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Asia in Review

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Dear Readers,

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

I wish you an informative read and extend special greetings to everyone who celebrates Spain's San Sebastian Day and Ukraine's Day of Unity this week.

With best regards,

Henning Glaser

Editor in Chief

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

China: Shanghai legislator proposes easing internet restrictions to boost competitiveness

(lb) A Shanghai lawmaker has suggested loosening internet controls in free-trade zones, business districts, and universities to enhance the city's global competitiveness. Mao Xiangdong, vice-president of the Shanghai Institute of Technology, proposed the measure during legislative sessions in January 2025. He argued that unfiltered internet access could support artificial intelligence (AI) development, attract foreign investment, and create opportunities for innovation and employment.

Mao called for unrestricted internet access in areas like the Lujiazui financial district, China International Import Expo sites, and the Pudong International Talent Hub to appeal to international businesses and residents. He also suggested easing restrictions at universities and research institutions to grant

academics access to global AI platforms, such as ChatGPT.

The proposal challenges China's "Great Firewall," a sophisticated censorship system that blocks access to over 10,000 websites, including major platforms like Facebook, Google Drive, and WhatsApp. Critics argue the restrictions stifle innovation and hinder global collaboration. Mao emphasized that carefully regulated cross-border data flows could mitigate security risks while fostering progress in education, research, and business.

China's internet watchdog, the Cyberspace Administration of China, has repeatedly reinforced its commitment to controlling online content, citing the need to filter undesirable information. [South China Morning Post]

China: Local governments increase minimum monthly pay

(ld) Several local governments in China have recently increased minimum wages to enhance the spending power of middle- and low-income groups, in an effort to stimulate domestic demand amid external economic uncertainties.

According to the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security (MOHRSS), five provincial-level regions, including Shanxi, Sichuan, Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, and Chongqing, announced wage hikes ranging from CNY 70 (USD 9.6) to over CNY 200 (USD 27.3) per month. Chongqing raised its monthly minimum wage by 10 percent, from CNY 2,000 (USD 272.8) to CNY 2,200 (USD 300), while Sichuan implemented a 17.6 percent increase to match the same level. Xinjiang, which previously had the lowest minimum wage in China, increased its rate by 13.6 percent, from CNY 1,540 (USD 210) to CNY 1,750 (USD 238.7). [MOHRSS, in Chinese]

Minimum wage standards vary across regions due to differing living costs, with Shanghai maintaining the highest at CNY 2,690 (USD 366.9) per month, followed by Beijing at CNY 2,420 (USD 330). Nearly half of China's provincial-level governments implemented similar wage increases last year. [South China Morning Post]

While China's industrial output and exports surged in December (see article above), driven by stimulus and front-loaded shipments ahead of anticipated U.S. tariffs, retail sales and household consumption lagged.

Analysts warn that without broader reforms, such as addressing deflationary pressures, high local government debt, and the ongoing property crisis, reliance on export-led growth and industrial stimulus could exacerbate imbalances. With U.S. President Donald Trump's second term expected to bring higher tariffs, external pressures add to domestic strains, raising doubts about sustainability. [Reuters 1]

Top financial regulator to cut staff pay by half

Millions of government employees across China, including civil servants, teachers, doctors at public hospitals, and police officers, also received unexpected pay raises averaging CNY 500 (USD 68.50) per month earlier this month in what appears to be a nationwide effort by Beijing to boost consumer spending and counteract a slowing economy (see AiR No. 1, January/2025, 1).

In contrast, China reportedly plans to cut salaries for staff at its top three financial regulators, including the People's Bank of China (PBOC), National Financial Regulatory Administration (NFRA), and China Securities Regulatory Commission (CSRC), by around 50 percent, effective this month. The move would come after a 2023 regulatory overhaul aimed at consolidating authority and aligning financial regulator salaries with those of other civil servants.

The pay reductions, which will impact on all levels of staff, include cuts of 40 percent for junior officials, 50 percent for department heads, and up to 60 percent for senior directors. Previously, staff at financial regulators benefited from higher pay scales as public institutions, but their remuneration will now match those at government bodies such as the Ministry of Finance. Before the changes, a CSRC department head earned CNY 300,000-400,000 (USD 40,925-54,570) a year, nearly double the salary of equivalent civil servants in other institutions. [Reuters 2]

China: State security forces granted power to oversee sensitive construction projects

(ld) China has introduced new regulations granting state security forces expanded powers to oversee construction projects involving sensitive government and military sites. The detailed rules, jointly formulated by the Ministry of State Security (MSS), the National Development and Reform Commission, the Ministry of Natural Resources, and the Ministry of Housing and

Urban-Rural Development, were published on January 15 and are set to take effect on March 1.

