. Each referendum costs approximately THB 3 billion (USD 88 million). However, a 2021 Constitutional Court ruling mandates public approval for any complete rewrite and at least two referendums. While the opposition argues this approach could expedite the process to produce a new charter before the next general election in 2027, analysts remain skeptical about meeting this timeline. [Bangkok Post 1]

Delays persist due to a 180-day suspension period required after the House and Senate failed to agree on referendum rules for the amendment process. Chief government whip Wisut Chainarun emphasized the necessity of this cooling-off period, making immediate progress unlikely. Wan Muhamad also highlighted that Senate support and compliance with the court's interpretation are critical for advancing any reforms.

The charter reform proposals include targeted section-by-section amendments, which do not violate the court's ruling and offer a less contentious pathway. However, their inclusion in the parliamentary agenda does not guarantee passage. [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: Election Commission prepares for provincial administration elections

(lm) The Election Commission (EC) is ramping up preparations for the Provincial Administration Organization (PAO) elections, scheduled for February 1, 2025. Secretary-General Sawang Boonmee emphasized the importance of equipping provincial election commissioners and officers with the necessary technical skills and problem-solving abilities to handle unexpected challenges during the election process.

Speaking at a trainers' workshop, Sawang detailed the EC's guidelines and stressed the need for local EC offices to provide prompt and accurate assistance. He addressed criticism faced by the EC, particularly during the 2023 elections, attributing some of it to a lack of understanding of electoral laws. He encouraged those dissatisfied with the laws to advocate for reforms rather than accusing the EC of bias.

To enhance transparency and fairness, Sawang assured that election officers would operate strictly within legal frameworks. Reflecting on previous PAO elections, he highlighted that delays in result reporting —often caused by system overloads—are being addressed to improve efficiency.

Regarding allegations of potential election bribery in Prachin Buri, involving a reported THB 20 million (USD 586,100), Sawang confirmed that the EC would thoroughly investigate all complaints. He reiterated the EC's commitment to minimizing errors, ensuring transparency, and fostering public trust in the electoral process. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: NACC denies lobbying allegations in ex-Prime Minister Thaksin detention probe

(acs) The National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC) has denied allegations of lobbying to influence its investigation into former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's extended detention at the Police General Hospital (PGH) rather than prison.

NACC Secretary-General Sarote Phuengramphan refuted claims that attempts were made to replace Commissioner Ekkawit Watchawanku, who is overseeing the investigation. The allegations were made by activist and former red-shirt leader Jatuporn Prompan during a live Facebook session on December 25, suggesting lobbying may have originated within the NACC itself.

The NACC had earlier accepted the case for investigation, alleging preferential treatment allowed Thaksin to stay in a hospital ward for six months despite serving a one-year prison sentence, reduced from eight years following royal clemency. Officials from the Department of Corrections and PGH are under scrutiny for potentially enabling Thaksin to avoid prison under the pretext of medical concerns.

Jatuporn alleged that lobbying aimed to sideline Commissioner Ekkawit, a former Supreme Court chief

justice, to delay the investigation. However, Sarote emphasized that the probe is supervised by the entire panel of commissioners and remains on track, with evidence and witness testimonies already collected.

The investigation focuses on 12 officials from the Department of Corrections and PGH, addressing accusations that Thaksin's extended hospital stay was unwarranted. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Bhumjaithai Party cleared of receiving illegal donations

(lm) The Election Commission has dismissed four petitions seeking the dissolution of Parliament's second-largest party, the Bhumjaithai Party, stating that there was insufficient evidence to support the allegations of unlawful donations.

Saksayam Chidchob, a prominent figure within the Bhumjaithai Party, was involved in a controversy regarding his stake in Burijarearn Construction. The Constitutional Court removed him from his ministerial position in January 2024, after determining that he concealed his majority shareholding in the company, which gave him control over it. The law prohibits cabinet ministers from holding significant stakes in commercial businesses, especially those involved in government contracts. The petitions alleged that Burijarearn Construction won numerous contracts from the Ministry of Transport while Saksayam was in charge, and some of those proceeds were funneled to the Bhumjaithai Party.

However, the Election Commission stated that no evidence was found suggesting that Bhumjaithai knowingly accepted donations from illegal sources. Allegations regarding other potential sources of illegal donations, such as Silachai Buriram (1991) Co. and Supachai Kasemsutthi, were also dismissed due to lack of evidence.

The poll body noted that if new evidence were to emerge regarding illegal actions by donors, the case could be reconsidered. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Opposition People's Party leader Natthaphong most favored for premiership

(msz) A recent NIDA Poll reveals that opposition leader Natthapong Ruengpanyawut of the People's Party is the most favored candidate for Thailand's prime minister, narrowly surpassing incumbent Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra. The poll, conducted nationwide between December 19 and 24, sampled 2,000 respondents as part of quarterly surveys tracking political preferences.

Natthapong received support from 29.85 percent of respondents, with many citing his adherence to party principles and appeal to young voters. Close behind, Paetongtarn secured 28.80 percent, praised for her business experience, modern political outlook, and representation of the younger generation. Approximately 14.40 percent of respondents were undecided.

Other prime ministerial preferences included Energy Minister Pirapan Salirathavibhaga of the United Thai Nation Party (10.25 percent), Bhumjaithai Party leader Anutin Charnvirakul (6.45 percent), Thai Sang Thai Party leader Khunying Sudarat Keyuraphan (4.95 percent), Palang Pracharath leader Gen Prawit Wongsuwon (1.70 percent), and Democrat Party leader Chalermchai Sri-on (1.05 percent).

In terms of party popularity, the People's Party led with 37.30 percent support, followed by Pheu Thai at 27.70 percent. Other parties included Thai United Nation (10.60 percent), Bhumjaithai (5.15 percent), Democrat (3.40 percent), and Palang Pracharath (3.05 percent).

This marks a shift from previous polls, where Paetongtarn led in popularity for prime minister, though the People's Party remained the most favored political group. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Opposition People's Party unveils New Year resolutions

(msz) Thailand's main opposition People's Party (PP) has unveiled its New Year resolutions, emphasizing efforts to address national issues, promote reforms, and strengthen its position in the upcoming provincial administrative organization (PAO) elections.

The party reaffirmed its commitment to tackling pressing national issues directly while actively seeking public input to refine its approach. It underscored the importance of achieving success in local elections, particularly the PAO presidential races, as a way to demonstrate how local governance can improve the lives of communities.

Among its key legislative goals, the PP announced plans to propose a new education reform bill aimed at overhauling the national education system. The party also intends to introduce a Pollutant Release and Transfer Registration framework to enhance environmental accountability and a public information bill that would require state agencies to increase transparency. Further, the PP aims to pursue land reform legislation to enable farmers to reclaim rights to lands reclassified as forest areas, alongside a free-trade bill designed to break monopolies and promote fair business competition. A proposed reform of the armed forces seeks to end mandatory conscription, signaling a significant shift in military policy.

The PP emphasized its ambition to foster unity among Members of Parliament from all political parties, urging collaboration to prioritize the public interest. The party expressed its belief that through such parliamentary reforms, meaningful change could be achieved for the nation. [The Nation]

Thailand: Entertainment Complex Bill sparks concerns over casino focus

(lm) The proposed Entertainment Complex Bill, set to be presented to Thailand's cabinet by the Finance Ministry next month, has drawn criticism from the Stop Gambling Foundation for prioritizing casinos over broader economic and social benefits. The bill diverges from the initially promised Singapore-inspired model of luxury entertainment complexes featuring hotels, malls, and conference venues, focusing instead on casinos as the primary attraction.

Key elements like concert venues and robust oversight mechanisms are notably absent. Critics, including foundation secretary-general Thanakorn Komkrit, highlight vague tax collection details and the lack of a dedicated agency to address gambling-related harms. Provisions allowing 30-year casino licenses and land leases of up to 99 years further amplify concerns about investor favoritism and potential money laundering risks.

The bill proposes entry fees for Thai citizens capped at THB 5,000 (USD 146.59), which could be waived, making casinos more accessible locally. The policy board, chaired by the prime minister, would have authority over complex locations, licenses, and tax rates without requiring public consultation.

Deputy Finance Minister Julapun Amornvivat defended the bill, claiming it could boost GDP by 0.2 percent

during the investment phase and 0.7 percent post-operation. The Finance Ministry projects investments exceeding THB 100 billion (USD 2.93 billion) per complex, with annual revenues of THB 40–50 billion (USD 1.17–1.46 billion). However, concerns remain about the bill's focus on casinos and unclear benefits for the broader economy. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Banks sued over mobile app breach

(lm) An auditing firm in Udon Thani has filed complaints against three banks after allegedly losing THB 2 million (USD 60,000) in 30 seconds due to a mobile banking app breach.

A board member of the firm reported the incident to Udon Thani police, accusing the banks of violating the Bank of Thailand's security measures. She stated that scammers had hacked into three accounts used by the firm, transferring THB 49,999 (USD 1,500) per transaction.

The first account saw THB 199,999 (USD 6,000) siphoned through four transactions, while the second account lost an identical amount. The third account was drained of THB 1,999,999 (USD 60,000) through 40 withdrawals. The banks failed to notify the firm of the unauthorized activities.

The board member claimed that two banks froze the accounts after detecting unusual withdrawals, but the third bank acted only after police intervention. She accused this bank of providing inadequate guidance on recovering the stolen funds and failing to address formal complaints.

The firm has filed charges against all three banks for neglecting security protocols and against the third bank for its delayed response. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Banks, telecoms face tougher scam laws

(lm/hrs) The Thai government is introducing stricter regulations for banks and mobile phone network operators to enhance their role in combating online scams. An executive decree, soon to be published in the Royal Gazette, will mandate these entities to act swiftly against scam-related activities or face accountability.

Deputy Minister Prasert Jantararuangtong announced that mobile operators must promptly remove suspicious messages, such as those containing clickbait, to prevent potential financial losses. Additionally, the decree will empower authorities to track and freeze fraudulent transactions faster, reducing the current recovery timeframe from one to two years to within six months.

Inspired by practices in countries like Singapore, the measures aim to enhance the freezing of bank accounts tied to scams and expedite restitution for victims.

The announcement aligns with former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra's recent remarks about tackling call center scams operating from neighboring countries, such as Cambodia and Myanmar. Thaksin, the de facto leader of the ruling Pheu Thai Party and father of incumbent premier Paetongtarn Shinawatra, offered to mobilize Thai resources to address these issues if regional governments fail to act decisively.

Prime Minister Paetongtarn emphasized the importance of public awareness during her visit to the Royal Thai Police headquarters. She highlighted the "Cyber Check" online platform, which allows users to verify phone numbers and bank accounts against police blacklists to avoid scams. [Bangkok Post 1]

Meanwhile, Thai authorities have intensified their crackdown on scam networks, recently uncovering a sophisticated phone scam operation routed through Singapore. The Technology Crime Suppression Division (TCSD) arrested a 19-year-old Chinese national, Minghong, and his girlfriend in Bangkok's Bang Kapi district. Minghong, residing on a student visa, allegedly operated a network spanning 14 properties across Bangkok. Advanced technologies, including SIM-less devices and virtual SIM cards, were used to evade detection.

The investigation began after a victim in Ayutthaya lost THB 10,600 (USD 311) to scammers. A month-long probe led to the seizure of telecommunications equipment such as routers and surveillance systems during a raid on a Ramkhamhaeng apartment. Police Commissioner Thatchai Pitaneelaboot emphasized the need for faster cooperation from banks and telecom providers, particularly in blocking mule accounts used for fraudulent transactions. [Khaosod English]

In a related operation, the Metropolitan Police Bureau (MPB) arrested four Chinese nationals linked to another scam network during coordinated raids across eight Bangkok locations. The suspects, aged 29 to 32,

were apprehended in Bang Na district, where authorities seized laptops and flash drives. Three of the men were charged with overstaying and illegal assembly, while the fourth faced charges for failing to report his residence to immigration authorities. [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: Court acquits four in high-profile Forex-3D case, hands down prison terms to remaining three

(hrs) The Criminal Court has delivered a landmark ruling in the high-profile Forex-3D Ponzi scheme, which defrauded nearly 10,000 investors of THB 2.49 billion (USD 68.12 million). The court acquitted four defendants, including celebrity couple Pattanapon "DJ Man" Kunjara and Suteewan "Baitoey" Thaweesin, while sentencing three others to 49,125 years in prison each, capped at 20 years under Thai law.

The Forex-3D Ponzi scheme, masterminded by Apirak Kothi, lured investors with promises of high returns from foreign exchange trading between 2015 and 2020. The scheme collapsed, leaving 9,825 victims. The court ordered restitution of THB 2.47 billion (USD 67.59 million) plus 7.5 percent annual interest from April 2021 to compensate the victims.

Among the seven defendants, three—Chatchai Khotchathin, Theeraphassakorn Kimwangtako, and Suranart Nakmusik—were found guilty of orchestrating the scheme and sentenced to 49,125 years each for 9,825 offences, though their prison terms are capped at 20 years. They were also ordered to pay the court-mandated restitution.

The court acquitted four defendants, including Singaporean Daryl Cai Yonghui and the celebrity couple Pattanapon and Suteewan. The court ruled that evidence, such as a photograph of the couple with Apirak, was unrelated to the scheme, being connected to a separate business activity. Similarly, insufficient evidence against Daryl Cai established his innocence.

Justice Minister Pol Col Tawee Sodsong highlighted that Pattanapon, detained for 570 days, and Suteewan, jailed for 191 days, could seek compensation for wrongful detention under Thai law. This includes THB 500 (USD 14.72) per day, along with medical expenses and legal fees.

Prosecutors have 30 days to appeal the acquittals, leaving the case's final resolution uncertain. [Bangkok Post 1] [Bangkok Post 2] [The Star]

Thailand: Political reporters criticize lack of rising political stars

(lm) For the third consecutive year, Thai political reporters have declined to name any parliamentarian as a "rising star," citing the absence of noteworthy achievements or impactful leadership. Instead, two figures—General Prawit Wongsuwon, leader of the Palang Pracharath Party, and Tisana Choonhavan, an opposition MP from the People's Party—were labeled as "fallen stars" due to their perceived failures.

Gen. Prawit, a former deputy prime minister and army chief, has faced criticism for his lack of participation in parliamentary sessions and poor leadership within Palang Pracharath. His health and political influence have waned, with his party failing to secure cabinet positions in the current coalition government. Additionally, a faction of his party defected to form the Klatham Party, further diminishing his political standing.

Tisana, a descendant of former Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan, was initially seen as a promising figure in parliament but faltered due to repeated inaccuracies during debates. Her human rights advocacy, including calls to address the status of Myanmar refugees in Thailand, was poorly received, drawing significant criticism.

Natthaphong Ruengpanyawut, opposition leader and chief of the People's Party, earned the nickname "Thengteng" (aimlessly floating) for his subdued leadership, which has failed to energize the party following the dissolution of its predecessor, the Move Forward Party. In contrast, former Move Forward leader Pita Limjaroenrat remains a prominent figure whose image is still used for election campaigning.

The "quote of the year" was attributed to Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra's election promise to "make Thai people prosper and be honored." This statement has since been mocked on social media amidst public dissatisfaction with the economic situation. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Media struggles with financial woes and press freedom challenges in 2024

(bk) The Thai Journalists Association (TJA) has labeled 2024 as the "Year of Hardships" for Thailand's print and broadcast media, which are grappling with changing consumer behavior in accessing information. As more people turn to digital and social media platforms for their news, traditional media outlets are experiencing a sharp decline in advertising revenues, readership, and audiences.

Mass layoffs and pay cuts for media professionals

The decline in advertising revenue has led to several mass layoffs and closures of major news outlets. Voice TV, after 15 years of operation, closed its doors in May. Mono 29 TV laid off 100 staff members, Thai Rath newspaper introduced a voluntary early retirement program, and Channel 3 TV recently laid off 300 employees. To survive, some media outlets have increasingly turned to government agencies and large corporations for funding, which could compromise their independence and ability to serve as a check on power. [Thai PBS World]

Growing climate of self-censorship

Alongside financial difficulties, the media in Thailand has faced several incidents of harassment in 2024. One notable case was the arrest of two independent journalists in February for photographing a political activist spray-painting an anarchist symbol and a crossed-out number 112, in reference to Thailand's lèse-majesté law, on the wall of the Grand Palace. The arrests were described as "an act of intimidation," spreading fear regarding the reporting of sensitive topics. [Committee to Protect Journalists]

Another case involved General Prawit Wongsuwan, leader of the Palang Pracharath party, who was filmed slapping a journalist from Thai PBS after being asked to comment on the appointment of Paetongtarn Shinawatra as prime minister in August. Prawit lashed out, expressing anger over the journalist’s questions. His actions were widely condemned as a threat to press freedom, with the broadcaster’s executive editor emphasizing the need to protect journalists’ rights to ensure unhindered media work. [The Guardian]

A third incident occurred in September where Adisorn Piengkes, a senior Pheu Thai MP, used a parliamentary session to call for the removal of certain programs from Thai PBS, accusing them of political bias and relentless government criticism. [The Standard, in Thai]

Thailand: 20 foreign sex workers arrested in Pattaya

(lm) Authorities in Pattaya arrested 20 foreign women on charges of providing sex services, following complaints from locals and tourists about their activities along the beach. The suspects, aged 26 to 51, include nine Ugandans, eight Uzbeks, two Madagascans, and one Rwandan.

Police monitored their behavior before confirming their involvement in soliciting sex. The women admitted to the charges, were fined, and had their visas revoked to enable deportation. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Government pledges support for laid-off auto parts workers

(lm) Labour Minister Phiphat Ratchakitprakarn has assured assistance for 859 former employees of Yarnapund Company Limited, who were laid off without severance pay following the company's November 26 announcement. The workers, who produced exhaust systems and press parts, are struggling financially, prompting about 200 of them to petition the Ministry of Labour for intervention.

Minister Phiphat urged workers to file complaints with labour inspectors to initiate legal proceedings and access welfare funds. The ministry will also summon the company's management for discussions. The Department of Employment will help match affected workers with new jobs, while the Social Security Office will provide unemployment benefits equal to 50 percent of monthly wages for up to 180 days.

Tensions rose after Yarnapund failed to honor its severance payment schedule, which promised staggered payouts. Protests erupted outside the company and the owner's home, with demonstrators vowing to continue until payments are made. Workers, some facing homelessness, remain determined to escalate protests if swift action is not taken. The labour union welcomed the minister's promise but stressed the urgency of tangible outcomes. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Minister condemns exploitation of disabled individual in tragic death

(lm) Social Development and Human Security Minister Varawut Silpa-archa has condemned the exploitation

of Thanakarn "Bank Lester" Kanthee, a 27-year-old disabled man, who died after consuming excessive alcohol at a party in Chanthaburi. Thanakarn reportedly participated in a drinking challenge after being promised THB 10,000 (USD 294) per bottle of whisky by party host Ekkachart Meephrom.

Ekkachart has been arrested and charged with recklessness causing death, with additional investigations uncovering ties to a gambling website. Influencer Thirawat Srirong, who allegedly posted clips of Thanakarn being teased, has also been charged with importing obscene data.

Minister Varawut called the incident a stark reminder of society's duty to protect disabled individuals, urging it to be the last such case of exploitation. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Mangrove forests to receive land tax exemption to boost conservation efforts

(hrs) The Thai government has approved a land tax exemption for privately owned mangrove forests, effective January 1, 2025, to promote conservation and combat ecological degradation. The move, spearheaded by the Department of Marine and Coastal Resources (DMCR), aims to preserve the country's 1.1 million rai (approximately 1.76 million acres) of mangrove forests.

Under the Land and Building Tax Act of 2019, unused or vacant land is taxed at a higher rate than agricultural areas, prompting some landowners to convert mangrove wetlands into agricultural farms to reduce tax burdens. By waiving taxes on mangrove lands classified as green areas, the policy seeks to mitigate such conversions and encourage ecological stewardship.

Mangrove forests play a critical role in sustaining marine biodiversity, serving as nurseries for aquatic species, protecting coastlines from natural disasters, preventing erosion, and acting as carbon sinks to combat climate change. To qualify for the exemption, land must be designated as green areas with vegetation as the primary component, providing environmental benefits and not being used for profit except through certified carbon credit trading under the Thailand Voluntary Emission Reduction Program (T-VER).

In collaboration with agencies such as the Fiscal Policy Office and the Local Administration Department, the DMCR is actively working to conserve mangrove zones and enhance their fertility. Initiatives include distributing mangrove seedlings to encourage planting on private lands. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: NEPC halts renewable energy purchase amid public concern over procurement process

(bk) On December 25, the National Energy Policy Council (NEPC) decided to suspend the purchase of 3,668.5 megawatts of electricity from renewable sources and to establish a team to investigate the procurement process. This decision came after public concerns were raised regarding the methods and processes used to select electricity providers under the renewable energy purchase project. Critics feared that the project could disproportionately benefit certain corporations, potentially undermining the public interest.

The Energy Regulatory Commission (ERC) launched the power purchase initiative in 2022, aiming to procure a total of 5,203 megawatts of renewable energy under a feed-in-tariff (FiT) scheme, which is set to run until 2030. The first phase of the project was completed, and in March 2023, the ERC approved the second phase, which included the purchase of 3,668.5 megawatts. However, after the selection committee announced the list of approved power producers on December 16, public concern over the process intensified.

In response, the NEPC meeting, chaired by Deputy Prime Minister and Energy Minister Pirapan Salirathavibhaga, agreed to halt contract signings between the approved power producers and the three electricity authorities -- the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT), Provincial Electricity Authority (PEA), and Metropolitan Electricity Authority (MEA) -- until the investigation team completes its work. The NEPC also stated that the investigation would involve consulting with the Office of the Council of State regarding legal issues and the ERC's authority in the power purchase scheme.

In addition to suspending the renewable energy purchase contracts, the NEPC meeting also approved an extension of the measure to purchase power from small and very small producers under non-firm contracts. This measure, which was set to expire on December 31, 2023, will now be extended for an

additional two years, lasting until December 31, 2026. [The Nation]

Thailand: Government reports progress toward 2050 carbon neutrality goals

(hrs) Thailand is advancing toward its 2050 carbon neutrality target, according to the Department of Climate Change and Environment (DCCE). In its First Biennial Transparency Report (BTR1) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the country detailed its emission reductions and efforts to meet global climate commitments.

In 2022, Thailand reduced greenhouse gas emissions by 65.23 million metric tons ($MtCO_2eq$), achieving 30.4 percent of its Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) under the Paris Agreement. Plans are underway to raise this target to 40 percent. The report also noted the transfer of 1,916 tCO_2eq of international carbon credits and pilot climate projects across six provinces.

Thailand has received USD 1.1 billion (THB 38.6 billion) in international support for climate-related initiatives but faces challenges in addressing emissions from key sectors like energy, transport, and agriculture. The government remains committed to achieving carbon neutrality by 2050 and net-zero emissions by 2065. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Drafting of new bill on regulation of trade in oil and gas finalized

(msz) Thailand's Energy Minister Pirapan Salirathavibhaga announced the completion of a draft bill aimed at regulating oil and gas trade to ensure fairness for stakeholders, stabilize consumer prices, enhance energy security, and liberalize oil imports.

The proposed legislation introduces a "cost plus" pricing system to calculate domestic oil and gas prices, limiting price adjustments to a monthly basis and reflecting actual production costs rather than neighboring countries' prices. Domestic oil traders will be required to justify price changes under the new framework.

The bill also seeks to empower transport operators, farmers, and fishing groups to import oil for personal use. It includes provisions to promote solar energy, replace the Oil Fuel Fund Office with a regulatory

commission, and establish a Strategic Petroleum Reserve, increasing Thailand's oil reserves from 50 to 90 days.

Pirapan emphasized consumer fairness as a priority while collaborating with five legal and energy experts to craft the draft, including former energy permanent secretary Arkhun Sitthipong and representatives of the Council of State. [Thai PBS World]

Thailand: Cabinet approves minimum wage increase, tax breaks, and expanded handout scheme

(hrs/acs) Thailand's cabinet, led by Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra, has approved a package of economic measures aimed at stimulating growth, including an increase in the minimum wage, tax incentives, and an expansion of the government's flagship handout program. These initiatives reflect the government's goal of achieving over 3 percent economic growth in 2025. However, the private sector has raised concerns about potential challenges stemming from the wage hike, particularly for small businesses. [Reuters]

Effective January 1, 2025, the daily minimum wage will rise by an average of 2.9 percent, ranging from THB 337 (USD 9.88) to THB 400 (USD 11.72) depending on the province. The highest rates will apply in industrial and tourist hubs such as Phuket, Chon Buri, Rayong, and Samui Island. Most provinces will see smaller increases of approximately 2 percent.

While the wage adjustment has been generally welcomed, organizations like the Thai Chamber of Commerce (TCC) and the Board of Trade of Thailand have expressed concerns about its potential impact on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Poj Aramwattananont, vice-chairman of both organizations, emphasized the need for government intervention to support small businesses, which may struggle with increased costs.

In response, the Department of Internal Trade has pledged to monitor prices and production costs to ensure that the wage increase does not lead to significant inflation or undue economic pressure on businesses. [Bangkok Post]

The government also approved a tax deduction of up to THB 50,000 (USD 1,464) to stimulate domestic spending. The tax incentive, which excludes travel-related expenses, will be available between January 16

and February 28, 2025. Specific categories eligible for the deduction are expected to be detailed in the coming weeks.

As part of its broader economic strategy, the cabinet approved the second phase of the government's handout program, allocating THB 40 billion (USD 1.17 billion) to support four million elderly citizens. Payments under this phase are scheduled to be distributed by January.

The program's initial phase, launched in September 2024, provided payments of THB 10,000 (USD 293) to approximately 14.5 million recipients. The government plans to extend the program to reach 45 million individuals nationwide. [Reuters]

Thailand: Tax measures to take effect in 2025

(bk) In 2025, Thailand will implement several tax adjustments, including a new top-up tax for multinational corporations, a continuation of reduced excise tax rates for entertainment venues, and the introduction of a "salt tax" to address health concerns. Increased excise tax on batteries is also on the table.

New top-up tax to enforce 15 percent OECD Global Minimum Tax for multinationals

Thailand's top-up tax for multinational corporations is scheduled to take effect on January 1, in alignment with the global minimum tax (GMT) initiative led by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

This tax policy is part of Thailand's commitment to the OECD's Global Anti-Base Erosion (GloBE) rules, which require large multinationals to meet a 15 percent minimum effective tax rate in every country where they operate. If a multinational corporation pays less than 15 percent corporate income tax in Thailand, it will be required to pay the difference to reach the 15 percent threshold. This payment can be made either in Thailand, where the corporation is operating, or in the country where the parent company is headquartered.

By allowing the difference to be paid in Thailand, the government aims to secure additional tax revenue and protect its fiscal interests. Deputy Finance Minister Julapun Amornvivat estimates the tax will contribute over THB 10 billion (USD 294 million) annually to state revenue. [The Nation]

Excise tax for entertainment venues kept at 5 percent

The Thai Cabinet has approved an extension of tax reduction measures for pubs, bars, nightclubs, and cocktail lounges for another year, from January 1 to December 31, 2025. The excise tax rate for these entertainment venues will continue to be reduced from 10 percent to 5 percent of their revenue, extending the initiative that was originally set to expire at the end of 2024.

This decision aligns with the government's broader strategy to stimulate the tourism industry, particularly through the "Amazing Thailand Grand Tourism Year 2025" campaign, which aims to boost local community income and attract more tourists to the country. Deputy Finance Minister Paopoom Rojanasakul explained that this tax reduction will encourage tourist spending, enhance liquidity, reduce business costs, and create jobs, all of which will contribute to overall economic growth.

The measures, introduced in 2024, have successfully brought more entertainment and leisure businesses into the formal tax system, with the number of registered businesses increasing by 60.9 percent, thus expanding the tax base. Excise tax revenue from these sectors also rose by 31.2 percent. [Bangkok Post 1]

"Salt tax" to be introduced in 2025

Thailand is set to introduce a "salt tax" in 2025, structured in a tiered system based on sodium levels in food products. This tax aims to incentivize Thais, who are currently consuming twice the recommended amount of sodium, to cut back.

Similar to the sugar tax introduced 7-8 years ago, which led to a reduction in sugar content by beverage producers, the salt tax will target food products with higher sodium content. Snacks are expected to be the first products affected, as they are considered non-essential foods. Foods with higher sodium levels will incur a higher tax, while those with lower sodium content will face a lower rate.

Tax hikes for batteries under consideration

In addition to the salt tax, the Excise Department is considering changes to the tax on batteries to encourage environmental sustainability. Currently, batteries are taxed at an 8 percent rate, but under the new system, the tax would depend on factors such as energy density and the battery's life cycle. Batteries with higher energy density relative to their weight would face a lower tax rate, while those with less

energy density would be taxed more. Batteries that can withstand more charge cycles will also be taxed less than those with fewer charge cycles.

The Excise Department has set a target of THB 609 billion (USD 18 billion) in total excise tax revenue for fiscal 2025, marking a 16 percent increase from the previous year. [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: Final phase of 30-baht universal healthcare plan to launch nationwide

(lm) Thailand's landmark 30-baht universal healthcare scheme will complete its rollout with the final phase starting January 1, 2025, in 31 provinces, including Chon Buri, Surat Thani, and Khon Kaen. Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra, who led the launch event, highlighted the program's success in reducing personal medical expenses and preventing debt from costly treatments.

This scheme, aimed at improving access to healthcare, leverages a digital platform to enhance efficiency. Medical records are now linked across hospitals under the scheme, allowing patients to access care by presenting their ID cards. Additionally, a mobile application enables appointment booking, telemedicine consultations, and home delivery of prescribed medications, eliminating the need for hospital visits for minor conditions. The delivery services are also creating community-level employment opportunities.

The healthcare plan has attracted 80,000 new subscribers this year, marking a significant milestone. It also includes proactive measures to promote public well-being, such as the establishment of nationwide Palliative Care Centers to support the elderly. These centers aim to employ 15,000 carers, focusing on new job seekers and retirees.

Other initiatives include free distribution of test kits for detecting illnesses like HIV, cervical cancer, and kidney disease. Comprehensive mental health support and upgraded City Hall-run hospitals in Bangkok's 50 districts are also part of the government's commitment to enhancing healthcare services.

This final phase marks the full implementation of the scheme, which was initially introduced in 46 provinces earlier this year, including Bangkok. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Decision on Kittiratt's Bank of Thailand chairmanship pending

(lm) The Council of State, acting as the government's legal adviser, has denied reports claiming it ruled Kittiratt Na-Ranong ineligible for the role of Bank of Thailand (BoT) board chairman. According to Pakorn Nilprapunt, secretary-general of the Council, the issue of Kittiratt's eligibility is still under review, with a decision expected soon.

Kittiratt, a former commerce minister and adviser to ex-prime minister Srettha Thavisin, is a leading candidate to succeed Porametee Vimolsiri. However, concerns have been raised about whether his advisory role constitutes a political position, which could disqualify him based on rules protecting the central bank's independence.

The Finance Ministry sought legal clarification from the Council, and Finance Minister Pichai Chunhavajira anticipates receiving the Council's response within days. Meanwhile, the ministry has assured that if Kittiratt is deemed ineligible, the deputy chairman, currently the BoT governor, will temporarily fulfill the chairman's responsibilities to avoid disruption. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: New regulation eases alcohol restrictions at airports on Buddhist holidays

(bk) The Thai government has eased the long-standing alcohol ban on national Buddhist days, permitting alcohol to be served at restaurants and cafes within international airports on the five national Buddhist days: Makha Bucha Day, Visakha Bucha Day, Asarnha Bucha Day, Buddhist Lent Day, and the end of Buddhist Lent. The revised regulation, effective from December 26, replaces the 2015 rule, which prohibited alcohol sales on these days but allowed exceptions only for airport duty-free shops.

The change follows years of advocacy by entertainment venue operators, who argued that, while Thailand is a predominantly Buddhist country, it is also a secular state with a diverse population. They pointed out that the alcohol ban posed challenges for foreign investors and travelers who do not adhere to Buddhist prohibitions on alcohol. Also, despite the ban, alcohol remained nevertheless accessible through unregulated outlets such as small grocery stores and some restaurants. The revised regulation aims to

enhance practicality and convenience while still respecting Buddhist traditions outside of airport premises. [The Nation]

Thailand: Pattaya and EEC property markets poised for growth amid high demand and Chinese investments

(bk) Experts predict significant growth in the property markets of Pattaya, a popular tourist destination on the eastern Gulf coast of Thailand in Chonburi Province, about 147 kilometers southeast of Bangkok, and the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC), driven by rising demand for beachside condominiums and the relocation of production bases by Chinese entrepreneurs.

The supply of condominiums in Pattaya has reached a five-year high in 2024, with 116,075 units launched since 2011, of which 76.29 percent have been sold. Demand for luxury condominiums, especially in beachside areas like Wong Amat and Jomtien, remains strong, with new projects expected in 2025 in these locations, as well as Na Jomtien and the city center. Major Bangkok-based developers such as Origin Property, Riviera Group, Sansiri, and AssetWise are leading the development of these projects, fueling the condominium market's growth.

Numerous property projects have been launched in the EEC over the past five years. Property buyers in the area include investors and employees working in industrial estates, particularly those earning THB 20,000-50,000 (USD 588-1,470) per month, with Chinese production relocations to the Amata City Chonburi Industrial Estate boosting demand. Apartment rental rates in the EEC have surged by 80-90 percent, reflecting a strong demand for both residential and rental properties in the region. [The Nation]

Thailand: High pesticide levels found in fruit, including organic certified dragon fruit

(lm) A study by the Thai Pesticide Alert Network (Thai-PAN) revealed hazardous pesticide residues exceeding safety standards in most fruit samples tested, including jujubes, oranges, apples, guavas, and dragon fruit. Conducted between November 27 and December

11, the analysis involved 85 samples collected from supermarkets and fresh markets across 12 provinces.

The findings indicated widespread contamination, with residues from chlorpyrifos—a chemical banned in Thailand since June 2020—detected in multiple samples, including imported mandarins from China and domestically grown fruits. All jujube samples tested were found to exceed safety limits, with six showing high chlorpyrifos levels. Among the orange samples, 14 out of 17 surpassed safety thresholds, while apples and guavas exhibited fewer violations but still showed concerning levels of pesticide residues. Notably, one sample of organic-certified dragon fruit contained hazardous residue levels exceeding standard values.

Thai-PAN plans to forward these results to government authorities to examine certification processes and improve food safety measures. Similar issues were found in earlier tests of imported Shine Muscat grapes, highlighting ongoing challenges in ensuring safe agricultural practices. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Authorities seize USD 29,000 million worth of uncertified Chinese goods

(lm) Thai Consumer Protection Police Division (CPPD) officers, in collaboration with the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), confiscated over 25,000 uncertified Chinese-made products worth THB 1 million (USD 29,000) during raids on eight supermarkets in Bangkok.

The supermarket owners face charges under Section 6(10) of the 1979 Food Act, which carries a maximum fine of THB 30,000 (USD 870). Authorities said the raids, conducted from December 2 to 28, aimed to curb the smuggling of uncertified goods ahead of the New Year holidays, when demand for gift hampers surges.

The operation was also linked to recent incidents of children being hospitalized for food allergies after consuming imported snacks without FDA approval. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: State railway ready to assume control of high-speed rail project

(lm) The State Railway of Thailand (SRT) has announced its readiness to take over the delayed high-speed rail project connecting Suvarnabhumi, Don Mueang, and U-Tapao airports. The project, overseen by Asia Era One, a joint venture led by CP Group, has faced a five-year delay, prompting concerns from the Eastern Economic Corridor Policy Committee (EECP). The EECP is a government body tasked with overseeing and driving economic development in Thailand's Eastern Economic Corridor, a key region for industrial, infrastructure, and investment initiatives.

SRT Governor Veeris Ammarapala stated that if the contractor fails to make progress, the SRT could assume the project without redesigning the existing blueprint, ensuring minimal further delays. The estimated investment of THB 120 billion (USD 3.6 billion) could be covered by the government-backed agency. The final decision, expected by January, would include an investigation into the causes of the delay and the responsible parties.

If the SRT assumes control, the project may operate under a Public-Private Partnership (PPP) model or through its subsidiary, SRT Electrified Train Co Ltd, which manages the Red Line commuter services. The SRT is committed to addressing the stalled construction between Bang Sue and Don Mueang stations.

In related developments, the government's Land Traffic System Regulation Committee has approved the Yellow Line monorail extension from Lat Phrao to Ratchayothin, connecting it to the BTS Green and MRT Blue lines. The committee also approved a revised extension of the Red Line to Mahachai, starting at Wongwian Yai instead of Hua Lamphong. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: High-speed rail projects face delays and operational review

(lm) Thailand's high-speed rail project has encountered significant delays, prompting the State Railway of Thailand (SRT) Board to approve extensions for three key contracts under the Thai-Chinese collaboration. The setbacks have been attributed to issues such as delays in land expropriation and the relocation of oil pipelines.

The Nava Nakhon-Ban Pho section, originally scheduled for completion on January 23, 2025, has been extended by 452 days to April 20, 2026, following an earlier 163-day adjustment. The Don Muang-Nava

Nakhon section, initially set to finish on January 3, 2025, has seen its timeline pushed back by 641 days to October 7, 2026, due to design adjustments and pipeline challenges. The Phra Kaew-Saraburi section has experienced the most significant delay, with its completion now extended by 780 days from January 3, 2025, to February 23, 2027, due to land transfer complications.

In light of these delays, the SRT Board is reassessing operational plans for the Bangkok-Nakhon Ratchasima route, previously outlined in a 2017 cabinet resolution. Instead of forming a new management unit under the SRT, the agency is exploring a Public-Private Partnership (PPP) model for the entire route from Bangkok to Nong Khai.

To evaluate this approach, the SRT has allocated THB 40 million (USD 1.17 million) for consultancy services, with findings expected within six to eight months. The Department of Rail Transport has expressed support for the PPP model, emphasizing its potential to reduce the financial burden on the government. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Defense Ministry engages on military-run businesses

(lm) The Thai Defense Ministry has expressed its readiness to address inquiries regarding the proposed transfer of businesses operated by the armed forces, Defense Minister Phumtham Wechayachai announced during a meeting with a special House committee studying the issue. The initiative aims to improve transparency and governance of military-run enterprises such as hotels, golf courses, and welfare projects.

Defense Ministry representatives, including Deputy Defense Minister Gen Natthapon Nakpanich and defense permanent secretary Sanitchanok Sangkhachan, participated in the discussions alongside armed forces representatives. Minister Phumtham assured the committee that necessary legal amendments would be expedited and updates provided regularly.