Under the 38-article guidelines, the first of their kind to be made public, the MSS and local state security agencies will supervise and manage projects critical to national security. The regulations mandate that any new construction, reconstruction, or alteration of projects within designated security zones must receive prior approval from state security agencies. These agencies will not only grant permissions but also actively supervise and manage the construction process to ensure compliance with national security standards. Applicants for security permits must submit detailed documentation, including the purpose and ownership details of the building, alongside comprehensive design blueprints. [Ministry of State Security, China, in Chinese]

The move follows repeated warnings from the MSS over the past 18 months about heightened foreign espionage threats targeting strategic facilities, amid escalating tensions between China and the United States. This shift marks a significant enhancement of the powers granted to the MSS, the nation's leading agency for counterespionage and intelligence, as well as to local security forces. [South China Morning Post]

It also follows centralizing reforms to the MSS that has introduced "vertical leadership," where personnel authority rests with the internal party organs of a higher-level unit, granting the MSS control over local bureaus' personnel, budgets, and oversight. This marks an exception to China's decentralized polity, where the authority to select, examine, and appoint the chiefs of a local state unit typically lies with its local party committee, not its functional superior, such as a ministry. These changes enhance the MSS's ability to coordinate joint operations, leverage regional expertise, and align local activities with the central government's strategic intelligence objectives. The reforms reflect President Xi Jinping's broader push to consolidate the "party center's supreme authority over state security." [The Jamestown Foundation]

China: Population declines for third year

(ld) China's population continued its decline in 2024, marking the third consecutive year of shrinkage, as deaths outpaced a modest rise in births amid the nation's deepening demographic challenges.

According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), the total population dropped by 1.39 million last year,

reaching 1.4083 billion, down from 1.40828 billion in 2023. While 9.54 million babies were born in 2024—a slight increase from the record low of 9.02 million births in 2023—approximately 10.93 million people died, pushing the death rate to a 50-year high. [NBS, in Chinese]

Cultural factors played a role in the uptick in births, as 2024 was the Year of the Dragon in the Chinese zodiac, traditionally considered an auspicious time for having children. Experts had anticipated a localized increase in birth rates due to this cultural preference but cautioned that it would not reverse the broader trend.

China's relaxation of family planning policies in 2021, allowing couples to have up to three children, may also have contributed to the rise in births. Analysts suggest that the slight improvement could signal some impact of the policy change, although the overall demographic outlook remains concerning. [South China Morning Post]

China: Rights lawyer defies pretrial detention in subversion case

(lb/dql) Chinese rights lawyer Xie Yang, held without trial for three years on subversion charges, has issued a resolute statement asserting he will "rather have his head chopped off than bow it," to pressure from authorities. Xie, detained at the Changsha No. 1 Detention Center – known for its detention of human rights defenders – since December 2021, marked the anniversary with a defiant New Year's message, declaring he would rather face execution than surrender his principles. His pretrial detention has been extended ten times, now scheduled to last until February 28. [Weiquanwang, in Chinese]

Xie's arrest followed his support for a teacher, Li Tiantian, who was forced into psychiatric treatment after critical social media posts. Li had condemned the expulsion of a journalism professor who called on students to challenge official narratives regarding the Nanjing Massacre, especially the official death toll. Xie's support, along with Xie's social media mocking President Xi Jinping, led to his arrest. In a post Xie shared footage of pigs being slaughtered, with a caption referencing a "200-pound pig." This was seen as an allusion to Xi's claim of carrying 120 kilograms of wheat for ten miles along a mountain road without switching shoulders. [Devdicourse]

Reports of Xie's treatment, including being forced into a "hanging chair" and deprived of food, sleep, and

water, paint a grim picture of systemic abuse. Xie previously pleaded guilty to subversion charges in 2017, a confession he attributed to torture.

Human rights lawyers and advocates have criticized Xie's prolonged detention as arbitrary and in violation not only of international standards, but even China's own legal standards. Despite state media claims denying any mistreatment, critics view his case as emblematic of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) oppressive tactics under Xi's administration. [Radio Free Asia]

China: Strong export surge helps China meet 5 percent GDP growth target

(ld) China's exports saw stronger-than-expected growth in December, driven by factories rushing to fulfill orders ahead of anticipated higher tariffs under US President Donald Trump. Imports also showed signs of recovery, though the year-end boost in trade activity was largely fueled by efforts to ship inventory overseas.

Data of China's General Administration of Customs (GACC) shows that China's total goods trade reached CNY 43.85 trillion (USD 5.98 trillion) in 2024, marking a 5 percent growth compared to the previous year. Notably, exports in December grew by 10.7 percent year-on-year, surpassing the 7.3 percent growth predicted in a Reuters survey of economists and improving on November's 6.7 percent increase. Imports also outperformed expectations, rising by 1.0 percent, the highest since July 2024, compared to the anticipated 1.5 percent decline. The trade surplus for the month stood at USD 104.84 billion. [Reuters] [GACC, in Chinese]

Countries participating in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) accounted for over 50 percent of China's total trade for the first time, with trade growing by 6.4 percent in 2024. Exports to BRI nations rose by 9.6 percent, while imports increased by 2.7 percent. according to a GACC spokesperson at a press conference held by the State Council Information Office (SCIO).