Key topics included the navy's ongoing transfer of its power production business in Sattahip, Chon Buri, to the Provincial Electricity Authority (PEA). Regarding the Kantarat Golf Course at Don Mueang Airport, the air force indicated it would retain supervision due to its sensitive location.

Critics, including members of the opposition People's Party, have called for greater transparency in the operation of military-run assets such as racecourses, boxing stadiums, and broadcasting stations. Study panel member Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit urged the army to expedite the submission of finance-related reports to ensure accountability. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Defense Council approves military downsizing plan

(lm) The Defense Council, chaired by Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Phumtham Wechayachai, has approved a white paper outlining plans to downsize the armed forces and cut military spending as part of the strategic plan for 2026–2037. The initiative aims to streamline operations, reduce personnel, and align defense policies with the national strategy.

The approved framework seeks a 5 percent personnel reduction by 2027, with a focus on cutting senior roles by 50 percent through early retirement programs by 2028. It also plans to limit intake from military education institutes and adjust conscription levels to align with mission needs. Additionally, voluntary recruits will replace personnel in combat and support units.

The council also discussed amendments to the Defense Act, initially drafted by former Defense Minister Sutin Klungsang, which will be revised based on feedback before submission to the cabinet and Parliament. The meeting reaffirmed Thailand's commitment to neutrality in global affairs while emphasizing disaster response operations and voluntary enlistment initiatives.

The Defense Ministry stated that the white paper provides a cohesive framework for enhancing military preparedness and aligning the armed forces with modern strategic needs. [Bangkok Post]

Timor-Leste: Study confirms viability of Greater Sunrise gas fields development

(lm) An independent study conducted by British Wood, a global consulting and engineering firm specializing in energy and liquefied natural gas (LNG) feasibility studies, confirmed that developing the Greater Sunrise gas fields in Timor-Leste is viable and the most

advantageous option for the nation. The study, carried out between April and November 2024, evaluated four potential development paths: Timor-Leste Liquefied Natural Gas (TLNG), Darwin LNG, Ichthys LNG, and a new LNG facility in Australia. While all options were technically feasible, the TLNG option emerged as offering the greatest economic and social benefits for Timor-Leste.

The TLNG option promises lower operating costs (OPEX), substantial returns for Timor-Leste's economy, and a significant positive impact on Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and job creation. It also provides the highest returns for the Sunrise Joint Venture, the consortium managing the project, and aligns with Australia's interest in achieving better upstream returns.

The study considered various factors, including engineering, technology, financing, environmental impacts, and socio-economic outcomes. It emphasized TLNG's potential to drive sustainable development in Timor-Leste while offering competitive advantages to Australia.

In a joint statement on December 21, Timor-Leste's Prime Minister Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão and Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese reaffirmed their commitment to ensuring the Greater Sunrise project delivers long-term benefits for the people of Timor-Leste. Australia announced plans to establish an infrastructure fund, financed through its share of future revenues from the project, to support Timor-Leste's economic aspirations.

The Greater Sunrise fields are located 140 kilometers south of Timor-Leste's coast. The project is managed by the Sunrise Joint Venture, comprising TIMOR GAP (56.6 percent ownership), Woodside (33.44 percent), and Osaka Gas Australia (10 percent). [Timor-Leste Government]

Vietnam: Police seize additional USD 3.9 million in nation's largest stock fraud case

(hn/lm) Hanoi police have confiscated an additional VND 100 billion (USD 3.9 million) in assets related to Vietnam's largest foreign currency and securities fraud, orchestrated by Pho Duc Nam, also known as "Mr. Pips." This brings the total recovered assets to VND 5.3 trillion (USD 208 million), including over 30 luxury cars, along with 246 kilograms of gold.

Nam and 30 accomplices were charged earlier this month with fraudulent appropriation of assets and money laundering. Operating from 44 offices nationwide with 1,000 unlicensed employees, the group allegedly defrauded over 2,660 victims by creating a sham stock trading platform. Victims were lured with promises of high returns, while their funds were funneled into the group's accounts without any trades. Nam flaunted a lavish lifestyle on social media, showcasing luxury cars and high-end properties to attract unsuspecting clients. [VnExpress International]

Separately, the Ministry of Public Security announced progress in the corruption investigation involving Phuc Son Group. Two former Secretaries of the Phu Tho Provincial Party Committee, Ngo Duc Vuong and Nguyen Doan Khanh, have been prosecuted for abusing their positions. Nguyen Van Hau, Chairman of Phuc Son Group, along with five others, faces charges of violating accounting regulations, causing serious consequences.

The case, which surfaced earlier this year, has implicated officials from multiple provinces, including Vinh Phuc and Quang Ngai, on charges such as bribery, bidding violations, and abusing authority. To date, three interconnected cases have resulted in 38 defendants facing five major charges. Authorities plan to release comprehensive findings from the investigation in early 2025. [Dantri, in Vietnamese]

Vietnam: Officials jailed over COVID-19 flight bribery scandal

(lm) Vietnam has sentenced over a dozen officials to prison for their involvement in corruption related to repatriation flights and quarantine procedures during the COVID-19 pandemic. Sentences ranged up to 12 years, with defendants accused of accepting bribes to secure seats on flights and medical quarantine accommodations. This follows a broader crackdown on pandemic-related corruption, which has seen prominent figures, including senior officials from the ministries of foreign affairs, health, and public security, previously handed life sentences.

One case involved Tran Tung, a former provincial official, who received a 12-year sentence for accepting bribes totaling approximately USD 300,000. Sixteen other individuals, including transportation ministry staff and travel company employees, were also convicted on charges such as bribery and abuse of power.

The anti-corruption campaign has intensified in Vietnam, with authorities investigating 825 cases involving 1,676 people for corruption in 2024, marking a 16 percent increase from the previous year. [tuoi tre news]

Vietnam: Waste-to-Energy adopted as landfills reach capacity

(cc) Vietnam is shifting to waste-to-energy (WtE) technology as landfill sites near capacity, with the country generating 67,110 tons of waste daily. While WtE offers sustainable alternatives, higher costs—up to USD 50 per ton compared to USD 20 for landfills—and integration challenges with the power grid present hurdles.

Environmental risks remain, as WtE plants can emit harmful pollutants like dioxins and nitrogen oxides. Experts stress strict emission standards and waste segregation at the source, mandated by the 2020 Environmental Protection Law starting January 2025, to optimize WtE operations and reduce landfill dependency.

Investments in green technologies, waste management infrastructure, and robust regulations are seen as critical to the success of WtE adoption, reflecting Vietnam's commitment to sustainable waste practices and a circular economy. [The Star]

Vietnam: Prime Minister urges Petrovietnam to evolve into national industrial-energy group

Vietnam's Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh has called on Petrovietnam, the state-owned Vietnam Oil and Gas Group responsible for managing the country's oil, gas, and energy resources, to transform into a national industrial-energy leader. He set ambitious targets, including annual growth of 15 to 20 percent by 2025 and significant contributions to GDP.

At its year-end review, Petrovietnam reported record-breaking revenue of VND 1 quadrillion (USD 39.27 billion) in 2024, contributing VND 165 trillion (USD 6.48 billion) to the state budget. Key projects, including the Thai Binh 2 and Nhon Trach power plants, progressed on schedule, while the company reinforced its leadership in renewable energy, particularly offshore wind power.

The Prime Minister emphasized modernizing operations, expanding renewable energy efforts, and aligning with national energy goals. He urged the company to innovate, enhance governance, and uphold safety and environmental standards, reaffirming its crucial role in Vietnam's economic and energy security. [Viet Nam News]

Vietnam: Environmental tax cuts on fuel extended through 2025 to support economic recovery

(hn) The National Assembly Standing Committee has extended Vietnam's reduced environmental protection tax rates for petrol, oil, and lubricants through December 31, 2025. Initially introduced to support post-COVID-19 economic recovery, the tax cut was set to expire on January 1, 2025.

The reduced rates include VND 2,000 (USD 0.08) per liter for petrol (excluding ethanol), VND 1,000 (USD 0.04) per liter for diesel, jet fuel, mazut oil, lubricating oil, and grease, and VND 600 (USD 0.02) per liter for kerosene. This decision aims to mitigate inflationary pressures, stabilize the macroeconomy, and ease financial burdens on businesses and the public.

Finance Minister Nguyễn Văn Thắng emphasized that reverting to higher tax rates could increase retail fuel prices, heighten inflation, and hinder economic growth. National Assembly members supported the extension but urged the government to balance reduced tax revenues with fiscal stability and to plan for a gradual tax rate increase aligned with environmental protection goals and international commitments.

The committee recommended a comprehensive review of the policy's economic impact to determine its viability beyond 2025. [Viet Nam News]

Vietnam: Central Bank acts to stabilize exchange rates and liquidity amid year-end pressures

(hn) The State Bank of Vietnam (SBV) has intervened to stabilize the USD/VND exchange rate and address year-end liquidity needs. Following weeks of volatility, the interbank rate fell to VND 25,435/USD on December 24, below the intervention threshold of VND

25,450/USD. This allowed the SBV to pause USD sales after significant interventions the prior week.

In response to easing exchange rate pressures, the SBV injected VND 33.7 trillion (USD 1.37 billion) into the banking system via open market operations, addressing seasonal liquidity demands while maintaining interest rates at 4 percent annually to manage the VND-USD rate gap. Despite stabilization efforts, the USD Index remains elevated, and domestic exchange rates at banks remain near allowable limits. [Cafef.vn, in Vietnamese]

International Relations, Geopolitics and Security in Asia

Thailand ready to host 6th BIMSTEC Summit in April 2025

(rs) Thailand will host the sixth BIMSTEC Summit in the first week of April 2025, postponed from September this year due to political changes. Nepal has confirmed participation, though Prime Minister Oli's potential bilateral visit to Thailand remains uncertain. BIMSTEC includes Nepal, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Thailand, and Myanmar, with summits held every two years.

Ahead of the summit, Thailand hosted the 24th Senior Officials' Meeting (SOM) virtually, proposing a BIMSTEC Centre of Excellence in Tropical Medicine and Public Health and a Public Audit Excellence Centre. The meeting reviewed documents on BIMSTEC's observer status at the United Nations and cooperation with ASEAN.

Member states shared updates on regional cooperation efforts and approved the 2025 budget for the BIMSTEC secretariat. A final report from the meeting will be submitted to the next BIMSTEC ministerial meeting. [The Kathmandu Post]

China imposes sanctions on foreign military-industrial companies

(wy) China's Foreign Ministry has announced sanctions against several military-industrial companies and their senior executives for supporting and selling arms to Taiwan under the U.S. National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2025. [Reuters]

The U.S. has pledged to provide Taiwan with the means to defend itself. On December 20, it approved USD 571.3 million in defense aid for Taiwan. Before the approval, the sale of tactical radio systems and gun mounts to Taiwan was also confirmed by America. Taiwan's Defense Ministry stated that with the support of the U.S., its defense capabilities could be enhanced to better address challenges posed by Communist China. [CNA, in Chinese]

China sanctions target seven military-industrial companies, including Boeing subsidiary Insitu Inc., Hudson Technologies, Saronic, Raytheon Canada, Raytheon Australia, Aeromexico, and Oceaneering International.

Effective December 27, all properties and business activities of these entities in China were halted. China's Foreign Ministry condemned the U.S. decision, stating it seriously violated the One-China policy and the Three Joint Communiqués. The U.S. was also accused of interfering in China's internal affairs, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China, in Chinese]

China launches investigation into imported beef

(wy) China's Commerce Ministry has launched an investigation into imported beef at the request of domestic industry representatives, citing a decline in domestic beef prices caused by oversupply, weak demand, and economic slowdown. [Ministry of Commerce, China, in Chinese]

Despite the economic challenges, beef imports have surged, particularly from Brazil, Argentina, and

Australia. In 2023, imports were 65 percent higher than in 2019. The Commerce Ministry stated that this trend has significantly impacted China's domestic industry. The investigation began on December 27 and is expected to last eight months, with the possibility of extensions. Trade will remain unaffected during this period.

In response, the Brazilian government pledged to demonstrate the benefits of its beef exports to China. It also expressed a willingness to engage in constructive dialogue and pursue mutually beneficial solutions. [South China Morning Post]

Mongolia proposes ratification of EBRD agreement amendments

(fs) Speaker of Parliament D. Amarbaysgalan received a bill from Finance Minister B. Javkhlan on December 23 proposing the ratification of amendments to the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) Agreement. The bill outlines the acceptance of changes adopted by the EBRD's Board of Governors on May 18, 2023.

The amendments expand the EBRD's operational scope to include Sub-Saharan African nations in addition to its existing focus on Central and Eastern Europe, the Mediterranean, and Mongolia. The changes also introduce measures to ensure the bank's financial stability.

Following the country's legal procedures, the proposed ratification will be discussed by the State Great Khural. Mongolia's parliament. [Sonin]

Mongolia launches livestock productivity enhancement program with World Bank support

(fs) The Ministry of Food, Agriculture, and Light Industry of Mongolia, with financial backing from the World Bank, has initiated the Livestock Economy Enhancement Project.

The initiative aims to improve livestock health and productivity in selected areas, strengthen value chains, and enhance disaster response efficiency. It also seeks to address challenges arising from climate change, overgrazing, and increasing livestock numbers,

ensuring food security and supporting sustainable livestock production.

The project has already started in selected districts of Selenge, Bulgan, and Tuv provinces. As an initial step, 250 high-quality heifers and 100 bulls from breeds like Selenge, Kazakh Whitehead, and Hereford have been distributed to local farmers and enterprises. Participants will raise and breed these cattle, returning equivalent cattle in three years to enable further program expansion.

This initiative is projected to increase central region beef yields by 10-15 per cent, addressing growing beef demand. [Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Light Industry, Mongolia]

South Korean foreign ministry engages with U.S., Japanese, and Chinese envoys after Acting President's impeachment

(yq) Senior officials from South Korea's foreign ministry held phone discussions with ambassadors from the United States, Japan, and China following the National Assembly's vote to impeach Acting President Han Duck-soo, the ministry announced on December 27.

Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul spoke with U.S. Ambassador to South Korea Philip Goldberg to address bilateral issues, as Finance Minister Choi Sang-mok assumed the role of acting president after Han's impeachment.

During the discussion, Ambassador Goldberg reaffirmed the United States' unwavering support for the U.S.-South Korea alliance and emphasized the importance of maintaining close communication, according to the ministry.

Meanwhile, First Vice Minister Kim Hong-kyung and Deputy Minister for Political Affairs Chung Byung-won held separate phone conversations with Japanese and Chinese envoys. These discussions centered on sustaining strong bilateral relations under Acting President Choi's leadership. [Yonhap News Agency]

South Korea extends support for UNDP's work in Türkiye

(dql) South Korea has contributed an additional USD 500,000 to the United Nations Development

Programme (UNDP) to support the second phase of the “Increasing Employability for Syrian Refugees and Turkish Host Communities in the Renewable Energy Sector Project” in Türkiye. This funding follows the successful completion of the project’s first phase, also supported by South Korea.

The second phase focuses on enhancing vocational skills in the renewable energy sector, addressing especially Syrians under Temporary Protection and Turkish citizens. With the new funding, the project will run for 14 months, expanding its scope to include the development of training materials and assessments aligned with the renewable energy sector's evolving needs. The project will also integrate graduates into the Turkish Employment Agency (İŞKUR) database to facilitate their transition into the job market.

Additionally, the project is expected to strengthen Türkiye’s renewable energy capacity through improved curricula, fostering cooperation among private sector stakeholders, NGOs, academic institutions, and government agencies. Special initiatives, such as mentorship, soft skill courses, and support for female trainees, will address the unique challenges faced by women in the workforce. [UNDP]

Nepal issues travel advisory for Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos

(rs) Nepal’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) has issued a travel advisory cautioning Nepali citizens against traveling on visit visas for employment purposes to Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos. The advisory follows reports of Nepalis being trafficked to these countries and coerced into illegal work under exploitative conditions, including passport confiscation, wage theft, long working hours, and torture. [The Himalayan Times]

Sri Lanka’s President Dissanayake expresses interest in joining BRICS

(raa) Sri Lankan President Anura Dissanayake has formally expressed the country’s interest in joining BRICS in a letter to Russian President Vladimir Putin, as confirmed by Sri Lanka’s ambassador to Moscow, Pakir Amza. The letter, sent in October 2024, underscores Sri Lanka's intention to become part of the BRICS coalition and seeks the endorsement of other member states for inclusion as a partner country.

In addition, Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Vijita Herath announced in October that Sri Lanka had decided to apply not only for BRICS membership but also for membership in the New Development Bank. The government views this potential partnership as an opportunity to foster mutually beneficial cooperation, peace, and development, aligning with the principles of comprehensive multilateralism under the UN Charter.

Last December, it was also reported that President Dissanayake had sought the support of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to strengthen Sri Lanka's bid for BRICS membership. [Daily Mirror]

US, UK, EU criticize Pakistan military courts for sentencing civilians

(an/mra) The United States, United Kingdom, and European Union have strongly criticized Pakistan's use of military courts to sentence 25 civilians involved in the May 2023 attacks on military facilities following the arrest of former Prime Minister Imran Khan. Sentences ranging from two to ten years have raised serious concerns about the fairness and transparency of the trials.

The U.S. State Department condemned the process for lacking judicial independence, while the UK's Foreign Office and the EU called the verdicts a violation of Pakistan's international human rights commitments under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). The EU, which grants Pakistan GSP+ trade preferences, warned that such actions could jeopardize the trade arrangement. [FirstPost] [The Express Tribune] [U.S. Department of State] [DAWN]

Amid this criticism, Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari, chairman of the Pakistan Peoples Party, denounced foreign interference in the country's politics, alleging such actions aim to undermine Pakistan's nuclear program. Speaking at a rally in Larkana, Bhutto-Zardari asserted that concerns about democracy and human rights are being used as a pretext to target Pakistan's atomic capabilities.

His remarks followed US sanctions on entities linked to Pakistan's missile program and calls by Richard Grenell, a Trump-era nominee, for the release of Khan. Bhutto-Zardari dismissed these moves as part of a broader campaign against Pakistan's nuclear assets, reaffirming his party's commitment to safeguarding the nation's sovereignty and atomic power.

The Foreign Office and Defense Minister Khawaja Asif echoed these concerns, alleging Western and Israeli influence in efforts to destabilize Pakistan. [Arab News]

Pakistan opens landmark trade route linking China to United Arab Emirates via Khunjerab Pass

(lm) Pakistan's National Logistics Corporation (NLC) has inaugurated a groundbreaking trade route under the Transports Internationaux Routiers (TIR) system, connecting China to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) via the Khunjerab Pass. This development marks a significant milestone in operationalizing the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and enhancing regional trade efficiency.

The Khunjerab Pass, located at over 4,600 meters above sea level in the Karakoram Range, is a high-altitude mountain pass that connects Pakistan's Gilgit-Baltistan region with China's Xinjiang province. It is a vital gateway for trade and tourism and serves as the highest paved border crossing in the world. The TIR system enables streamlined cross-border trade with minimal customs interference, reducing the transit time for goods to the UAE from 30 days via sea to just 10 days.