In terms of global trade by sector, exports of mechanical and electrical products rose nearly 9 percent, with high-end equipment exports increasing by over 40 percent. Shipments of electric vehicles grew by 13 percent, 3D printers by 33 percent, and industrial robots by 45 percent. Additionally, e-commerce trade, led by platforms like Temu, Shein, and Alibaba,

reached CNY 2.6 trillion (USD 350 billion), more than double the 2020 figure. [State Council Information Office, in Chinese]

China's robust export performance in December capped off a year that helped drive the country's 2024 GDP growth to its 5 percent target. The strong export wave, coupled with stimulus measures introduced in late September, contributed significantly to the 5.4 percent expansion recorded in the final quarter, marking the highest quarterly growth for the year.

U.S. officials and other critics have argued that Beijing has expanded exports to offset weak domestic demand amid an economic slowdown. They contend that many industries in China are operating below capacity, leading to an "overcapacity" problem, a claim Chinese officials have consistently denied and called unfounded, emphasizing that the expansion in China's exports came from investment, innovation and improvements in industrial efficiency rather than an increase in production capacity. [Associated Press]

Under Xi Jinping's leadership, the government has emphasized upgrading factories and transitioning to high-tech manufacturing. Xi has called for institutional opening-up and the development of a "world-class" business environment to enhance growth, attract foreign investment, and stabilize trade. In remarks to senior officials last October, released days before President Trump's second-term inauguration, Xi emphasized aligning with international standards and reforming trade and investment management, with pilot free-trade zones in Shanghai and Hainan cited as key areas to advance these efforts. The timing of the release of the speech is seen as a calculated move to reassure investors and unify domestic sentiment as trade tensions with the U.S. loom. [South China Morning Post 1]

Analysts believe the 2025 growth target, likely to remain at 5 percent based on recent projections from key economic regions, will demand increased fiscal and monetary policy support. This is particularly crucial as the economy faces heightened challenges, including potential higher tariffs under U.S. President-elect Donald Trump's second term and subdued domestic confidence. Investment banks have already adjusted their forecasts for 2025, with growth estimates ranging from 4.5 to 4.7 percent, reflecting anticipated headwinds and uncertainty surrounding U.S.-China trade relations under the new administration. [South China Morning Post 2]

China: Real estate giants struggle as sector slumps

(ld) Struggling Chinese property developer Country Garden Holdings reported a narrowed net loss of CNY 12.8 billion (USD 1.75 billion) for the first half of 2024, down from CNY 48.9 billion (USD 6.68 billion) in the same period of 2023. Revenue for the first half fell 55 percent year-on-year to approximately CNY 102 billion (USD 12.9 billion), as China's property market slump persisted into 2025 despite government measures to support the sector. Country Garden anticipates a smaller annual loss for 2024, citing improved margins and reduced administrative and sales expenses. [South China Morning Post 1]

The company is under pressure from a liquidation petition filed in Hong Kong over a USD 205 million unpaid loan and has proposed a debt restructuring plan to reduce its USD 6.4 billion offshore debts by 70 percent. As of mid-2024, Country Garden reported CNY 250.2 billion (USD 34.1 billion) in interest-bearing debt, with only CNY 6.7 billion (USD 910 million) in cash reserves. The company's efforts to stabilize its finances include significant provisions on inventory, which fell to CNY 2.7 billion (USD 370 million) in the first half of 2024 from CNY 82.4 billion (USD 11.2 billion) in 2023. Country Garden stated that it has reached an understanding with a lender group, with the next liquidation hearing scheduled for January 20. [Reuters]

China's property market has struggled since 2021, with property sales declining nearly 50 percent over three years due to a debt crisis. Country Garden's sales by value plummeted over 70 percent in 2024, dropping its national ranking from 7th in 2023 to 16th, according to a report from real estate researcher CRIC. [CRIC, in Chinese]

China Vanke, the country's largest property developer by revenue, also saw its shares fall on January 17 amid swirling rumors about its CEO's status, prompting market discussions about a potential government rescue. Shares of Vanke dropped 3.29 percent to HKD 4.70 (USD 0.6) in Hong Kong trading, while its mainland-listed stock declined 3.63 percent to CNY 6.63 (USD 0.9). The market reacted to a now-deleted report by The Economic Observer on January 16, alleging that the company's president and CEO, Zhu Jiusheng, had been detained by police. A source close to Vanke disclosed to Caijing magazine that Zhu was indeed unreachable for a time, though the reason for his brief absence remains unclear. [Caijing, in Chinese]

Adding to the uncertainty, Zhu reportedly posted on WeChat on January 16, promoting Vanke's rental

property business and mentioning a "brief transition period" as he will be returning to work following the Lunar New Year holiday, according to a screenshot. The company's mounting debts have fueled speculation about a possible state intervention. [South China Morning Post 2]

The developer faces a record USD 4.9 billion in yuan- and dollar-denominated bonds maturing or subject to redemption in 2025—the highest annual amount in its history and the largest for any Chinese developer this year, according to data compiled by Bloomberg. Trading of its yuan bond due in November 2027 was suspended after a 32 percent drop, mirroring recent declines in other securities. Vanke has assured that it is committed to addressing its public debt obligations this year. [Bloomberg]

Local governments pay overdue bills with unfinished apartments

In the meantime, Chinese property developers and local governments are increasingly using unsold apartments to settle debts amid the severe financial difficulties faced by developers and local governments, with many struggling to meet financial obligations.

For instance, Xinjiang East Universe Gas accepted 260 unfinished apartments to settle a USD 25 million debt owed by state-owned entities in Changji city. The gas supplier plans to sell the apartments to recover its dues. Similarly, companies like Monalisa Group and Sunfly Intelligent Technology have accepted apartments as payment for millions in unpaid debts from developers. In Guizhou province, local police departments adopted a similar approach to repay over USD 10 million owed to AVCON Information Technology for installing surveillance systems. Apartments were purchased from local developers, with proceeds used to settle police debts to AVCON.

The broader real estate market, burdened by more than 90 million empty housing units, continues to struggle with falling home prices, while local governments, whose revenues from land sales have collapsed, are grappling with trillions of dollars in debt. [Wall Street Journal]

China: Near-record level of liquidity pumped as central bank grapples with cash shortage

(ld) China's central bank has injected a near-record level of liquidity into the financial system to address a

cash shortage ahead of the Lunar New Year. On January 15, the People's Bank of China (PBOC) provided a net CNY 958.4 billion (USD 131 billion) through seven-day reverse repurchase agreements, marking the second-highest injection since 2004, according to Bloomberg data.

The injection comes amid concerns over tight liquidity, as the seven-day interbank borrowing rate reached its highest point in over a year earlier last week. The PBOC has shifted its monetary policy approach by relying more on reverse repo operations instead of medium-term lending facility (MLF) tools. The seven-day repo rate dropped to around 2.2 percentfollowing the PBOC's action, after closing at 2.3 percent on January 14. [Bloomberg]

The PBOC's efforts are part of a broader strategy to maintain a stable liquidity environment while preparing for high seasonal cash demands during the week-long Lunar New Year holiday starting January 28. In addition to addressing domestic liquidity needs, the PBOC has also taken measures to support the yuan, which has come under pressure from a strengthening U.S. dollar (see AiR No. 2, January/2025, 2). This includes selling a record CNY 60 billion (USD 8.2 billion) in six-month bills in Hong Kong to reduce offshore liquidity and bolster currency demand.

PBOC Deputy Governor Xuan Changneng noted at a press briefing held by the State Council Information Office (SCIO) that a variety of monetary tools, including interest rate adjustments and changes to the reserve requirement ratio (RRR), remain available to ensure ample liquidity and support a loose social financing environment. [SCIO, in Chinese]

China's broad money supply (M2) rose to CNY 313.53 trillion (USD 42.8 trillion) by the end of 2024, marking a 7.3 percent year-on-year increase, up from 7.1 percentin November, which reflects the impact of incremental policies aimed at reviving economic growth and increased government bond issuances in late 2024. The PBOC stressed the potential for economic growth expectations to influence treasury yields and cautioned against assuming a continuous decline in long-term bond yields.

By the end of 2024, over CNY 100 billion (USD 13.6 billion) in securities had been swapped under a facility allowing financial institutions to exchange low-liquidity assets for high-liquidity ones, supporting stock market investments. Additionally, the issuance of panda bonds (onshore renminbi bonds issued by overseas financial institutions and enterprises) rose by 32 percent year-on-year to nearly CNY 200 billion (USD 27.3 billion),

while offshore yuan bond issuance surged by 150 percent in 2024. [China Daily]

Despite these efforts, economists point to the central bank's limited options. Cutting interest rates risks worsening yuan depreciation and squeezing already narrow bank profit margins. However, with the leadership signaling a shift to "moderately loose" monetary policy (see AiR No. 50, December/2024, 2), analysts expect substantial rate cuts later this year. Investor sentiment remains fragile, with the stock market and yuan under pressure from broader economic uncertainties. Barclays economists note the central bank is caught between the need to support growth, combat deflation, and defend financial markets, a predicament worsened by recent selloffs and deteriorating market confidence. [Wall Street Journal, in Chinese]

China – Hong Kong: Housing policies under scrutiny: new regulations and stricter penalties proposed

(lb) Hong Kong's housing policies have come under the spotlight with recent developments addressing subdivided flats and public housing abuse.