Traders and business leaders hailed the initiative as a transformative step for Pakistan's economy, boosting economic activities in Gilgit-Baltistan and Gwadar. The Gilgit-Baltistan Collectorate of Customs reported record revenue of PKR 9.5 billion (USD 34.87 million) at Sost Dry Port in the first half of the 2024-25 fiscal year, significantly up from PKR 6.5 billion (USD 23.4 million) in the same period last year. [Arab News]

China, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand hold joint drill to tackle Mekong River crimes

(cc) China, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand recently held a joint drill aimed at enhancing regional security and addressing criminal activities along the Mekong River. The exercise, held in December 2024, focused on combating illegal activities such as drug trafficking, human trafficking, and illegal fishing, which have long affected the region.

The drill, conducted under the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) framework, involved simulated scenarios such as coordinated naval patrols and anti-

smuggling operations. The goal was to improve cross-border collaboration, enhance intelligence sharing, and strengthen the ability of law enforcement and military forces to respond to crimes in real-time. [China Daily]

US missile acquisition by Philippines sparks tensions with China over South China Sea

(alm/elr) The Philippines' decision to acquire the United States-made Typhon missile system has heightened tensions with China, which has condemned the move as a provocative step likely to incite an arms race in the Asia-Pacific region. Philippine military chief Lieutenant-General Roy Galido announced the plan to purchase the mid-range missile system to strengthen the country's maritime defense and protect its sovereignty, particularly in contested areas of the South China Sea. [Al Jazeera]

China criticized the acquisition, calling it a "strategic and offensive" weapon that introduces unnecessary geopolitical confrontation. Beijing reiterated demands for the removal of Typhon systems already deployed in the northern Philippines during earlier joint US-Philippine military exercises. It also warned that US weapons deployments historically elevate risks of conflict and instability, urging the Philippines to reconsider its decision. [peoples dispatch]

Philippine Defense Secretary Gilberto Teodoro rejected China's criticism, asserting that the country's security decisions fall solely within its sovereign prerogative. He called on Beijing to stop interfering in internal matters and to cease provocative actions in the South China Sea. Teodoro emphasized that the missile system aims to enhance defense capabilities rather than target any specific country. [Barron's]

The Typhon system, developed by Lockheed Martin, has a range of 480 kilometers (300 miles) and will allow the Philippines to safeguard its maritime assets within its 200-nautical-mile exclusive economic zone. Although budget allocations for the acquisition are pending, the move aligns with strengthened US-Philippine military cooperation under President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., who has pushed back against China's expansive claims over the South China Sea.

Singapore's intelligence agency warns of potential extremism spillover from Syria's

instability

(fi) The Internal Security Department (ISD) of Singapore has expressed concern over the potential regional impact of escalating instability in Syria following the fall of former president Bashar al-Assad. The department highlighted the risks posed by terrorist groups such as the Islamic State (ISIS) and Al Qaeda exploiting the power vacuum in Syria to rebuild and recruit.

The ISD emphasized that these groups might use the developments in Syria for propaganda, portraying Assad's ouster as a jihadist victory. This could inspire supporters globally, including in Southeast Asia, to join their ranks or commit violence locally. The department warned that the fluid security situation in Syria demands close monitoring, citing the role of the Syrian civil war in the rise of ISIS and the Al-Nusra Front over a decade ago.

The ISD has previously taken firm action against radicalized individuals in Singapore. Recent cases include the arrest of a 17-year-old planning a terror attack locally and intending to travel to Syria, as well as restriction orders against individuals supporting terrorism. The department urged the public to report signs of radicalization, such as sharing extremist content or expressing admiration for terrorist groups.

With Southeast Asia having witnessed the influence of Middle Eastern extremist ideologies in the past, authorities in the region have been advised to remain vigilant against the spread of extremism following Assad’s ouster. [Channel News Asia]

Thai Cabinet acknowledges country’s successful bid to join BRICS

(acs/hrs) Thailand’s cabinet has formally acknowledged the country’s successful bid to join BRICS, a major alliance of emerging economies. The bloc includes Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, the United Arab Emirates, Iran, Egypt, and Ethiopia as full members.

Thailand has conveyed its acceptance of the membership invitation extended by BRICS leaders during the 16th BRICS summit held in Kazan, Russia, in October 2024. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) is set to notify Russia, the current BRICS chair, of Thailand’s decision before the end of 2024, aligning with the conclusion of Russia’s chairmanship.

The MFA emphasized that BRICS membership is expected to bolster Thailand's trade, investment, food security, and energy security. Additionally, it will enhance Thailand's role in fostering international cooperation and multilateralism. Foreign Affairs Minister Maris Sangiampongsa represented Thailand at the Kazan summit, reaffirming the nation's commitment to strengthening its engagement with BRICS.

Thailand has been a BRICS partner country since June 2024, along with 12 others, including Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam. These partner countries collaborate with BRICS initiatives, often with the aim of becoming full members. [Bangkok Post] [The Kyiv Independent]

Vietnam's 'barefoot monk' approaches Thailand on pilgrimage to India

(lm) Thich Minh Tue, known as Vietnam's "barefoot monk," is nearing the Thai border after journeying through Laos' Champasak province as part of his walking pilgrimage to Buddhist sites in India. Tue, who gained widespread attention for his ascetic lifestyle, began his trek in Vietnam in late November and entered Laos on December 12.

Tue first gained prominence in Vietnam earlier this year during a cross-country pilgrimage, which authorities disrupted in June, citing concerns about unauthorized religious activities. Despite lacking formal recognition as a monk by the state-sanctioned Vietnam Buddhist Sangha, his simple lifestyle, shaved head, patched robe, and use of a rice cooker as an alms bowl have resonated with many followers.

Following his June pilgrimage, Tue disappeared from public view until his recent pilgrimage to India began. Analysts view the Vietnamese government's decision to allow him to leave the country as a pragmatic move to ease public pressure while ensuring security concerns are mitigated.

While in Laos, Tue did not seek accommodation through the Buddhist Fellowship Organization, the official governing body of the Buddhist community, prompting local authorities to monitor his journey for safety. [Radio Free Asia]

Vietnam's Prime Minister holds meeting with Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar envoys

(hn) Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh held a working session with ambassadors and staff from the embassies of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Qatar to expedite the implementation of high-level agreements between Vietnam and these nations on December 24.

The Prime Minister praised their contributions to his recent visits, which marked milestones in bilateral relations and conveyed Vietnam's commitment to fostering deeper cooperation. He emphasized the visits' outcomes, such as assigning the Ministry of Planning and Investment to oversee prioritized investment projects and proposing a joint working group to advance collaboration. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs was tasked with enhancing delegation exchanges and negotiating visa exemptions, while the Ministry of Industry and Trade was directed to explore Free Trade Agreements or Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreements with Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

Chinh expressed aspirations for mutual development, advocating for partnerships in trade, investment, agriculture, energy, digital transformation, and green transition, including support for developing international financial centres in Ho Chi Minh City and Da Nang. He also highlighted cooperation in defense, labor, tourism, and education and called for stronger ties between ASEAN, Gulf Cooperation Council, and the three nations.

The ambassadors affirmed their commitment to realizing agreements from the visits and highlighted increased business interest in Vietnam. They view Vietnam as a strategic gateway to ASEAN and believe that stronger partnerships will lead to substantive progress on shared goals. [Viet Nam News]

Bangladesh skeptical about India's willingness to extradite ex-Prime Minister Hasina; legal push against imports from India

(lm) Earlier this month, Bangladesh's interim government formally requested India to extradite former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, currently residing in India, to face legal proceedings. Hasina is accused of crimes, including murder and genocide, related to the uprising that led her to flee to India on August 5. However, Adviser Mahfuj Alam expressed

skepticism, suggesting India may politically decide against her extradition. While Bangladesh awaits a formal response from India, the request was made under the amended 2016 bilateral extradition treaty, which facilitates the extradition of fugitive criminals.

Meanwhile, India's Ministry of External Affairs confirmed receipt of the request but declined immediate comment. The Bangladeshi government plans to send reminders if no response is received. Hasina faces over 100 charges and remains a contentious figure in both nations' diplomatic relations. [The Daily Star 1]

In a separate development, Supreme Court lawyer Md Mahmudul Hasan issued a legal notice urging the Bangladeshi government to halt the import of unnecessary products from India. He argued that such imports violate the principle of comparative advantage, harm Bangladesh's economy, and hinder local industries. Hasan called for action against agents facilitating imports he deems unnecessary, claiming they undermine economic efficiency. If authorities fail to respond within seven days, the lawyer intends to file a writ petition with the High Court. [The Daily Star 2]

Bangladesh, Malaysia discuss strengthening bilateral ties

(vk) Malaysian High Commissioner to Bangladesh Mohd Shuhada Othman met with Chief Adviser's Special Envoy on International Affairs, Lutfey Siddiqi, at the Foreign Service Academy in Dhaka on December 29. The meeting focused on strengthening Bangladesh-Malaysia relations, emphasizing trade, economic cooperation, and regional partnerships.

The special envoy highlighted the longstanding bilateral relationship, noting the significance of Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's visit to Bangladesh in October 2024, which marked the first visit by a head of government since the interim administration assumed office. The visit was credited with reinvigorating ties and identifying new areas for collaboration.

Discussions included expanding trade, enhancing manpower mobility, and reducing recruitment processing costs. Both parties identified potential cooperation in data science, artificial intelligence, semiconductors, finance, health, agriculture, energy, and the halal economy. The envoy also called for addressing challenges posed by recruitment

syndicates, aiming to safeguard workers' rights and improve transparency.

Lutfey Siddiqi proposed Malaysia establish a dedicated "Economic Zone" for its investors in Bangladesh, leveraging the country's strategic location between China, India, and ASEAN. The initiative seeks to attract Malaysian investment while enhancing regional connectivity.

Malaysia pledged support for 18,000 Bangladeshi workers unable to enter the country by May 31, 2024, and both sides assured collaboration to resolve this issue promptly. Additionally, Siddiqi congratulated Malaysia on its upcoming ASEAN chairmanship and reiterated Bangladesh's bid to become a Sectoral Dialogue Partner of ASEAN. [Bss News]

Bhutan generates USD 2.38 million through mandarin exports to Bangladesh

(mt) Since the start of the mandarin export season on November 30, Bhutan has exported 185,700 boxes of oranges to Bangladesh, generating USD 2.38 million in revenue.

According to Bhutan Trade Statistics, the country exported mandarins worth BTN 50.86 million (USD 609,000) last year, totaling 13 million kilograms. Bhutan’s mandarin production rose sharply to 21,000 metric tons (MT) in 2023, compared to 2,700 MT in 2022. [Kuensel]

Brunei and China strengthen partnership with agricultural MoU

(ga) Brunei and China have strengthened agricultural ties with the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on December 25, in Beijing. Brunei's Minister of Primary Resources and Tourism, Dato Seri Setia Dr. Haji Abdul Manaf, and China's Minister of Agriculture, Han Jun, formalized the agreement.

The MoU focuses on enhancing Brunei's rice and agricultural sectors, particularly by addressing gaps in the rice value chain through high-yield rice varieties. A key project includes the potential creation of a National Rice Research Center in collaboration with Chinese agencies.

China will provide hybrid rice seeds, technical expertise, and resources to support Brunei's agricultural growth. The MoU builds on prior commitments made between the two nations during a 2023 leaders' meeting. [Borneo Bulletin]

Japan grants USD 7.2 million for Cambodia’s geospatial data platform to boost urban planning

(mfr) The Japanese government has provided Cambodia with a grant of USD 7.2 million to develop a geospatial data platform aimed at supporting urban planning and land management. The project was formalized on December 26 during a signing ceremony between Cambodia’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Prak Sokhonn, and Japanese Ambassador Atsushi Ueno. It seeks to address Cambodia’s challenges in developing basic land data and integrating it across various organizations. [The Phnom Penh Post] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs Japan]

The grant will fund satellite imagery, thematic maps, and 3D urban planning data. These tools will enhance the capacity of Cambodia's Ministry of Land Management, Urban Planning, and Construction, as well as other relevant ministries such as Environment and Agriculture.

Japan's support aims to strengthen Cambodia’s urban planning capabilities in the context of rapid urbanization, focusing on resolving land conflicts and promoting safe economic development. The initiative aligns with Japan's broader strategy of fostering social infrastructure tailored to the development stages of its partner countries, contributing to Cambodia’s emerging digital economy. [Kiri Post]

South Korean development cooperation agency pledges USD 12 million in agricultural extension services in Cambodia

(mfr) The Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) has committed USD 12 million to boost Cambodia's agricultural extension services through a project from 2025 to 2030. The initiative, focused on climate change adaptation, will train commune agricultural officers in technical skills and support farmers with localized assistance.

The project aligns with Cambodia's agricultural priorities, aiming to improve farmer livelihoods. KOICA also continues its Peace Village Project, fostering rural development in 30 villages across the northwest.

Choi Moonjung, KOICA Cambodia's country director, reaffirmed South Korea's commitment to strengthening bilateral partnerships and supporting Cambodia's agricultural sector. [The Phnom Penh Post]

China contributes CNY 1 million to Cambodia's girls' awareness initiative

(mfr) China has selected Cambodia as the first country to receive funding from the Chinese First Lady's Foundation for a girls' awareness project. This initiative, which has been successfully implemented in China for 45 years, aims to raise awareness among girls in Cambodia, particularly in the digital and STEM fields. The project, which will be launched in the first quarter of 2025, is being supported with an initial donation of 1 million yuan.

Chinese Ambassador to Cambodia Wang Wenbin announced the project during a meeting with Dr. Ing Kantha Phavi, Cambodia's Minister of Women's Affairs, on December 25. The ambassador emphasized that the project is a personal initiative of the Chinese First Lady, which has now received recognition from the United Nations. The funds will be used to establish a center that promotes girls' awareness in science, technology, mathematics, and engineering.

The project will begin in Phnom Penh, initially benefiting 100 girls who have dropped out of school and cannot afford higher education. If successful, the initiative will be expanded nationwide. Minister Kantha Phavi expressed gratitude for China's support and emphasized the project's importance as a model for Cambodia-China cooperation. [Khmer Times]

Cambodia foreign minister strengthens bilateral relations with Russia

(mfr) Cambodia and Russia reaffirmed their commitment to enhancing bilateral cooperation during a meeting between Cambodian Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn and Russian Ambassador Anatoly Borovik. The discussion at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs focused on strengthening ties in education, culture, health, and people-to-people

exchanges. Minister Sokhonn praised Ambassador Borovik's active role in fostering strong relations and emphasized the importance of regular high-level engagements.

The two officials also exchanged views on regional and international issues of common interest. Both sides expressed a shared commitment to advancing collaboration within bilateral and multilateral frameworks, underscoring their dedication to deepening the long-standing friendship between Cambodia and Russia. [Khmer Times]

Chinese, Japanese foreign ministers trade warnings over bilateral tensions

(dql/wy/dh) Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with his Japanese counterpart, Takeshi Iwaya, during Iwaya's official visit to Beijing on December 25. This marked Iwaya's first official trip to Beijing since his appointment in October and was the first visit by a Japanese foreign minister to China in approximately 20 months. The visit came amid strained diplomatic relations, compounded by public opinion polls showing that nearly 90 percent of people in both Japan and China hold unfavorable views of each other's countries (see AiR No. 49, December/2024, 1). [South China Morning Post]

The discussions, characterized by tense relations, saw both sides expressing concerns and issuing warnings. Iwaya informed Wang that Tokyo was "closely monitoring the Taiwan situation and recent military developments," while also voicing concerns over rising tensions in the East China Sea, including the situation around the Senkaku Islands and China's growing military activity. He further demanded the release of Japanese citizens detained in China under the country's counter-espionage law (see AiR No. 50, December/2024, 2), warning that the "[o]paqueness surrounding the anti-espionage law is causing Japanese people to think twice about visiting China." [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan]

In response, Wang urged Japan to "avoid disruptions, build consensus," and "maintain the correct positioning of the strategic relationship of mutual benefit." He also demanded that Tokyo "honor its commitments regarding historical issues, Taiwan, and other major sensitive topics. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China]

Despite these differences, the two ministers reached a consensus on the importance of stabilizing bilateral relations and agreed to work toward arranging Wang's

visit to Japan "at the earliest possible time next year," signaling efforts to maintain communication and improve ties. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan]

According to diplomatic sources, discussions are underway regarding Wang's potential visit to Japan in February. If confirmed, it would mark the first visit by a Chinese foreign minister since November 2020. A high-level bilateral economic dialogue – the first in about six years – is also planned for Wang's visit, alongside a possible trilateral meeting involving the foreign ministers of Japan, China, and South Korea.

During his anticipated trip, Wang is expected to meet with Iwaya and Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba, urging him to make the first visit to China by a Japanese leader since 2019, when then-Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited Beijing and Chengdu. [Kyodo News]

Before their bilateral talks, Iwaya and Wang co-hosted the second meeting of a high-level consultation mechanism on people-to-people and cultural exchanges. The session led to agreements to strengthen collaboration in cultural and humanitarian fields, including youth exchange programs, education, and tourism [The State Council Informational Office, China]

China urges Philippines to withdraw stationing and purchase plans of US Typhon missile system

(wy) China has intensified pressure on the Philippines to withdraw the U.S. Typhon missile system stationed there, citing the risks of an arms race in the region. Beijing also criticized Manila's plans to acquire its own set of mid-range missiles (see AiR No. 52, December/2024, 4), following remarks by Philippine Defence Secretary Gilberto Teodoro asserting the country's right to enhance its security.

The Chinese foreign ministry condemned the Typhon deployment, stating that the Philippines' cooperation with the U.S. undermines its own security and risks regional peace. It questioned the true interests behind such actions, labeling them harmful. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China]

The Typhon system, deployed by the U.S. Army in northern Philippines during joint drills, can strike Chinese targets with its cruise missiles. Its deployment has escalated tensions between the two countries, already strained by territorial disputes in the South China Sea. The missile system, capable of firing

missiles with ranges of 240km to 2,500km, has not been deployed in the Asia-Pacific region since the 1987 U.S.-Soviet arms treaty.

The Philippines, however, defends the deployment as legal, aligning with its sovereign rights and independent foreign policy. Teodoro emphasized that the country is not beholden to foreign vetoes on its security decisions. [Reuters] [South China Morning Post]

China prosecutes members of major telecom fraud gangs in northern Myanmar

(dql) 39 members of major criminal groups operating in northern Myanmar were prosecuted in China for telecom fraud and other crimes targeting Chinese civilians. The suspects, including Mg Myin Shaunt Phyin and Ma Thiri Maung, face charges such as fraud, homicide, injury, illegal detention, operating casinos, drug trafficking, and organizing prostitution. The case was filed in a local court in Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province.

Wenzhou procurators reported that 16 of the defendants are Myanmar citizens. Additionally, several thousand other individuals connected to the criminal groups are under investigation in Wenzhou and other locations across China. Over 10,000 confirmed cases of telecom fraud, amounting to billions of yuan, have been linked to these groups, with several Chinese citizens having lost their lives.

In coordination with Burmese police, Chinese authorities conducted investigations, collected evidence, and apprehended suspects. [Xinhua] [South China Morning Post]

China’s defence ministry condemns US plans to establish Space Force headquarters in Japan

(wy) China's defense ministry has accused the U.S. of destabilizing global security through its plan to establish a Space Force headquarters at the U.S. military's Yokohama Air Base in Japan. China described the move as a “dangerous action” in space and accused the U.S. of “provoking a space arms race.” The ministry also called on the U.S. to “cease provoking space confrontations and stop spreading false narratives.”

The planned headquarters in Japan follows the U.S. deployment of another Space Force unit in South Korea in 2022, during a period when Washington was strengthening alliances to counter growing technological threats from China, Russia, and North Korea. [South China Morning Post 1] [South China Morning Post 2]

Hong Kong lashes out against US over extension of sanctions against officials

(wy) The Hong Kong government issued a warning to the United States after President Joe Biden signed the National Defense Authorization Act on December 23. Under the 2019 Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act, a provision of this legislation, sanctions against Chief Executive John Lee Ka-chiu and former Chief Executive Carrie Lam Chung Yuet-ngor will be extended for an additional five years. [South China Morning Post 1]

In response, Hong Kong authorities cautioned that these sanctions could harm American business interests and damage the "mutually beneficial relations" between the two regions. They further warned that U.S. companies and their interests would also be adversely affected. [South China Morning Post 2]

Canada criticizes China over sanctions

(wy) Canada has condemned China for imposing penalties on two Canadian human rights organizations and their associated personnel. [Reuters 1]

On December 21, China's foreign ministry announced sanctions against the Uyghur Rights Advocacy Project and the Canada-Tibet Committee, as well as their staff. These sanctions include asset freezes and travel bans. The move is widely seen as retaliation for Canada's sanctions on Chinese officials accused of oppressing ethnic and religious minorities, which were announced on International Human Rights Day (see AiR No. 51, December/2024, 3). [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China, in Chinese]

In response, the Canadian government issued a statement condemning China's actions. It criticized the sanctions targeting organizations advocating for human rights and urged China to uphold its obligations under international law. The statement also warned Canadians of the heightened risks of arbitrary

enforcement of local laws in China. Furthermore, Canada reiterated its commitment to opposing any form of violence or harassment against its citizens. [Reuters 2]

Another US telecommunications company attacked by Chinese hackers

(wy) On December 27, a senior White House official announced that a ninth telecommunications company had been confirmed as a victim of cyberespionage by the Chinese-backed group known as Salt Typhoon. According to Anne Neuberger, U.S. Deputy National Security Advisor for Cyber and Emerging Technology, the attackers targeted major telecommunications companies, including Verizon, AT&T, Lumen, and others. The hackers infiltrated these companies' networks and accessed their clients' call records.

The Salt Typhoon campaign has resulted in significant data breaches affecting many Americans, including prominent political figures such as former Democratic presidential candidate Kamala Harris, President-elect Donald Trump, and Vice President-elect JD Vance.

In response to the cyberattacks, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) urged senior government officials and political leaders on December 18 to use end-to-end encrypted communication apps. However, Beijing has dismissed these allegations as disinformation, asserting that the Chinese government "firmly opposes and combats cyberattacks and cyber theft in all forms." [DW, in Chinese] [Reuters]

Chinese companies rush to purchase U.S. chip making materials ahead of potential export restrictions

(dh) Chinese companies are rushing to secure key chipmaking materials from U.S. suppliers, including DuPont, Entegris, and Chemours, ahead of potential new U.S. export restrictions. Since November 2023, orders for essential components such as polishing pads, filters, and lubricants have surged. Industry sources suggest this surge is driven by concerns that further U.S. curbs on semiconductor technology and materials could disrupt supply chains.

While China has been working to develop domestic alternatives, many U.S. products are still considered superior in quality and reliability, prompting

companies to stockpile supplies. The urgency follows recent U.S. actions, including new export controls and the addition of 140 Chinese entities to a trade blacklist. These measures require U.S. suppliers to seek licenses for transactions with blacklisted firms starting in early 2024.

The heightened procurement efforts align with China's broader strategy to reduce reliance on foreign suppliers, especially amid rising tensions in the global semiconductor race. Despite efforts to increase self-sufficiency, Chinese companies continue to face challenges in replacing high-end materials, which remain largely controlled by U.S., European, and Japanese suppliers. [Nikkei Asia]

Donald Trump asks U.S. Supreme Court to postpone ban on TikTok

(wy) President-elect Donald Trump has asked the U.S. Supreme Court to delay the scheduled ban on TikTok and will seek the opportunity to resolve the issues through political means, claiming that the case represents "an unprecedented, novel, and difficult tension between free-speech rights on one side, and foreign policy and national security concerns on the other".

On January 10, 2025, the Supreme Court will hear ByteDance's arguments, TikTok's parent company which is believed to have ties to the Chinese government, albeit the company denied it. After that, ByteDance will either sell the social media company to an American firm or be banned on January 19, 2025. The law, which included the divest or ban requirement, was passed in April and signed by President Joe Biden after TikTok gained 170 million users in the U.S. TikTok and ByteDance have challenged the law for several times, arguing such law violates free speech. However, the courts have so far upheld the law.

The U.S. Justice Department and state attorneys general, led by Montana's Austin Knudsen, stated that TikTok's alleged Chinese ties pose a security threat and support the law mandating divestment. Several state governments also expressed their concerns about this social media. They urged the Supreme Court to uphold the law.

However, Trump opposes the ban because of the support from the young voters who might use TikTok and prefers to solve the issues through political means. He has also met with Shou Zi Chew, TikTok's CEO, previously. [BBC]

President Xi to visit Russia in 2025

(dh) Quoting Moscow's ambassador to Beijing on Friday 27 December, RIA news (Russia's state-run media) announced that China's President Xi is set to visit Russia in 2025. Igor Morgulov, the Russian ambassador to China, stated that the exact details of this visit are currently being worked out.

President Xi last trip to China was in 2023, when he was welcomed as a dear friend, whilst Russia's President Putin visited Beijing last May after his latest electoral victory.

While China's Foreign Ministry has not yet confirmed the trip, they emphasized the close relationship between the two countries. Ambassador Morgulov emphasised the shared challenges both countries face as they attempt to combat the influence of U.S. policy and other Western influence, such as NATO activities. In particular, he cited the need for both countries to work together to counter US and western pressures they face, such as the pressure placed on China in the Asia-Pacific region by the US and it allies.

China, which has not condemned Russia's war in Ukraine since its beginning, has worked with other countries such as Brazil to propose a peace plan to end the war in Ukraine, which has been welcomed by Russia but dismissed by Ukraine (see AiR No. 52, December/2024, 4). [Reuters]

Ukrainian President Zelensky stresses closer ties with China, urges Beijing to deter North Korean military aid

(dh) Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky highlighted the importance of strengthening Ukraine's relationship with China during a meeting with the newly appointed Chinese Ambassador, Ma Shengkun, in Kiev. Zelensky expressed a desire to expand cooperation between the two countries, particularly in areas such as trade, economics, culture, and people-to-people exchanges.

Additionally, Zelensky emphasized his reliance on a "strong voice" from Beijing given North Korea's involvement in the Russia-Ukraine war. Zelensky further stressed the need for China to use its influence to end North Korean military aid being sent to Russia, stating that: "The Korean people should not lose their

people in battles in Europe. And this can be influenced, in particular, by Korea's neighbors, in particular, China. If China is sincere in its statements that the war should not expand, appropriate influence on Pyongyang is necessary." [RBC-Ukraine] [The Kyiv Independent]

Ma, who arrived in Ukraine on November 20, emphasized China's long-term commitment to fostering a strong partnership with Ukraine and working together to implement agreements that benefit both nations. [Global Times]

China extends anti-dumping probe into EU brandy

(dh) China's Ministry of Commerce announced a three-month extension to its investigation into alleged dumping of EU brandy. Initially scheduled to be completed within a year, the ministry will continue investigating for a minimum of three more months after initial findings from the probe showed that EU brandy poses a threat to China's domestic industry. Under exceptional circumstances, the investigation could be extended to six months according to the ministry.

The extension of this investigation comes after China imposed temporary measures in October which resulted in the need for Chinese importers pay security deposits of close to 40 percent on EU brandy imports, affecting major French brandy brands such as Hennessy and Rémy Martin.

These measures and China's anti-dumping investigation have been seen as a response to EU tariffs on Chinese electrical vehicles. French President Emmanuel Macron referred to China's probe as "pure retaliation" whilst the France's trade ministry called the temporary measures as "incomprehensible."

In 2023, French brandy, worth USD 1.7 billion in exports, accounted for 99 percent of China's brandy imports. [Reuters]

China and Iran strengthen partnership whilst committing to peace

(dh) Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and his Iranian counterpart Seyyed Abbas Araghchi met in Beijing on December 28 to discuss deepening ties under their comprehensive cooperation plan. The meeting focused on fostering closer collaboration for mutual benefit

and contributing to global stability. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China]

Both sides emphasized the importance of supporting each other on core national interests and expanding practical cooperation. They pledged to work together more closely within international organizations, including the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS, to safeguard shared interests and promote equitable global governance.

Wang highlighted the need for solidarity and multilateralism amid global uncertainty, while Araghchi reaffirmed Iran's priority to strengthen its partnership with China and expressed support for China's positions on issues like Xinjiang and human rights.

The discussions spanned a wide range of areas, including trade, technology, culture, environmental protection, and youth exchanges. Both sides also agreed to deepen cooperation in governance, diplomacy, and law enforcement while enhancing ties between cities and local communities.

On the Iranian nuclear issue, Wang reiterated China's commitment to a diplomatic resolution and support for the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). He called for dialogue and opposed unilateral sanctions. Araghchi expressed appreciation for China's role in maintaining the JCPOA and affirmed Iran's willingness to continue working closely with Beijing. [The Standard]

Another key takeaway of this meeting was the addressing of ongoing issues in the Middle East, with a stress on the Palestinian occupation. Both sides stressed the need to restore the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people and ending the occupation, whilst also calling for an immediate ceasefire, troop withdrawal, and emergency humanitarian aid. Both countries further stressed the need for regional stability in the Middle East and an acknowledgement people's sovereignty in Middle Eastern countries to stop it becoming a stage for geopolitical rivalries. [Anadolu Ajansı]

Chinese men arrested for illegal mining released in DRC

(dh) Fourteen out of the 17 men arrested last week in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (see AiR No. 52, December/2024, 4) have been freed by the authorities. The men had been detained by authorities as they

failed to provide the required documentation for their mining operation.

The release of the prisoners, who are set to return to China, came as a shock to the governor of the province, South Kivu, where the men were arrested. The governor also added that the Chinese nationals involved in the mining operation owed the DRC government USD 10 million in fines and unpaid taxes.

The Chinese embassy in Kinshasa is yet to comment. It is also still unclear what the fate of the three remaining men is to be.

These arrests have further highlighted the Congo's struggle to control the mining industry in their country as illegal or unlicensed operations persist, which have also contributed to ongoing fighting on the border near Rwanda. [Reuters]

China's Ganfeng Lithium launches major mine in Mali

(dh) China's Ganfeng Lithium, one of the world's lithium companies, has begun operations at the Goulamina lithium mine in southern Mali, overcoming significant challenges including security issues, a strict new mining code, and a global oversupply of lithium.

The mine's first phase will produce 506,000 tons of lithium annually, with plans to increase capacity to 1 million tons in the second phase. The mine is expected to operate for over 23 years, producing 15.6 million tons of spodumene concentrate.

Mali's military government, under the new mining code, will hold a 35 percent stake in the project while Ganfeng retains 65 percent. Mali's President Assimi Goita hailed the project as a key economic asset and praised China for its strategic partnership with the country.

The development underscores China's growing role in Africa's critical minerals sector. Chinese investment is seen as more integrated, with expertise and resources that Western companies often lack. While some caution about risks like potential expropriation, there are calls for fair resource distribution. [South China Morning Post]

The move comes as the race to exploit the African continent's mineral wealth is intensifying with China and the U.S. vying for dominance over resources crucial for their respective transition to renewable

energy. [Sri Lanka Guardian] [Observer Research Foundation]

Brazilian authorities uncover Chinese workers in “slavery-like conditions”

(dh) Brazilian authorities uncovered more than 16 Chinese nationals working in “slavery-like conditions” in the Bahia State in north-eastern Brazil. The workers had been hired in China by the Jinjiang Construction Brazil company and brought to Brazil to work at a construction site for BYD, an electric vehicle manufacturing company.

On December 23, the local prosecutor’s office in Brazil revealed that the Chinese workers had been working in conditions that were in violation of Brazil’s labor laws. This included their subjugation to long hours, often working seven days a week, degrading and unsafe work conditions and accommodation, with some workers having to sleep on beds without mattresses.

The Brazilian Public Labour Prosecutor’s Office (MPT) also added that the conditions meet the criteria of “forced labor,” as 107 workers had their passports withheld by their employer whilst others had their wages withheld from them. [Reuters 1]

Following the report from Brazilian authorities BYD has shut down the factory and has housed the workers in hotels whilst they await a deal to end their contracts.

Jinjiang Group, a contractor for BYD, denied the allegations made by Brazilian authorities, asserting that the assessment was inaccurate and possibly the result of cultural differences and translation issues. On its Weibo account, Jinjiang expressed disapproval of the claims that their employees were “enslaved,” describing them as hurtful to the dignity of Chinese workers. [Reuters 2]

In light of this situation, Brazil has stopped issuing work visas for BYD workers in a bid to stop human trafficking of Chinese workers. [Reuters 3]

This controversy has stalled BYD’s expansion plans in Brazil, where the company had aimed to produce 150,000 electric vehicles annually starting in early 2025. Moreover, the situation has drawn attention to China’s growing influence in Brazil as the two countries seek to deepen their relationship. While Brazil has been receptive to increasing Chinese investment, incidents involving the use of Chinese labor and alleged violations by Chinese companies, such as BYD,

may have strained these ties. This comes at a critical time, as major markets like the United States and the European Union have imposed tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles, with further increases anticipated under the Trump administration. [The Straits Times] [BBC]

India's External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar visits US; first ministerial visit since Trump victory

(ad/lm) India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar's official visit to the United States from December 24 to 29 marked a crucial phase in India-US relations as it bridged the outgoing Biden administration and the incoming Trump administration.

During this first ministerial visit since Donald Trump's electoral victory, Jaishankar held extensive discussions with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, outgoing National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, and Congressman Michael Waltz, Trump's nominee for National Security Advisor. [The Indian Express 1] [The Indian Express 2]

Jaishankar also chaired a conference of Indian Consul Generals in the US and emphasized enhancing services for the Indian diaspora, while preparing for Trump's administration's early engagements, including a potential visit to India for the 2025 Quad Summit. Notable discussions included critical and emerging technologies (iCET), focusing on areas like biotechnology, artificial intelligence, semiconductors, and defense, including the GE-F414 jet engine deal. [Deccan Herald]

The visit was also set against a backdrop of controversies, including indictments involving Gautam Adani and allegations against an Indian official in connection with a Sikh separatist leader. Both governments, however, emphasized that these developments would not affect bilateral relations, reaffirming their commitment to a strong partnership. [The Wire]

India, Sri Lanka bolster maritime cooperation through SLINEX-24 exercise

(raa) Sri Lanka and India successfully concluded the 2024 edition of the SLINEX naval exercise, held from December 17 to 20 at Visakhapatnam under the Indian

Navy's Eastern Naval Command. Conducted in two phases, the Harbour Phase (December 17–18) featured professional exchanges and social interactions, while the Sea Phase (December 19–20) included joint drills such as gun firings, navigation evolutions, and helicopter operations.

Representatives included India's INS Sumitra and Sri Lanka's SLNS Sayura, along with Special Forces teams from both countries. Initiated in 2005, SLINEX has strengthened bilateral naval cooperation and advanced regional security, aligning with India's SAGAR (Security And Growth for All in the Region) initiative. [Ada Derana]

Chinese naval ships make friendly visit to Indonesia's Tanjung Priok port

(lp) From December 24-27, three Chinese Navy warships docked at Tanjung Priok Port in Jakarta for a friendly visit. Indonesian Navy Lieutenant Colonel M. Qomar Syarifudin clarified that no joint activities were conducted during the visit, as the Chinese warships followed their own schedule.

Brigadier General Harry Indarto, Commander of Lantamal III, highlighted that the visit strengthened naval ties and bilateral relations between Indonesia and China. He noted that the visit was coordinated with the Indonesian Navy and Chinese Naval Attaché, offering the Chinese crew a brief break before resuming their duties. [Antara News] [China Military]

Indonesia and UK to strengthen bilateral relationship through blue economy development

(gk) Indonesia's Maritime Affairs and Fisheries Minister Sakti Wahyu Trenggono met British Ambassador to Indonesia and Timor Leste, Dominic Jermey on December 23, in Jakarta to reaffirm their commitment to strengthening bilateral synergy through blue economy development. The meeting centered around three main topics: blue carbon, aquaculture, and modern fishing practices. This meeting was a follow-up to President Prabowo Subianto's state visit to London in November.

Jeremy pointed to UK's Blue Planet Fund which supports sustainable conservation and fisheries resource management in Indonesia while Trenggono

emphasized the need for joint management of conservation areas, highlighting their role in carbon emission absorption and addressing climate change.

Strategic programs initiated by President Prabowo Subianto such as the Free Nutritious Meals program for school-aged children and mothers, food self-sufficiency, and achieving an 8 percent economic growth target were also discussed, with Trenggono acknowledging the synergy between these programs and the marine and fisheries sector, noting their shared potential to drive sustainability and economic growth. [Antara] [The Gulf Observer] [AiR No. 48, November/2024, 4]

Indonesia and Saudi Arabia discuss preparations for Hajj Pilgrimage

(gk) Dahnil Simanjuntak, Deputy Head of Indonesia's Hajj Organizing Agency (BPH) exchanged views on Hajj pilgrimage preparations with Deputy for International Cooperation at Saudi Arabia's Hajj and Umrah Ministry, Hassan bin Yahya Al Manakhrah. This bilateral meeting focused on stepping up their collaboration to offer safe and comfortable Hajj pilgrimages to Muslims from Indonesia.

Simanjuntak informed that for the next year's Hajj season, the Ministry of Religious Affairs will retain its role as the operator of the annual Islamic pilgrimage. Both officials agreed that operational efficiency, safety of pilgrims, and comfort in performing rituals are top priorities for a good Hajj pilgrimage. [Antara]

Indonesia to receive assistance from Qatar and UAE for developing seven million housing units

(gk) Indonesia's Housing Task Force has confirmed that the governments of Qatar and Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates (UAE), will assist Indonesia in constructing seven million housing units. The Qatari government has pledged support for the development of five million homes, while a Qatari philanthropist has committed to personally funding one million homes. Additionally, Abu Dhabi has offered to help build another one million homes.

With the support of these Middle Eastern countries, the Housing Task Force stated that Indonesia is on track to achieve its goal of constructing 15 million

homes within the first five years of President Prabowo's term. [Antara]

Indonesia sends humanitarian aid to Vanuatu

(gk) The Indonesian government has dispatched 50.5 tons of humanitarian aid to earthquake-stricken Vanuatu. The assistance includes medicines, medical equipment, food supplies, and evacuation logistics. In addition, Indonesia has sent a team of 15 paramedics, including specialists in surgery, orthopedics, internal medicine, and emergency medicine. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Indonesia, in Indonesian]

An earthquake hit the Pacific nation of Vanuatu on December 17, reportedly killing 12 people and injuring 200 people. [Antara] [Jakarta Globe]

Japanese prime minister to visit Malaysia, Indonesia

(dql) Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba is set to visit Malaysia and Indonesia from January 9 to 12 to enhance cooperation with Southeast Asian nations and promote a rules-based, free, and open Indo-Pacific, as announced by Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshimasa Hayashi on December 27. This marks Ishiba's first bilateral-focused overseas trip since assuming office in October, following his participation in various multilateral events.