Housing Minister Winnie Ho has dismissed criticisms of proposed regulations on subdivided flats following a recent report in *The Guardian* that labeled them as ineffective. The report highlighted concerns over the exclusion of "coffin homes," minuscule bedspaces legalized under colonial-era laws in 1994 and still regulated under the Bedspace Apartments Ordinance. Ho defended the government's strategy, calling the claims "alarmist and pessimistic." She emphasized that existing laws regulate bedspaces, citing enforcement actions, including two successful prosecutions in September 2023. However, critics note that some landlords circumvent regulations by keeping the number of bedspaces below the threshold of 12, thus avoiding oversight. [The Guardian]

In October 2023, Chief Executive John Lee announced new minimum standards for subdivided flats, including at least eight square meters of space, windows, and toilets. Units meeting these criteria or upgraded accordingly will be designated as "Basic Housing Units" (see AiR No.42, October/2023,3). Ho also highlighted government initiatives like transitional and light public housing to alleviate housing shortages. Currently, about 40 percent of Hong Kong's 110,000 subdivided units house residents are waiting for public rental flats. However, Ho ruled out prioritizing public housing for

those displaced by the new regulations, warning that such a move could incentivize people to occupy substandard accommodations.

Simultaneously, the Housing Authority (HA) is considering stricter measures to curb public housing abuse. Proposed amendments to the Housing Ordinance aim to criminalize activities such as subletting units for profit, using flats for commercial purposes, or providing false information. Violators could face up to one year in prison and fines of HKD 500,000 (USD 64,000), alongside lease terminations.

The proposals include empowering authorities to demand personal details from those suspected of violating regulations, with noncompliance punishable by six months in jail and a fine of HKD 10,000 (USD 1,300). The timeframe for prosecuting false statements or withheld information would extend to six years after the offense, or one year after its discovery.

To enhance enforcement, the government has introduced incentives, including rewards of up to HKD 3,000 (USD 380) for reporting abuse and additional tendering points for property management firms that assist in identifying violations. [Hong Kong Free Press]

China: COMAC to further expand production of C919 passenger planes

(ld) China's state-owned aircraft manufacturer, the Commercial Aircraft Corporation of China (COMAC), aims to double production of its C919 passenger jets this year to meet growing demand. The company plans to deliver 30 jets in 2025, with production capacity potentially reaching 50 units, according to Vice President Shen Bo. [The Paper, in Chinese]

Since launching commercial operations in May 2023, COMAC has delivered 15 C919s, including the latest delivery to China Eastern on New Year's Eve. COMAC is tackling a significant backlog of over 1,000 orders from domestic and international carriers. Leading Chinese airlines such as China Eastern, China Southern, and Air China each plan to operate more than 100 C919s by 2031. To support increased production, the company has announced facility expansions in Shanghai. [South China Morning Post]

The pledge came after the C919 recently made its first scheduled flight outside the mainland, between Shanghai Hongqiao and Hong Kong, which was technically the jet's first international flight as Hong Kong follows its own aviation regulations and classifies

all flights as international (see AiR No. 1, January/2025, 1).

The jet's global market appeal remains limited, however, as the C919 still lacks airworthiness certifications from key regulators such as the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and the European Union's Aviation Safety Agency (EASA). The aircraft's reliance on western components and state-directed orders have also dampened its international allure. Despite these challenges, the C919 represents a critical step in China's broader ambition to establish a competitive aerospace industry. This goal extends to the wide-body C929, initially a joint venture with Russia but now solely managed by China. Designed to compete with Boeing's 787 Dreamliner and Airbus's A350, the C929 could elevate China's standing in the global aviation market if paired with domestically developed engines like the CJ-2000. [Channel News Asia]

China: Authority to investigate concerns over quality of centrally procured drugs

(ld) China's National Healthcare Security Administration (NHSA) announced on January 20 that it will spearhead an investigation into potential quality issues with certain drugs acquired through centralized procurement. The inquiry follows concerns raised by medical experts during the recent "two sessions" in Shanghai. [NHSA, in Chinese]

The NHSA emphasized that the investigation aims to uphold the integrity of the centralized procurement system and safeguard public health, and reiterated its commitment to transparency, democratic oversight, and frontline clinical input. [Global Times]

Concerns over the quality of drugs procured through China's centralized procurement program resurfaced after prominent medical experts and political advisors raised issues with drugs such as antibiotics, anesthetics, and laxatives during this year's local "two sessions," drawing renewed attention to longstanding criticisms of the program. Twenty Shanghai political advisors criticized the inconsistent efficacy of some centrally procured drugs and urged authorities to create pathways for original-brand drugs, noting that while some medications show unstable efficacy, doctors are compelled to use them due to procurement restrictions.

Launched in 2018 by the NHSA, the centralized procurement program aims to lower drug prices

through bulk purchasing to ensure affordability for low-income groups. In the latest round of procurement last month, many drugs saw deeper-than-expected price cuts, while no original-brand drugs—those produced by the original manufacturers after patent expiration—were selected.