During the trip, Ishiba is expected to meet Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto. The talks with Anwar come as Malaysia is set to chair the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) next year.

Hayashi emphasized the importance of strengthening ties with Southeast Asian countries, citing their strategic location near vital sea lanes and their role as economic growth drivers. [Prime Minister's Office, Japan] [Kyodo News]

Japanese prime minister confirms visit to Indonesia and Malaysia between Jan 9-12

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Hayashi emphasized the importance of strengthening ties with Southeast Asian countries, citing their strategic location near vital sea lanes and their role as economic growth drivers. [Prime Minister's Office, Japan] [Kyodo News]

Japan, U.S. deepen deterrence cooperation

(dql) Japan and the U.S. have disclosed their first guidelines on "extended deterrence", focusing on U.S. nuclear protection and enhanced collaboration to address security threats from China and North Korea. The document aims to reinforce consultation and communication within the Japan-U.S. alliance, though specific details remain undisclosed. [Department of State, USA]

The guidelines outline measures to strengthen deterrence. These include strategic messaging and bolstering U.S. extended deterrence with Japan's defense capabilities, to promote regional stability and prevent conflict.

The announcement follows heightened concerns about nuclear weapon use, particularly after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. It builds on the first ministerial talks on extended deterrence held in Tokyo in July as part of bilateral "two-plus-two" discussions involving the countries' foreign and defense ministers. [Kyodo News]

In a separate development, the Japanese and U.S. governments are planning to set up a U.S. military unit responsible for coordinating with Japan's Self-Defense Forces in central Tokyo, near the defense ministry. This location would facilitate smoother development of joint operational plans. [The Japan Times]

US foreign investment committee fails to reach consensus on Nippon Steel's takeover bid of US Steel

(dgl) The decision on whether to approve Nippon Steel's proposed USD 15 billion takeover of US Steel now rests with U.S. President Joe Biden, after the Committee on Foreign Investment in the U.S. (CFIUS) failed to reach a consensus on potential national security risks.

This increases the likelihood that Biden will block the deal, a move he has previously voiced support for, emphasizing the importance of strong American steel companies (see AiR No. 51, December/2024, 3). President-elect Donald Trump also opposed the deal, calling it "a horrible thing," (see AiR No. 49, December/2024, 1). [VoA]

Under the acquisition's terms, US Steel would remain headquartered in Pittsburgh but become a subsidiary of Nippon Steel. The combined company would be one of the world's largest steel producers. Both US Steel and Nippon Steel urged Biden to approve the deal, claiming it would enhance U.S. economic and national security by fostering innovation and creating a competitive alliance against China. However, the United Steelworkers union expressed concerns over job security, opposing the acquisition as detrimental to American workers and national security. [Al Jazeera] [Kyodo News]

Ukraine to receive USD 3 billion in frozen Russian assets from Japan

(dql) Japan will transfer an additional USD 3 billion to Ukraine, funded by frozen Russian assets, as announced by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky after a conversation with Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba on December 25. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan]

Zelensky expressed gratitude for Japan's USD 12 billion in humanitarian and financial aid to Ukraine, including the new USD 3 billion transfer. He also welcomed Japan's additional support for energy equipment and shelter construction, vital for Ukraine's energy infrastructure amid ongoing Russian attacks.

During their first conversation since Ishiba took office in October, he and President Volodymyr Zelenskyy discussed the situation in Ukraine, including the participation of North Korean soldiers. Both leaders

condemned North Korea's involvement in Russia's invasion of Ukraine and agreed to continue close coordination. [The Odessa Journal]

Ishiba reaffirmed Japan's support for Ukraine, emphasizing the country's commitment to achieving a "just and lasting" peace amidst the ongoing war with Russia, now involving North Korean troops.

Ishiba also voiced concerns about the broader regional impact, particularly regarding East Asia, where tensions between China and Taiwan continue to rise. The involvement of North Korean troops in the conflict, marking deeper cooperation between Moscow and Pyongyang, has heightened concerns in Japan. Zelenskyy noted that over 3,000 North Korean soldiers had been killed or wounded while fighting alongside Russian forces. [Kyodo News]

In November, Japan and Ukraine signed an agreement to exchange classified security information, following an unannounced visit by Japan's Foreign Minister Takeshi Iwaya to Kyiv (see AiR No. 47, November/2024, 3).

Japan, Djibouti sign security assistance project

(dql) Chargé d'Affaires ad interim of Japan to Djibouti Oshima Hiroyuki, and Djibouti's Foreign Minister Mahmoud Ali Youssouf signed an exchange of notes for a JPY 1.1 billion (USD 7 million) "Official Security Assistance (OSA)" project for FY 2024.

The project will provide a coastal radar system and related infrastructure to Djibouti's Navy, enhancing its maritime surveillance and domain awareness, thereby contributing to the security of vital sea lanes and regional stability. Through this cooperation, Japan aims to strengthen maritime security and further its security ties with Djibouti.

Djibouti, located at a strategic point in the Gulf of Aden, plays a key role in regional stability and is critical to Japan's national security, hosting Japan's only overseas Self-Defense Forces base for counter-piracy operations. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan] [Arab News]

Vietnam and Laos strengthen trade and investment ties for greater economic

growth

(cc) Vietnam and Laos are working to unlock the full potential of their trade and investment relationship, with a focus on enhancing economic cooperation to drive growth and development. Recent discussions between leaders from both countries at the Vietnam-Laos trade and investment promotion forum have underscored the importance of boosting bilateral trade, simplifying trade procedures, and improving infrastructure to facilitate smoother commerce.

Vietnam, one of Laos' largest trading partners, is increasing investments in key sectors such as agriculture, infrastructure, and energy. Both nations are committed to improving connectivity and expanding joint ventures, which will support Laos' diversification efforts and promote sustainable economic growth.

This intensified collaboration is expected to deliver significant economic benefits, creating new opportunities for businesses and communities in both countries. By maximizing their trade and investment potential, Vietnam and Laos aim to build a stronger, more resilient economic partnership. [Lao News Agency]

Laos and China strengthen educational partnership

(cc) Laos and China are furthering their educational partnership, offering increased opportunities for Lao students to pursue higher education in China. This initiative aims to foster stronger bilateral relations and equip Lao students with the skills necessary for national development.

With expanded scholarships and exchange programs, more Lao students are gaining access to China's top universities, particularly in fields like engineering, business, and technology. These educational exchanges are not only enhancing academic growth but also promoting long-term collaboration between academic institutions in both countries.

As these students return to Laos, they are expected to contribute significantly to the country's development, particularly in areas where China's expertise can support growth. This strengthened educational cooperation underscores the strategic partnership between Laos and China, with a focus on sustainable development and human capital growth. [Bastille Post]

Laos and China embrace QR payments to streamline cashless tourism

(cc) In a significant move to enhance cross-border tourism, Laos and China have officially launched a QR payment system designed to enable seamless, cashless transactions for Chinese tourists visiting Laos. This partnership aims to streamline the tourism experience by leveraging the convenience of mobile payments, which have become the norm in China.

The initiative was introduced on December 25, with the collaboration of UnionPay International, LAPNet, and various local merchants. [GlobeNewswire] [The Laotian Times]

South Korea grants USD 8.1 million to support agricultural development in Laos

(cc) South Korea has approved USD 8.1 million in aid to bolster Laos' agricultural sector, a critical component of the country's economy. The funding, provided through the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), aims to enhance productivity, improve food security, and promote sustainable farming practices across Laos.

The aid package will focus on key initiatives, including the modernization of farming methods, the development of irrigation systems, and capacity-building programs for farmers. By introducing advanced agricultural technologies and techniques, the initiative seeks to address challenges such as outdated practices, limited infrastructure, and the growing impact of climate change on crop yields.

Laos' agricultural sector, which employs a significant portion of the population, is vital for both economic stability and rural livelihoods. However, it has faced persistent issues such as low productivity and environmental vulnerability. The Lao Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry welcomed the financial support, emphasizing its potential to drive meaningful improvements in farming efficiency, resilience, and sustainability.

South Korea's assistance aligns with its longstanding commitment to supporting Laos' development. Over the years, South Korea has partnered with Laos on numerous projects in areas such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure. This latest aid package

reflects a deepening of bilateral ties and underscores the importance of agriculture in Laos' national development strategy.

By empowering farmers with modern tools and training, the initiative aims to uplift rural communities and improve food security in the country. The program will also prioritize environmentally sustainable practices to ensure long-term benefits for the agricultural sector. [Asia News Network]

Malaysia and Kyrgyz Republic explore agriculture collaboration

(ga) Malaysia and the Kyrgyz Republic have agreed to explore agricultural collaboration following their first meeting on December 23. The discussion, led by Malaysia's Agriculture and Food Security Minister Mohamad Sabu and Kyrgyz Ambassador Anarbaev, focused on food security and expanding Malaysian agricultural exports, such as value-added animal products, livestock feed, liquid eggs, and animal vaccines.

Malaysia also expressed interest in partnering on beekeeping, honey production, and aquaculture, particularly in shrimp and tilapia farming. The minister highlighted Malaysia's tropical fruits, like durian and jackfruit, and invited Kyrgyzstan to consider importing them. Additionally, both nations explored potential research and development collaborations between Malaysia and Kyrgyz research institutions. [Bernama]

Mongolia and China advance cross-border railway project

(fs) Mongolian Prime Minister Oyun-Erdene Luvsannamsrai met on December 24 with Shen Minjuan, Chinese Ambassador to Mongolia, and Kang Fengwei, Assistant General Manager of "China Energy" Group, to discuss the Gashuunsukhait-Gantsmod Cross-Border Railway Project.

The Chinese government reaffirmed its readiness to address project issues through an international agreement with Mongolia. The railway project, under discussion since 2009, regained momentum following Prime Minister Oyun-Erdene's official visit to China on November 5, where an agreement was signed for the joint construction of a railway bridge at the Gashuunsukhait-Gantsmod border.

Successful completion of this project is expected to catalyze other cross-border railway initiatives, including the Khangi-Mandal, Shiveekhuren-Sekhe, and Bichigt-Zuunkhatavch routes. Additionally, it could enhance Mongolia's coal export capacity to 120 million tons annually and boost the nation's GDP per capita to USD 10,000. [Montsame]

Mongolia, South Korea to implement electronic traffic management project

(fs) Mongolia's Ministry of Road and Transport and South Korea's Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, and Transport are jointly implementing the "K-Smart" Electronic Traffic Management Project to enhance road maintenance in Mongolia.

During a recent meeting, Mongolian officials, including D. Oyunbold from the National Road Transport Center, discussed the project's implementation plan with South Korean experts.

The project, funded by a KRW 6.5 billion (USD 4.43 million) grant from the South Korean government and the International Development Assistance Organization (ODA), aims to improve road management using advanced technology.

The initiative will involve training Mongolian engineers in South Korea, equipping the country with road maintenance tools, and introducing artificial intelligence systems to monitor and detect road surface issues. The project is expected to be completed in four years. [Montsame]

Mongolia begins live sheep exports to Uzbekistan amid efforts to expand agricultural trade

(fs) Mongolia has launched its first live sheep exports to Uzbekistan, fulfilling a bilateral agreement aimed at bolstering agricultural trade between the two nations.

The initiative follows an agreement reached during Mongolian President Ukhnaa Khurelsukh's state visit to Uzbekistan in June 2024, where leaders committed to enhancing trade in livestock and related products, such as wool, cashmere, leather, and meat.

Under the agreement, Mongolia pledged to export 100,000 live livestock to Uzbekistan, with the first

shipments of 1,440 sheep transported on December 21 via two flights. The Ministry of Food, Agriculture, and Light Industry confirmed the implementation of the deal, which also aims to facilitate access to Central Asian markets through Uzbekistan.

Livestock husbandry is a vital component of Mongolia's economy and a key strategy for diversifying its mining-dependent economy. As of the end of 2023, Mongolia's livestock population stood at 64.7 million, with sheep comprising 45.5 percent and goats 38.1 percent, according to the National Statistics Office. [Pune]

Mongolia, Israel to collaborate on green initiatives

(fs) The "Billion Trees National Movement" NGO in Mongolia signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Israel's Agency for International Development Cooperation (MASHAV) on December 17.

The agreement aims to improve urban green spaces, increase forest reserves, and promote tree planting to combat desertification and climate change. Under the terms of the Memorandum, tree planting activities will begin in Ulaanbaatar in spring 2025, aimed at reducing air and soil pollution in the city. [Montsame]

Mongolia and Colombia strengthen bilateral relations

(fs) The Ministries of Foreign Affairs of Mongolia and Colombia held their fourth Political Consultative Meeting in Bogotá, Colombia, on December 18.

The discussions centered on enhancing cooperation in trade, economy, tourism, education, and culture. Both sides reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening bilateral relations and agreed to appoint Honorary Consuls to promote business and tourism ties.

The Colombian delegation invited Mongolia to participate in technical cooperation initiatives under the 2023 Memorandum of Understanding between the two governments. Both nations also pledged to support each other in multilateral platforms, including the United Nations and the East Asia-Latin America Cooperation Forum.

Furthermore, Mongolia's Ambassador to Colombia Zoljargal Seseer and Colombia's Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs Jorge Rojas signed an agreement

exempting ordinary passport holders from short-term visa requirements. This adds to Mongolia's existing reciprocal visa exemption agreements with several Latin American countries, including Argentina, Brazil, and Peru. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Mongolia] [Montsame]

Universities of China, Nepal sign cooperation agreement

(lm) The Lumbini Buddhist University of Nepal and Beijing Language and Culture University (BLCU) signed a cooperation agreement on December 30 in the presence of Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli at his official residence in Baluwatar. The agreement includes the establishment of a Nepal Institute in Beijing and a China Institute in Lumbini to promote cultural exchange, language teaching, and joint research activities.

Prime Minister Oli, who is also the Chancellor of Lumbini Buddhist University, expressed his satisfaction with the initiative, emphasizing the long-standing people-to-people ties between Nepal and China and highlighting the significance of enhancing academic and educational collaboration between the two nations. [Rising Nepal Daily]

North Korea vows "toughest" anti-U.S. strategy ahead of Donald Trump's return to presidency

(ac) North Korea concluded the five-day annual year-end general meeting of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea, held from December 23 to 27. During the key party gathering, North Korea announced plans to adopt what it called the "toughest" strategy against the United States as Donald Trump prepares to return to the White House.

Describing the U.S. as "the most reactionary state that regards anti-communism as its invariable state policy," North Korean leader Kim Jong-un emphasized the need to build a robust anti-U.S. strategy to safeguard its long-term national interests and security. North Korea also condemned the trilateral cooperation between South Korea, the U.S., and Japan, accusing them of forming an imperialistic and nuclear military bloc. [Yonhap News Agency] [KCNA]

While details of the anti-U.S. policies were not elaborated, the regime highlighted its focus on enhancing self-defense capabilities, advancing modern warfare technology, and strengthening the mental resilience of North Korean soldiers.

The meeting also emphasized maintaining diplomacy with North Korea's "friendly countries" and committed to promoting a "multi-polar world." This was seen as a nod to its closer ties with Moscow, as well as the re-establishment of embassies by India and Nigeria in Pyongyang.

Critics argue that the rapport previously established between Trump and Kim is unlikely to be revived, as the U.S. is expected to prioritize conflicts in the Middle East and Ukraine. Moreover, North Korea's support for Russia is likely to complicate diplomatic efforts and pose challenges to regional security. [AP News]

US Congress fails to renew North Korean Human Rights Act

(mc) The North Korean Human Rights Act (NKHRA), enacted in 2004 to promote freedoms of expression, press, and religion in North Korea, has once again been voted down by the US Congress. Given the lack of bipartisan support in Congress, the law, which expires in September 2022, will remain in effect for more than two years for the first time since its enactment.

On December 22, the 118th session of the US Congress convened for the 118th time and adjourned without taking up the NKHRA reauthorization bill. Although the US House of Representatives approved the bill in November 2024, the Senate failed to bring the bill up for consideration. Senate lawmakers left the issue of resolving the NKHRA in limbo until the new congressional session begins in January 2025.

The background to the NKHRA includes provisions on reuniting Korean Americans with family members in North Korea, the appointment of a special envoy for North Korean human rights, and US support for broadcasting efforts to the country.

The NKHRA was previously renewed in 2008, 2012 and 2018. [VoA]

North Korean military may participate in Russia's victory day parade next year

(mc) According to the Russian news agency *Sputnik*, the North Korean military has indicated that Russia is considering its participation in Moscow's 80th Victory Day parade in May 2025.

A Kremlin aide emphasized that North Korea's involvement would highlight the strengthening military ties between the two countries. In November, Russian Defense Minister Andrei Belousov invited North Korean military officials during his visit to Pyongyang, further underscoring the deepening partnership between Moscow and Kim Jong-un's regime.

Victory Day, which commemorates the Soviet Union's victory over Nazi Germany in the Second World War, holds significant political and historical importance for Russia. If North Korea's participation in the May 2025 parade is confirmed, it is likely to draw international attention, especially given ongoing concerns about the deepening military cooperation between the two nations.

This potential collaboration comes at a time when both Russia and North Korea face escalating tensions with the West—Russia due to its war in Ukraine and North Korea over its continued missile development.

South Korea confirms Ukraine's capture of injured North Korean soldier

(mc) South Korea's National Intelligence Service (NIS) confirmed the capture of a wounded North Korean soldier by Ukrainian forces in a press release on December 27, marking the first reported incident of its kind. The NIS pledged to follow up on further developments in the case.

The confirmation by the NIS follows reports by Ukraine's military-oriented news outlet *Militarnyi* on December 26 that Ukrainian special operations forces captured the North Korean soldier during operations in the Kursk region along Russia's western front.

The photo of the captured North Korean soldier, pictured in a wounded state, has been circulating on Telegram pages. [Yonhap News Agency]

North Korean soldiers kill themselves before being captured in Ukraine, US official reports

(mc) A senior US military official has claimed that North Korean troops deployed to support Russia's war effort in Ukraine are taking their own lives to avoid capture by the Ukrainian military.

According to White House National Security Council spokesman John Kirby, North Korean troops in the Kursk region are carrying out "desperate" attacks against Ukrainian troops on orders they have received. "There are reports that North Korean soldiers are committing suicide rather than be captured by Ukrainian forces, possibly out of fear of reprisals against their families," Kirby said.

Kirby added that the human wave tactics employed by North Korean forces on the orders of Russian and North Korean commanders have been largely ineffective and have resulted in significant casualties, with more than 1,000 North Korean soldiers killed or wounded in the past week alone. According to the data available so far, at least 3,000 North Korean soldiers appear to be missing.

In a related development, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said that Russian and North Korean military leaders "do not care about the survival" of North Korean soldiers, citing the disregard for their lives and the fact that North Korean soldiers are executed by their forces to avoid capture.

Zelenskyy also called on China to put a stop to this war and put pressure on North Korea to prevent further escalation of the war, saying that "Korean people should not lose their lives in wars in Europe, and China can influence this outcome." [Radio Free Asia]

15 North Koreans sanctioned by South Korea for nuclear weapon involvement

(jb) The South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) announced on December 26 that it will impose sanctions on 15 individuals, identified as North Korean nationals, involved in crypto theft to earn foreign currency to allegedly fund North Korea’s nuclear program.

The individuals were traced back to General Bureau 313 of North Korea’s Department of Munitions Industry, which oversees the nation’s ballistic missile program and is responsible for the development of the latest missiles test launched by North Korea in the past few years including the failed Hwasong-13 intercontinental ballistic missile. The department is also under sanctions on the United Nations Security

Council's Sanctions Committee's consolidated list. [United Nations Security Council] [Switzerland State Secretariat for Economic Affairs]

The department's general bureau is also allegedly involved in sending IT experts to foreign countries to earn foreign currency through illegal means. Several individuals booked by South Korea in this case have prior records of working abroad in IT companies under false identities to earn foreign currency. The United States recorded 130 such North Korean workers between 2017 and 2023 in a recent expose by the US Department of State. The workers used email IDs which were traced back to North Korean IP addresses to generate a total of USD 88 million for North Korea. [Reuters]

South Korea's foreign ministry also placed one company, the Chosun Kum Jong Electronics Information Technology Exchange Co., on its sanctions list on suspicions of sending IT workers abroad for similar purposes.

The sanctions come after an UN Panel of Experts concluded that over 40 percent of all earnings from North Korean crypto theft have been utilized to fund their ballistic missiles program. [Yonhap News Agency]

Pakistan to acquire 40 Chinese J-35 stealth fighter jets, media report claims

(mra/sn) Reports indicate that Pakistan has approved the purchase of 40 Chinese J-35 stealth fighter jets, marking Beijing's first export of fifth-generation jets to a foreign ally. The aircraft, expected to be delivered within two years, will replace Pakistan's aging fleet of American F-16s and French Mirage fighters. This move is seen as a significant development in the Pakistan-India rivalry, potentially boosting the Pakistan Air Force's capabilities compared to India's air force.

Analysts suggest that the deal signifies the J-35's readiness for the global market and could help China finance further advancements in military technology for its People's Liberation Army. Reports also state that Pakistani pilots have already begun training for the J-35 in China, with Air Chief Marshal Zaheer Ahmed Baber Sidhu previously hinting at plans for its acquisition earlier this year.

The J-35 deal complements Pakistan's existing fleet of Chinese-made J-10CE medium multi-role combat aircraft, delivered two years ago, and reflects deepening defense ties between China and Pakistan.

Observers believe the deal could recalibrate regional dynamics and further solidify Pakistan's reliance on Chinese military hardware amidst its geopolitical tensions with India. [South China Morning Post] [The Economic Times]

On December 26, further emphasizing their partnership, Pakistan and China unveiled sculptures of their founding leaders, Muhammad Ali Jinnah and Mao Zedong, at a ceremony attended by Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and a Chinese delegation. Sharif highlighted China's significant contributions to Pakistan, including the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the recent USD 350 million investment by China's ADM Group in Pakistan's electric vehicle sector. [Arab News] [Business Recorder]

Pakistan's maritime security agency rescues nine crew members from Indian cargo vessel

(lm) The Pakistan Maritime Security Agency (PMSA) rescued nine crew members from an Indian cargo vessel after receiving a distress alert from Mumbai's Maritime Rescue Coordination Center. The vessel, located approximately 120 nautical miles south of Karachi, experienced water ingress, forcing the crew to abandon ship and seek refuge in a life raft.

This marks the second such operation by PMSA this month, following the rescue of 12 Indian crew members from MSV Peeran-e-Peer.

These actions underscore sporadic cooperation between Pakistan and India amid their strained diplomatic relations. Both nations frequently detain each other's fishermen for maritime boundary violations, often leading to prolonged imprisonments. [Arab News]

Pakistan security forces repel Afghan-based militant incursion amid rising tensions

(mrs/tj/sn/lm) Tensions between Pakistan and Afghanistan have escalated following a series of cross-border clashes and airstrikes, intensifying hostilities along their shared border.

On December 28, Pakistan's security forces repelled multiple infiltration attempts by militants allegedly

supported by Afghan Taliban authorities. The incursions, involving 20 to 25 militants from the banned Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), targeted Kurram and North Waziristan. Pakistani forces effectively thwarted the attempts, reportedly killing over 15 militants and Afghan Taliban personnel, with conflicting reports indicating no or one fatalities on the Pakistani side. Moreover, varying reports indicate between three to eleve soldiers were injured. [Arab News 1] [DAWN]

These developments followed Pakistani airstrikes earlier in the week on alleged TTP hideouts in Afghanistan's Paktika province. Afghan officials accused Pakistan of targeting civilians, claiming 46 deaths, including women and children. Pakistan denied these allegations, asserting that the strikes were precise and aimed at dismantling terrorist camps responsible for cross-border attacks. The airstrikes were part of Pakistan's broader Azm-e-Istehkam military campaign to counter TTP violence, which has surged since the group's ceasefire ended in November 2022. [Arab News 2] [Al Jazeera] [CNN]

In response, the Afghan Taliban launched retaliatory strikes on Pakistani territory, targeting locations beyond the disputed Durand Line, which separates the two nations. Afghanistan's Defense Ministry condemned the airstrikes as a "cowardly act" and warned of further retaliation, while the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) called for an investigation into alleged civilian casualties. [Barron's]

The border tensions underscore the fragility of Pakistan-Afghanistan relations, with both sides accusing each other of harboring militants. Security analysts caution that while Pakistan's military actions aim to curb TTP violence, they risk deepening the rift with Afghanistan, complicating efforts to stabilize the region.

Iran urges implementation of Iran-Pakistan security agreement

(mra/sn) Iran and Pakistan have taken steps to enhance bilateral relations through agreements on security and economic collaboration. During a meeting in Tehran on December 23, Iran's Interior Minister Eskandar Momeni urged Pakistan's Deputy Interior Minister Mohammad Khorram Agha to implement the Iran-Pakistan security agreement. Momeni highlighted the importance of deepening border cooperation to ensure regional stability and bolster trade,

emphasizing the historical, cultural, and religious ties between the two nations.

Khorram Agha praised Iran's hospitality and reaffirmed both countries' commitment to combating drug trafficking and terrorism. He noted the peaceful history of their shared borders and expressed optimism about increasing bilateral trade to USD 10 billion. Both officials emphasized the need for sustained dialogue and collaboration to advance mutual interests. [Islamic Republic News Agency]

On the economic front, representatives from the Qazvin and Karachi chambers of commerce signed a new cooperation agreement in Karachi on December 27. The Iranian delegation, led by Consul General Hassan Nourian and industry leaders from oil and trade sectors, met with Pakistani businesses in Sindh, visited the Build Asia 2024 International Exhibition, and encouraged greater economic activity. [Mehr News Agency] [NEWS.AZ]

In parallel, Pakistan has begun blocking the passports of over 10,000 citizens implicated in criminal activities in Iran, including human trafficking, illegal residency, and drug-related offenses. The initiative, part of a broader crackdown, includes barring passports for 5 to 7 years. Over the past 18 months, Iran has deported more than 5,000 Pakistanis, with 4,000 arrested for illegal border crossings. Pakistan's Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) reported a significant increase in arrests in 2024, with 10,454 citizens detained in Iran for attempting to travel abroad illegally. [Minute Mirror]

Pakistan, Kenya agree to Free Trade Agreement

(lm) Pakistan and Kenya have finalized a free trade agreement to enhance business and investment opportunities as Islamabad seeks sustainable economic growth amid ongoing macroeconomic challenges. Under the deal, Pakistan will export pink salt, marble, cement, and pharmaceuticals to Kenya, while expanding bilateral trade in key sectors.

Kenya is one of Pakistan's largest African trading partners, with trade primarily centered on rice and tea. Pakistan is the largest global buyer of Kenyan tea, while Kenya is the leading importer of Pakistani basmati and non-basmati rice.

The agreement is expected to foster economic stability, lower prices, and increase business opportunities in

both nations. It follows Pakistan's broader strategy to strengthen trade ties with regional allies and African nations, complementing its total trade with Africa, which amounted to USD 4.44 billion in 2022-23. Major export destinations for Pakistan in Africa include Kenya, South Africa, and Tanzania, while imports from Africa consist of coal, petroleum, tea, and cotton.

Islamabad and Nairobi have maintained structured economic relations through mechanisms like the Joint Ministerial Commission and Joint Trade and Investment Committee, signaling ongoing collaboration to enhance trade and market positioning. [Arab News]

Singapore-Vietnam economic ties bolstered by robust diplomacy in 2024

(fi) Vietnam's vibrant economic diplomacy in 2024 has strengthened ties with Singapore, setting the stage for a comprehensive strategic partnership, according to Cao Xuan Thang, Vietnam's Trade Counsellor in Singapore.

Vietnam became Singapore's largest rice exporter, holding 33 percent of the market, and rose to the fifth-largest exporter of aquatic products. Exports to Singapore surged by 32.11 percent, with a trade surplus of SGD 1.5 billion (USD 1.1 billion).

Efforts such as trade fairs, business connections, and promotional activities have increased Singaporean investment and boosted the visibility of Vietnamese goods. With shared membership in agreements like the CPTPP and RCEP, Vietnam and Singapore are well-positioned to deepen cooperation in manufacturing, trade, and environmentally friendly products.

Vietnam aims to expand its product markets, promote key exports, and utilize e-commerce to enhance trade further, supported by the Vietnam Trade Office's ongoing efforts to connect businesses and attract investment. [VietnamPlus]

Singapore's Mayor Fahmi accepts Ar-Raniry Award on behalf of Senior Minister Lee in Banda Aceh

(fi) From December 22 to 24, Singapore's South East District Mayor Mohd Fahmi bin Aliman visited Banda Aceh, Indonesia, to accept the prestigious Ar-Raniry

Award on behalf of Senior Minister Lee Hsien Loong. The award honors Singapore's significant contributions to the relief efforts following the devastating 2004 Boxing Day earthquake and tsunami.

During his visit, Mayor Fahmi met with Aceh leaders, including Wali Nanggroe Malik Mahmud al-Haytar and Acting Mayor Almuniza Kamal, and toured the University Syiah Kuala. Discussions focused on strengthening cooperation in education and sustainable development, reflecting Singapore's commitment to fostering closer relations with Aceh. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs Singapore]

South Korea, Japan plan foreign ministers' meeting amid political turmoil

(mc) Considering political turmoil in South Korea following South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol's controversial declaration of martial law, the foreign ministers of South Korea and Japan have announced that they are working to organize a bilateral meeting in early 2025.

The planned meeting between South Korean Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul and Japanese Foreign Minister Takeshi Iwaya is expected to be an opportunity for both countries to reaffirm their commitment to strengthening bilateral ties.

The main agenda items of the meeting are expected to include preparations for events marking the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations between South Korea and Japan in 2025, as well as discussions on trilateral cooperation with the United States to counter regional security threats posed by North Korea.

In addition, reflecting preparations for a possible summit of the leaders of Japan, South Korea and China, a trilateral foreign ministerial meeting of these countries is on the agenda for February 2025.

In a related development, Japan's Mainichi Shimbun newspaper reported that Japan initially planned to host the trilateral summit in the spring of 2025 but has put this plan on hold due to political tensions in South Korea. [Yonhap News Agency]

South Korea-China talks cement cooperation in trade, security arenas

(jb) South Korean Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi held a phone call on December 24 to reaffirm both nations' bilateral strategic ties.

China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a statement immediately prior to the phone conversation affirming that it stood by "the principle of non-interference in internal affairs". It also pushed for cooperation between China, Japan and South Korea, arguing that it would lead to their development and "regional peace, stability and prosperity". [South China Morning Post]

The conversation touched upon the security threat from a growing nuclear North Korea, with Wang stating that the issue of North Korean aggression should be resolved through "dialogue and consultation", promising China's role in facilitating negotiations that support peace and stability in the region. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Korea]

Both officials also anticipated the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum's 2025 summit which is set to be held in South Korea in late October next year. The newly appointed Chinese ambassador to South Korea, Dai Bing, also released a statement of support for South Korea chairing the 2025 session and his hope for Chinese Premier Xi Jinping's attendance at the summit.

Dai, previously a deputy ambassador to the UN, has expressed a positive and cooperative outlook on China-ROK relations, and was appointed ambassador after a five-month vacancy in the post, the longest since both nations established diplomatic relations in 1992. South Korea's foreign ministry also reported that their summit invitation to Xi has been issued in hopes of a positive response as China is set to host APEC 2026. [South China Morning Post] [The Korea Times]

The foreign ministers also promised to improve economic ties, with Wang insisting that South Korea invest more in China to ensure the "smooth flow of the global production and supply chain". According to a Korea International Trade Association report for December 2023, the United States became South Korea's biggest export destination after China holding the position for over 20 years. However, with the incoming Trump administration in the US aiming to enforce a protectionist economy, South Korea finds itself in need of strengthening ties with its other major trading partners, with its major partner being China. Both nations have also pursued dialogue on establishing a Free Trade Zone since 2004, with the most recent round of talks occurring in Seoul on December 9. [Korea International Trade Association]

[Ministry of Commerce, People's Republic of China] [Global Times]

An important aspect of China-ROK diplomatic ties that is yet to be addressed is the formalization of appointment of the South Korean ambassador to China, Kim Dae Ki. Kim is required to be approved by the Cabinet and the Acting President (see AiR No. 52, December/2024, 4). However, due to the National Assembly impeaching Acting President Han Duck Soo, the protocol on his formalization remains unclear. China has approved of the appointment. [Yonhap News Agency]

China has found itself in an increasingly tricky position vis-a-vis its alliances in the Korean Peninsula following Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's official request to China to influence North Korea into withdrawing its troops from Kursk in Russia. Despite China and Russia improving ties in the past year, Foreign Minister Wang Yi during July's ASEAN meeting in Laos officially declined all allegations of supporting Russia in its war against Ukraine [Kyiv Independent] [The Guardian]

South Korea, US reaffirm ties, promise to resume diplomatic meetings

(jb) Deputy Secretary of State for the US, Kurt Campbell, met with South Korea's Vice Foreign Minister Kim Hong-kyun in the Department of State, Washington D.C., on December 23 to discuss the future of US-ROK relations. [Department of State 1, USA]

The meeting came on the heels of South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol's impeachment proceedings following his failed imposition of martial law on December 3. Campbell acknowledged the crisis during the meeting and emphasized the United States' belief in South Korea's robust democracy, thanking their Ministry of Foreign Affairs for their close communication over the past month.

As the United States gears up for the incoming Trump administration, Campbell assured Kim that the US will stand by its ally at a time of change. Kim in return, assured Campbell of South Korea's internal political stability despite the unfolding events and expressed gratitude for the United States' vote of confidence. [Department of State 2, USA]

A major focus of the meeting was the Nuclear Consultative Group formed by both states to address

an increasingly belligerent North Korea. Both officials stressed the importance of resuming diplomatic events and meetings at the earliest, stating that the "critical mechanisms" for their bilateral strategic relationship will remain in place despite incoming changes in administration; however, an exact date for the meeting of the NCG is yet to be confirmed. [Yonhap News Agency 1] [Yonhap News Agency 2]

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken previously held a phone conversation with South Korean Foreign Minister Cho Tae Yul on December 20, highlighting that their alliance was rooted in "shared values and mutual interests". [Department of State 3, USA]

South Korea postpones opening of embassy in Cuba

(mc) South Korean officials have announced that the planned opening of an embassy in Cuba has been postponed due to logistical challenges, with the opening now expected in early 2025.

Originally scheduled for late 2024, following the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries in February 2024 (see AiR No. 8, February/2024, 3), the embassy's opening has been delayed by supply chain issues and ongoing infrastructure problems in Cuba, including frequent power outages and fuel shortages. [Yonhap Agency News]

Taiwan blocks 124 Chinese nationals from entering over forged documents

(dql) Taiwan's National Immigration Agency (NIA) reported on December 25 that it has caught 124 people attempting to enter Taiwan with forged documents since allowing Chinese nationals living abroad to apply for entry permits in September 2023. This follows a CNA report citing immigration officials and travel agents about applicants submitting fake documents claiming to be students in Malaysia.

Taiwan closed its borders to Chinese tourists in January 2020 due to COVID-19 but began allowing entry from third countries on September 1, 2023. To address potential fraud, the NIA has strengthened screening processes for applicants and conducts detailed interviews with Chinese arrivals from third countries.

Between January 1 and November 30, 2023, around 134,000 Chinese nationals living or studying abroad applied for permits, with 98,000 visiting Taiwan. [Focus Taiwan]

Taiwan, Belgium jointly investigate drug trafficking case for first time

(dql) Taiwanese law enforcement, in collaboration with Belgian authorities, collected evidence for the first time last month as part of an investigation into a drug trafficking case. The case involved a package containing 3.29 kilograms of ketamine, discovered by Belgian customs in late 2022.

Belgian authorities informed Taiwan's Criminal Investigation Bureau (CIB) about the package on December 29, 2022, leading to a task force being formed in Taiwan. This resulted in the arrest of three suspects between January 10-13, 2023. The suspects were indicted on April 7, 2023, for violating the Narcotics Hazard Prevention Act and the Smuggling Penalty Act.

The Taoyuan District Court requested legal assistance from Belgium, which led to the collection of a ketamine sample in Brussels on November 14, 2024. The sample was brought back to Taiwan on November 16 for testing. This marks the first joint evidence collection effort between the two countries.

As of Friday, no verdict had been announced in the case, and the suspects had been released on bail in May 2023 following their confessions. [Focus Taiwan]

Taiwan to donate sewing machines and equipment to Turkey

(dql) Taiwan has signed an agreement to donate sewing machines and equipment to support women's livelihoods in Ümraniye, a municipality in Istanbul province, Turkey.

Signed on December 23 by Taiwan's representative to Turkey, Huang Chih-yang, and Ümraniye Mayor İsmet Yıldırım, the agreement aims to enhance vocational training opportunities for women in the municipality.

Ümraniye, home to around 750,000 residents and known for its large manual labor force, is one of Istanbul's economically disadvantaged areas.

The donations follow Taiwan's 2023 post-disaster reconstruction donations. [Focus Taiwan]

Taiwan to provide Ukraine with USD 5 million for renovation of medical building

(dql) Taiwan has pledged USD 5 million for the renovation of a medical building in Lviv, Ukraine. The renovated facility will be renamed the "Taiwan Friendship Building." The funding agreement was formalized through a virtual memorandum of understanding (MOU) signed on December 27 by representatives from the Taipei Representative Office in Poland, the Lviv City Government, and the UNBROKEN National Rehabilitation Center

This follows Taiwan's previous donation of USD 800,000 to the hospital in 2022 as part of a broader USD 5.8 million aid package for seven Ukrainian hospitals.

Lviv has become a key hub for the treatment and rehabilitation of those injured in the ongoing wart, with more than 16,000 individuals, including children, treated at the UNBROKEN center since February 2022. [Focus Taiwan]

Taiwan appoints new representatives to Greece and Mexico

(sk) Taiwan has filled two key diplomatic positions with the appointment of Calvin Ho as representative to Greece and Ivan Lee as envoy to Mexico, following a personnel reshuffle approved by the Cabinet.

Ho, who heads the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Bureau of Consular Affairs, will take over the role in Athens, vacant since Sherman S. Kuo stepped down in June for personal reasons. With a career spanning assignments in the United States, Canada, Geneva, and London, Ho previously served as ambassador to Saint Vincent and the Grenadines from 2018 to 2021. He has also been instrumental in advancing an online passport renewal service currently in trial.

Lee, Ministry of Foreign Affairs' chief liaison officer to the Legislative Yuan, will represent Taiwan in Mexico. His extensive experience includes ambassadorship to Nicaragua and postings in Peru and Paraguay. Since September 2022, he has overseen MOFA's Office of Parliamentarian Affairs.