Responding to these criticisms, the NHSA last week issued a directive to the Shanghai Healthcare Security Administration, emphasizing its commitment to addressing quality concerns. The NHSA called for further investigation into the issues raised by clinical experts and instructed companies involved to provide explanations. Contracts would be terminated for drugs found to have quality problems. The NHSA also encouraged healthcare professionals to act as whistleblowers to report concerns about drug prices and quality. [Zaobao, in Chinese]

China: Profiles of top executive, J-20 designer removed from China Aviation Industry Corporation website

(ld) China Aviation Industry Corporation (AVIC) has removed the profiles of Hao Zhaoping, former General Manager and rocket expert, and Yang Wei, former Deputy General Manager and chief designer of the J-20 fighter jet, from its official website as of January 18. The reasons for their dismissals and their current status have not been disclosed. A now-deleted Caixin report suggested an ongoing management shakeup at AVIC, with possible new leadership appointments from COMAC, China's commercial aircraft manufacturer, as speculation was fueled by the pair's high-profile careers and the backdrop of anti-corruption efforts in China's military-industrial complex. [Caixin]

The reports came after a recent surge in dismissals of People's Liberation Army (PLA) deputies from the National People's Congress (NPC), highlighting the intensifying anti-corruption campaign within China's military. Public records reveal that 14 military lawmakers have been removed since March 2023, a sharp rise compared to seven and eight dismissals in the two preceding terms (see AiR No. 1, January/2025, 1).

Yang Wei, born in Beijing in May 1963, is celebrated as the "Father of the J-20." At just 38, Yang became China's youngest chief aircraft designer, leading the development of several indigenous aircraft, including the J-10 series, the jointly developed FC-1 Xiaolong fighter with Pakistan, and the J-20 fifth-generation stealth fighter. He was elected an academician of the

Chinese Academy of Sciences in 2017 and appointed AVIC Deputy General Manager in 2018. Having reached the official retirement age of 62, Yang's departure aligns with standard regulations. However, Hao Zhaoping, the general manager of AVIC, was born in Shaanxi in 1968, meaning that his dismissal came well before the typical retirement age of 63 for such positions.

The reasons behind these leadership changes remain unclear, and no official statements have been made regarding their dismissals. Observers suggest the moves could be linked to broader anti-corruption efforts within China's military and aerospace industries. The removal of both figures has sparked significant speculation, particularly due to their ties to the rocket forces and weapons systems, areas implicated in China's anti-corruption efforts.

Since 2003, anti-corruption campaigns have targeted the Rocket Force, the Central Military Commission's Equipment Development Department, aerospace enterprises, and associated academic institutions. Although some officials have been publicly investigated, others from military and aerospace sectors have been absent from public view, fueling further speculation about ongoing probes. [Ming Pao, in Chinese]

China: Two men executed for public attacks amid rising violence

(lb) China has executed two men convicted of deadly public attacks, highlighting concerns over rising societal violence. In one case, 62-year-old Fan Weiqiu killed at least 35 people and injured dozens when he drove his car into a crowd outside a stadium in Zhuhai on November 11, 2024. Authorities stated Fan acted out of dissatisfaction over a property dispute following his divorce. He was sentenced to death in December, with the court condemning his actions as "particularly cruel." Fan's execution occurred less than a month after sentencing.

The second man, 21-year-old Xu Jiajin, killed eight people in a stabbing spree at a university in Wuxi after failing to graduate due to poor academic performance. Police said Xu confessed without hesitation, and he was executed following his December sentencing. The court described his actions as "extremely serious." These incidents are among a string of public attacks that have raised alarm in China, with 19 such cases reported in 2024.

Other recent incidents include a man driving into a crowd near a primary school in Changde city, injuring 30 people. The perpetrator, Huang Wen, reportedly acted out of frustration over financial losses and family disputes. He received a suspended death sentence, which could be commuted to life imprisonment if no further crimes are committed within two years.

Experts link the rise in mass violence to mounting stressors such as economic struggles and personal grievances. George Magnus, an economist at Oxford University's China Centre, noted that societal tensions are escalating without clear signs of relief. Human rights groups have also criticized China's lack of transparency regarding its use of the death penalty, believed to involve thousands of executions annually. [BBC]

China – Hong Kong: Police question family of ex-pollster Chung Kim-Wah in national security case

(lb) Hong Kong national security police have questioned the wife and son of Chung Kim-Wah, a former deputy CEO of the Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute (HKPORI), who is wanted under the national security law. Chung, who fled to the United Kingdom in April 2022 citing fears of censorship, was added to a wanted list in December alongside five other overseas-based individuals. Authorities have placed bounties of HKD 1 million (approximately USD 128,000) on each for information leading to their arrests (see AiR No. 53, December/2024, 5).

Chung is accused of violating Hong Kong's national security law, with specific allegations of engaging in activities such as subversion, secession, or collusion with foreign forces. Police further suspect that Robert Chung, the current president of HKPORI, used the organization to assist Chung in "continuing activities endangering national security" after his departure to the UK. [Dimsum Daily]

As part of the investigation, police detained Robert Chung for questioning and conducted a search of HKPORI's office, seizing a significant number of documents. Authorities are reportedly seeking to determine whether any financial assistance or other support was provided to Chung Kim-Wah by the institute or its staff. Despite the ongoing investigation, no formal arrests have been made. Chris Tang, Hong Kong's Secretary for Security, stated that the case is unrelated to the polling activities of HKPORI.

The case highlights the growing enforcement of Beijing's national security law, enacted in June 2020 to criminalize broadly defined offenses such as subversion, secession, and collusion with foreign forces. Critics argue the law has suppressed dissent and eroded civil liberties, with dozens of civil society groups dissolving and hundreds arrested since its implementation. Proponents claim it has restored stability following the 2019 pro-democracy protests.

To date, 19 individuals, including former lawmakers Ted Hui, Dennis Kwok, and Nathan Law, remain wanted under the legislation. [Hong Kong Free Press]

Japan: New political party formed

(adi) Former independent lawmaker Akira Ishimaru has announced the formation of a new political party in preparation for the upcoming Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly elections. Named the "Citizens' Reform Alliance," the party seeks to address critical local issues such as urban development, disaster preparedness, and public transport infrastructure. Ishimaru emphasized transparency, citizen participation, and reform-oriented governance as the pillars of his platform during his announcement on January 18.

Ishimaru's initiative aims to attract voters dissatisfied with the dominance of established parties, such as the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), by focusing on grassroots outreach. His reputation as a reformist and focus on inclusive policymaking could appeal to younger voters and urban professionals. [Nippon.com]

The Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly elections, scheduled for later this year, are expected to focus on key issues like housing affordability and environmental sustainability. Ishimaru's entry into the race adds to the competition, posing a challenge to traditional political structures. Analysts suggest that his success will depend on mobilizing public support and addressing the concerns of Tokyo residents effectively.

This development reflects the shifting dynamics of Japan's local politics, with reformist movements seeking to redefine governance in one of the world's largest cities. The upcoming elections are expected to play a crucial role in shaping Tokyo's future. [Asahi Shimbun]

Japan: Ruling party accountant indicted over unreported assembly funds

(adi) The Tokyo District Public Prosecutors Office summarily indicted Hidekatsu Yajima, a 72-year-old accountant for the ruling Liberal Democratic Party's (LDP) parliamentary group in the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly, for violating the Political Fund Control Law. Prosecutors allege that Yajima failed to report approximately JPY 35 million (USD 225,000) in revenue generated from political fundraising events held in 2019 and 2022. [The Japan News]

Furthermore, expenditures were understated by about JPY 28 million (USD 180,000), bringing the total amount of unreported funds to JPY 63 million (USD 405,000).

The LDP parliamentary group distributed 100 tickets for fundraising events, valued at JPY 2 million (USD 12,900), to each assembly member, with a sales quota of 50 tickets. Revenue generated beyond this quota was retained by the members. Yajima, responsible for the group's bookkeeping, failed to include these amounts in the official financial reports.

This case highlights broader issues within the LDP, as unreported political funds have been uncovered in various factions, including JPY 1.35 billion (USD 8.7 million) by faction formerly led by former late Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, JPY 380 million (USD 2.4 million) the Nikai faction, led by former LDP Secretary-General Toshihiro Nikai, and JPY 30 million (USD 193,000) by the faction of former Prime Minister Fumio Kishida. These findings have intensified public scrutiny of political funding practices.

The LDP has pledged to cooperate fully with investigations and improve its financial reporting practices. This incident underscores the need for stricter enforcement of political funding regulations to ensure transparency and maintain public trust in Japan’s political institutions. [Asahi Shimbun]

Japan: Osaka High Court rules for equal compensation in death of disabled child case

(adi) The Osaka High Court overturned a lower court decision by awarding equal compensation to the family of Ayuka Ide, an 11-year-old hearing-impaired girl who was fatally struck by heavy machinery in 2018. The court ordered a payment of JPY 43 million (approximately USD 227,000), consistent with compensation awarded to nondisabled individuals in similar cases.

The court rejected the initial ruling, which had reduced the compensation amount due to Ayuka's disability, deeming it unjustified. Presiding Judge Hiroki Matsuo emphasized that there is "no reason to reduce the amount from the average of all workers" concerning future lost earnings, affirming the principle of equal treatment under the law.

This landmark decision has been praised by disability rights advocates as a significant step toward addressing discrimination and recognizing the value of individuals with disabilities. Experts view the ruling as a critical move to promote equality in Japan's legal and social systems, underscoring the need for fairness in compensation regardless of physical or mental ability. [Japan Times]

Japan: Government initiates compensation process for forced sterilization victims

(adi) The Japanese government has begun to compensate individuals who were forcibly sterilized under the now-defunct Eugenic Protection Law. This law, enacted in 1948 and repealed in 1996, permitted forced sterilization to prevent the births of individuals deemed to have "hereditary diseases" or disabilities. Approximately 16,500 people were forcibly sterilized during its enforcement.