The government has not specified when Ho and Lee will assume their new positions. These appointments reflect ongoing efforts to enhance Taiwan's international presence. [Focus Taiwan]

Taiwan seeks semiconductor, AI cooperation with Oman

(dql) A delegation of Taiwanese business representatives and semiconductor experts visited Oman earlier this month to explore collaboration opportunities in semiconductors and artificial intelligence. The six-day visit included meetings with Omani officials from the Ministry of Transport, Communications and Information Technology, and the Oman Investment Authority.

The discussions focused on investment and cooperation as part of Oman's "Vision 2040," the country's a national development blueprint which prioritizes technology and innovation. [Taipei Times]

Cambodia to open consulate in Thailand's southern Songkhla province

(lm) The Cambodian government has announced plans to establish a consulate-general in Songkhla, a southern border province in Thailand. The consulate will be Cambodia's first in Thailand and follows reciprocal discussions held in February 2024 between Prime Minister Hun Manet and then-Thai Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin. During those talks, Thailand also expressed intentions to set up a consulate-general in Siem Reap, Cambodia.

Songkhla was chosen due to its strategic location and its significance as a hub for Cambodian workers in Thailand. According to Cambodia's Labor Ministry, approximately 1.2 million Cambodians are legally employed in Thailand, underscoring the importance of strengthened bilateral cooperation. [Bangkok Post]

Thai ex-Prime Minister Thaksin, Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar hold talks aboard yacht

(lm/msz) Former Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra met with Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim aboard a luxury yacht near the Thai-Malaysian

maritime border to discuss several regional and bilateral issues. The meeting, which took place after Thaksin's appointment as an informal adviser to Malaysia's ASEAN chairmanship, covered topics including the Myanmar crisis, peace efforts in southern Thailand, and the strengthening of ASEAN unity.

Thaksin, who had previously served as Thailand's prime minister from 2001 to 2006, expressed the importance of ASEAN countries uniting to become a powerful collective force, particularly in tackling global and regional challenges. Anwar, in his post-meeting statement, emphasized the value of Thaksin's extensive network and experience in advancing ASEAN's priorities and strengthening Malaysia's role within the regional bloc.

Additionally, the leaders discussed ways to enhance bilateral ties between Thailand and Malaysia, aligning both countries with a vision for sustainable development and regional cohesion. Anwar also highlighted that the talks would contribute to improving cooperation between the two nations on economic revitalization and peacebuilding efforts in southern Thailand. [Bangkok Post]

Thaksin's appointment as a personal advisor to Malaysia's ASEAN chairmanship, meanwhile, has drawn criticism from prominent figures, including former Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. While acknowledging Anwar's prerogative, Mahathir questioned the choice of Thaksin, citing his ongoing legal issues and past convictions for corruption and abuse of power. He suggested that a candidate with a background in diplomacy, foreign affairs, or academia might have been a more suitable choice.

Ahmad Fadhli Shaari, information chief of the Malaysian opposition Parti Islam Se-Malaysia, echoed these concerns, doubting the benefits of Thaksin's appointment for ASEAN. He criticized the decision, pointing to Thaksin's legal history and suggesting that the role should have been filled by a figure with deeper expertise in international relations.

Despite the criticism, Malaysian Foreign Minister Mohamad Hasan defended Anwar's decision, citing Thaksin's influence in Thailand and his strong rapport with major global powers, including the United States and China. [Thai PBS World]

Thailand closes border with Myanmar for a month amid Cholera outbreak;

crackdown on fraudulent medical certificates

(hrs/lm) Thailand has announced a one-month closure of its border with Myanmar in Tak province to contain a cholera outbreak originating in the neighboring city of Shwe Kokko, Kayin State. Defense Minister Phumtham Wechayachai emphasized that the measure aims to strengthen border controls and prevent the further spread of the disease. The decision follows reports of 300 cholera cases and two fatalities in Shwe Kokko.

A joint task force comprising the Thai Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Public Health, and the army has been established to manage the situation. Efforts include distributing rubber gloves and face masks, sanitizing public areas, and educating residents about hygiene. Additional health personnel have been deployed to Mae Sot, where an emergency screening center has been set up to monitor arrivals from Myanmar. Thai officials are also sanitizing markets, ensuring clean drinking water, and distributing over 1,400 doses of cholera vaccine to high-risk areas.

Three Myanmar nationals working in Mae Sot were infected with cholera, two of whom have recovered, while one remains hospitalized. Thai medical supplies have been sent into Myanmar, and displaced persons in shelters along the border are being educated on preventive measures and urged to report any new arrivals displaying symptoms. [Thai PBS World]

In tandem with containment efforts, Public Health Minister Somsak Thepsutin has launched a crackdown on clinics issuing fraudulent medical certificates to migrant workers without proper health checks. These illegal practices have gained urgency following the cholera outbreak, which was traced to Myanmar workers. Somsak called on the public to report misconduct, warning that such activities increase the risk of disease outbreaks and strain the healthcare system. Public cooperation is deemed crucial, as authorities face challenges in monitoring clinics nationwide.

While Thai medical teams cannot cross into Myanmar without formal requests, Thailand is providing support and knowledge to Myanmar health authorities to aid in containing the outbreak. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand, Vietnam reaffirm defense cooperation as pillar of Enhanced

Strategic Partnership

(hrs) Vietnam and Thailand have deepened their defense ties, reinforcing their Enhanced Strategic Partnership, according to Vietnamese Defense Attaché Colonel Pho Trieu Cuong. Key initiatives include high-level exchanges, bilateral defense dialogues, intelligence-sharing forums, and joint maritime patrols under a Memorandum of Understanding between the Vietnam Coast Guard and Thailand's Maritime Enforcement Command Centre (Thai-MECC).

Defense education, training, and peacekeeping collaboration have also advanced, alongside multilateral cooperation through ASEAN frameworks. Thai officials praised the Vietnam People's Army (VPA) for its contributions to regional security, peacekeeping, and non-traditional security efforts. Both nations remain committed to fostering regional stability and cooperation. [Nation Thailand]

Oman purchases several vessels from Thai shipbuilder Marsun

(hrs) Thailand's Marsun Public Company Limited has signed a contract with Oman's Ministry of Defence to supply several landing craft for the Royal Navy of Oman (RNO). The agreement, finalized on December 14, supports Oman's defense modernization under Sultan Haitham bin Tarik.

The vessels will enhance RNO's operational capabilities and align with Oman's development goals. Marsun, a Thai shipbuilder established in 1980, has delivered over 355 vessels globally, including patrol craft and multi-purpose vessels. [Naval News]

Thai embassy in South Korea to support grieving families of the two Thai victims of the Jeju Air crash on 29 December

(hrs) The Royal Thai Embassy released a statement that affirms its support to the bereaved families of the two Thai victims of the Jeju Air crash at Muan International Airport, South Korea, which claimed 179 passengers' lives. All but two crew members on board perished in the incident.

Thai Ambassador to Korea Tanee Sangrat expressed condolences to the victims' families, offering his

deepest sympathies and assuring necessary assistance.

“The Embassy has reported the tragedy to the Foreign Minister and (the Thai) MFA and coordinated closely with (the) Korean authorities concerned. Our Consular Department has informed families of the two Thai victims," Sangrat told The Korea Times on Monday.

"Our Embassy has also worked closely with Jeju Air officials who reassured us that they would be responsible for the related costs of damages of the victims," he said. "Today the Royal Thai Embassy in Seoul and Team Thailand offices have lowered the flag for seven days in mourning for the victims. We will continue to work with all local authorities and provide assistance to victims and their families."

According to the Thai Embassy in Seoul, the Thai victims were a 45-year-old woman and a 22-year-old woman. The crash occurred at around 9:03 a.m. when the Boeing 737-800, attempting to land on the runway, was forced to make an emergency belly landing due to a landing gear failure. The aircraft collided with the outer edge of the runway, causing the fuselage to break apart and burst into flames.

The 44-year-old victim's father, who was in Thailand, was devastated when he learned that his daughter had been on the flight.

"I wish to see my daughter’s face one last time when her body returns to our hometown," he tearfully told local media. She had been living in Korea for several years and had been visiting her family in Thailand.

The 22-year-old victim, a university student from Bangkok, was traveling to Korea to reunite with her mother, who had married a Korean man and moved to Korea. Her mother, who lives in Korea, was notified of the tragedy after the crash.

Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul extended his condolences Monday to the victims of the deadly plane crash at Muan International Airport and their families, including the two Thai victims.

"The tragic plane crash at Muan International Airport has left us in utter shock and profound sadness," Cho wrote on X. "Our hearts are torn apart by the loss of so many precious lives, including those of the two Thai nationals who had been on board. Our heartfelt thoughts and condolences go out to all the victims and their families."

Thai Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra also expressed his condolences, offering his support to the families of the victims and those injured. He instructed the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs to assist the victims' families promptly, ensuring they receive support during this difficult time. [The Korea Times]

Thailand's central bank and anti-money laundering agency says they found no evidence of bank transactions for Myanmar weapons

(hrs) Thailand's central bank and anti-money laundering agency said on Monday that they have not found any evidence to support a report from a U.N. expert that some of the country's banks were used to help Myanmar's junta acquire weapons.

The report from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in June said companies registered in Thailand had used Thai banks to transfer funds for weapons and related military materials for Myanmar worth $120 million in the 2023 fiscal year, compared with $60 million the year before.

The government set up a task force in July to review past transactions and due-diligence capabilities after Thai banks said they lacked the capacity to investigate all transactions that could be used for weapons purchases by Myanmar's military.

"The investigation found that some financial institutions did conduct transactions with individuals listed in the OHCHR report, but no evidence was found linking these transactions to arms procurement," the Bank of Thailand and the Anti-Money Laundering Office said in a joint statement.

The joint statement said the review found that Thai financial institutions had "varying levels of rigor in their operations" which highlighted the need to improve certain anti-money laundering and counter-terrorism practices.

"This would enable financial institutions to better manage the risks of being used as channels for funding illegal activities and human rights violations, which may manifest in new forms," the agencies said. [Reuters]

China, Vietnam conduct joint Gulf of Tonkin patrol

(hn) Vietnam and China conducted their fourth joint patrol in the northern Gulf of Tonkin on December 24, focusing on combating maritime crimes and legal violations during the year-end period. The patrol was carried out by the Vietnam Coast Guard (VCG) and its Chinese counterpart, covering a 120-nautical-mile route along the demarcation line from Point 1 to Point 9.

This critical maritime zone, near Móng Cái City in Vietnam's Quảng Ninh Province and Dongxing City in China's Guangxi Province, serves as a key hub for trade and goods exchange but is also prone to smuggling, trade fraud, illegal transport of goods, and unauthorized border crossings.

Joint patrols between the two countries have been scheduled quarterly since 2024, reflecting a commitment to maintaining security, legal compliance, and cooperation in the shared maritime region. [Viet Nam News] [VietnamPlus]

Vietnam imposes 97 percent anti-dumping tariff on Chinese wind towers

(hn) Vietnam has announced a 97 percent anti-dumping tariff on wind towers originating from China following a 15-month investigation by the Trade Ministry. The tariff, which will be effective 15 days from its signing date and will remain in place for five years, aims to protect Vietnam's domestic manufacturing industry from significant damage caused by the dumping of Chinese-made wind towers.

The investigation, launched in September 2023, concluded that several Chinese firms had engaged in dumping practices that harmed local producers. The measures apply to almost all Chinese companies except Jiangsu Zhenjiang New Energy Equipment Co., which was found not to have engaged in dumping during the investigation period. Vietnam's Trade Ministry emphasized that domestic manufacturers are capable of producing high-quality wind towers for export, justifying the protective tariff. [Bangkok Post] [Viet Nam News]

Vietnam's Dien Bien strengthens ties with northern Lao localities

(cc) On December 25, delegations from Vietnam's Dien Bien province and the northern Lao provinces of Phongsali, Oudomxay, and Luang Prabang convened in Dien Bien city to solidify cooperation agreements for the 2025–2027 period. The event underscored the strong bilateral relations between the localities and the broader commitment of Vietnam and Laos to deepen their historical ties. Tran Quoc Cuong, Secretary of the Dien Bien provincial Party Committee, emphasized that the Lao delegations' participation was a testament to the enduring friendship and close collaboration between the two countries.

The agreements highlight key areas of cooperation, including political system development, economic growth, cultural exchange, education, healthcare, national security, and judicial collaboration. The provinces aim to enhance mutual development through partnerships in trade, services, agriculture, digital transformation, tourism, and infrastructure development. These agreements also emphasize people-to-people diplomacy, particularly in the border regions, to strengthen solidarity and peaceful coexistence.

Over the past three years, the cooperation between Dien Bien and these Lao provinces has grown substantially. Dien Bien hosted 69 delegations from Laos and sent 68 delegations to the northern Lao provinces. The Vietnamese province also contributed more than 26 billion VND (over USD 1 million) to welfare projects in the three provinces, reinforcing its support for shared development. Leaders from both sides acknowledged that these initiatives have bolstered economic progress, enhanced national defense and security, and maintained peace along their shared borders.

During the discussions, Khamphoi Nanasan, Secretary of the Party Committee and Governor of Phongsali province, awarded the Friendship Order on behalf of the President and Prime Minister of Laos to several Dien Bien officials and residents. Tran Van Son, Minister-Chairman of the Government Office and former Secretary of the Dien Bien provincial Party Committee, along with Lo Mai Trinh, also a former Secretary of the same committee, received this prestigious honor for their outstanding contributions to Phongsali's socio-economic development from 2019 to 2024. [Lao News Agency]

Freed Vietnamese environmental activist seeks asylum in United States

(lm) Hoang Thi Minh Hong, a prominent Vietnamese environmental activist, has requested political asylum in the United States after arriving there on December 24 with her husband and son. Hong, who founded the non-profit CHANGE VN to promote environmental awareness, was released from prison in September after serving a year of a three-year sentence for tax evasion. Her release coincided with a diplomatic trip to the US by Communist Party General Secretary To Lam.

Hong, 52, cited difficulties in continuing her environmental advocacy in Vietnam as the reason for seeking asylum. She aims to resume her work in a safer environment with greater opportunities. In her case, Vietnamese authorities alleged she evaded taxes amounting to USD 274,000 and imposed a fine of USD 4,000, which her family paid.

Her release, part of a presidential pardon, came amid Vietnam's international commitments to green energy and climate initiatives. Despite pledging to transition to clean energy and achieve net-zero carbon emissions by 2050, Vietnam has faced criticism for its harsh crackdown on environmental activists. Over the past two years, six prominent figures, including Hong, have been jailed on charges such as tax evasion. [Radio Free Asia 1]

Meanwhile, Pham Thanh Nghien, a former political prisoner now based in the United States, reported incidents of police harassment targeting her family in Hai Phong City. The harassment followed Nghien's acceptance of the 2024 Vietnam Human Rights Award on behalf of imprisoned activist Do Nam Trung during a ceremony in Houston, Texas, on December 15. Vietnamese police reportedly visited her sister's home on December 23 under the pretense of a residency check but questioned her relatives about her activities in the US, including her book Life Behind Bars. Officers took a statement from her sister and pressured her to sign it without providing a copy.

Nghien, who served a four-year prison sentence beginning in 2010 on charges of "propaganda against the state," described the police actions as an effort at transnational repression. She claimed the intimidation tactics aimed to silence her ongoing criticism of Vietnam's human rights record and Communist Party leadership. [Radio Free Asia 2]

Announcements

Recent Book Releases

Bertil Lintner, ***The Golden Land Ablaze: Coups, Insurgents and the State in Myanmar***, Hurst, 280 pages, published December 15, 2024. For a review, see [Asian Review of Books].

Arvid J. Lukauskas, **and Yumiko Shimabukuro**, ***Misery beneath the Miracle in East Asia***, Cornell University Press, 318 pages, published December 15, 2024. For a review, see [Asian Review of Books].

Mark L. Clifford, ***The Troublemaker: How Jimmy Lai Became a Billionaire, Hong Kong's Greatest Dissident, and China's Most Feared Critic***, Free Press, 288 pages, published December 3, 2024. For a review, see [The New York Times].

Calls

The **Australian and New Zealand Society of International Law (ANZSIL)** ty invites paper proposals for the ***32nd ANZSIL Annual Conference 2025 "International Law: Silence, Forgetting and Remembrance,"*** to be held on July 2-4, 2025, at Australian National University. The deadline for abstract submission is February 10 31, 2025. For more information, see [ANZSIL].

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].

The **College of Law of Michigan State University** invites paper proposals for the ***Democracy Works-in-Progress Conference*** to be held on April 10-11, 2025.

The deadline for abstract submission is December 31, 2024. For more information, see [Michigan State University].

Jobs and Positions

The **Council of Europe Development Bank** is looking for a **Country Manager**. The deadline for application submission is January 12, 2025. For more information, see [CEB].

The **Council of Europe Development Bank** is looking for a **Liaison Officer (Ukraine)**. The deadline for application submission is January 12, 2025. For more information, see [CEB].

The **European Network Against Racism (ENAR)** is looking for **Policy and Advocacy Advisor, Climate and Economic Justice**. The deadline for application submission is January 12, 2025. For more information, see [ENAR].

EuroTech is hiring a Secretary-General to head its Brussels Office. The deadline for application submission is January 29, 2025. For more information, see [EuroTech].

Durham University is looking for an **Assistant Professor in Durham Law School and Economics**. The deadline for application submission is January 20, 2025. For more information, see [Durham University]

The **University of Auckland, New Zealand** is looking for an **Associate Professor/Professor of Ethics**. The deadline for application submission is March 9, 2025. For more information, see [Auckland University].

The **University of Hong Kong** is seeking **Fellowship in the Society of Fellows in the Humanities**. The deadline for application submission is February 28, 2025. For more information, see [Hong Kong University].

The **University of Southampton** is looking for a **PhD Studentship** to contribute to research in **Law and Technology**. The deadline for application submission is February 28, 2025. For more information, see [University of Southampton].

The **United Nations Mission in South Sudan** is looking for a **Liaison Assistant**. The deadline for application submission is January 19, 2025. For more information, see [UNMISS]

The **United Nations Transitional Assistance Mission in Somalia** is looking for a **Senior Political Affairs Officer**. The deadline for application submission is December 27, 2024. For more information, see [UN]

The **European Organization for the Exploitation of Meteorological Satellites** is looking for a **Junior International Relations Officer**. The deadline for application submission is February 17, 2025. For more information, see [EUMETSAT].

The **United Nations Department of Peace Operations** is looking for a **Political Affairs Officer**. The application submission is December 26, 2024. For more information, see [UNDPO]

The **United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan** islooking for a **Head of Office in Political Affairs**. The deadline for application submission is December 29, 2024. For more information, see [UNAMA].

The **University of Oxford** is looking for a **Postdoctoral Researcher in the Centre for Socio-Legal Studies**. The deadline for application submission is January 20, 2025. For more information, see [University of Oxford].

The **Asian Development Bank** is looking for an **Economist in Individual Consultancy**. The deadline for application submission is January 2, 2025. For more information, see [ADB].

The **United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia** is looking for a **Regional Advisor on Stabilization and Political Economy**. The deadline for application submission is January 4, 2025. For more information, see [UNESCWA].

The **University of Oxford** are looking for a **Digital Policy Postdoctoral Researcher**. The deadline for application submission is January 6, 2025. For more information, see [University of Oxford].

Team:

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