Under a new law that took effect of January 17, victims or their families can apply for compensation through the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare. Each victim is entitled to receive JPY 3.2 million (approximately USD 22,000) as a lump-sum payment. The compensation program also includes provisions for providing detailed explanations and emotional support to applicants, many of whom endured decades of social stigma and psychological trauma. [NHK]

The compensation program reflects a broader effort by Japan to address historical injustices. However, advocates stress the importance of implementing robust measures to ensure timely processing of applications and delivering justice to survivors. The issue remains a significant point of discussion in Japan's ongoing conversation about human rights and historical accountability. [Kyodo News]

Japan: 2025 fiscal surplus target likely to be missed

(adi) Sources familiar with the situation disclosed that Japan is expected to miss its primary budget surplus target for FY 2025. This target, initially set to achieve fiscal sustainability, has been postponed multiple times and now faces further challenges due to increased government spending.

The government has enacted a supplementary budget of JPY 13.9 trillion (USD 92 billion) to address rising living costs, including subsidies for fuel and financial support for low-income households. Additionally, a record defense budget of JPY 8.7 trillion (USD 55 billion) has been proposed as part of the fiscal year 2025 budget and is awaiting parliamentary approval.

The government now projects achieving a primary budget surplus in fiscal 2026, delaying the target by a year. The revised forecast anticipates a surplus of JPY 800 billion (USD 5.15 billion) in 2026, with tax revenues expected to surpass expenditures excluding bond sales and debt-servicing costs. In contrast, fiscal 2025 is projected to face a deficit of JPY 4.5 trillion (USD 28.9 billion), reflecting additional spending to support economic recovery and shield households from rising costs. The government is expected to outline new fiscal targets in its upcoming policy guidelines to be released in June. [Mainichi]

Critics warn that the increased spending risks undermining fiscal stability, with Japan's public debt already exceeding 260 percent of GDP – the highest among developed nations. [Reuters]

Japan: Balancing inflation and yen volatility

(adi) Japan's government and the Bank of Japan (BOJ) are tackling rising inflation and yen volatility as key policy challenges. On January 15, Finance Minister Katsunobu Kato reaffirmed the government's readiness to intervene in the foreign exchange market to curb excessive volatility, highlighting a shared goal with the BOJ to achieve stable 2 percent inflation. The yen's recent 0.5 percent appreciation against the U.S. dollar followed signals of a potential interest rate hike, driven by inflation hitting 2.9 percent year-on-year in November 2024. [Reuters 1]

The BOJ is set to deliberate a potential interest rate hike during its January 23-24 policy meeting. Persistently high wholesale inflation, at 3.8 percent in December, and global economic shifts have intensified calls for a departure from Japan's traditionally dovish monetary approach. A rate hike could strengthen the

yen, potentially impacting Japan's export-driven industries, but would align Japan's policies more closely with other major economies. [Reuters 2]

Japan: Employee pension program to be expanded

(adi) The Japanese government announced plans to broaden the scope of the "kosei nenkin" employee pension program to encompass a greater number of part-time workers.

Currently, companies with 51 or more employees are mandated to enroll their part-time staff in the kosei nenkin program, which supplements the universal basic pension. The government intends to lower this threshold to 21 employees by October 2027 and eliminate it entirely by 2029.

This phased approach considers the additional financial responsibilities that smaller businesses will incur, as kosei nenkin premium payments are equally divided between employees and employers.

Additionally, the government plans to remove the existing requirement for part-timers earning an annual income of JPY 1.06 million (USD 6, 780) or more to join the kosei nenkin program once the minimum wage reaches JPY 1,016 (USD 6.50) nationwide.

These reforms aim to enhance social security coverage for part-time workers, reflecting Japan's efforts to adapt its pension system to the evolving labor market. [Nippon]

Japan: Supreme Court dismisses Okinawa's appeal on U.S. base relocation

(adi) The Supreme Court has rejected an appeal of Okinawa Prefecture challenging the state's approval of a modified landfill plan for the controversial U.S. military base relocation. The court's decision, issued on January 16, finalized the Fukuoka High Court's ruling in September, which dismissed the appeal due to the prefecture's lack of standing as a plaintiff. [Stars and Stripes]

The central government and Okinawa have been in conflict over the transfer of the Futenma base from Ginowan to the Henoko coastal area in Nago. Since World War II, Okinawa has hosted most U.S. military

facilities in Japan. Of the 14 lawsuits related to the Henoko relocation, Okinawa lost 10.

Okinawa Governor Denny Tamaki expressed disappointment over the court's dismissal, reaffirming the prefecture's opposition to the Henoko base plan. Despite the legal setbacks, Okinawa will continue its efforts to resolve the issue.

In 2020, the central government submitted a revised landfill plan to address soil concerns, which Okinawa rejected. The government, however, approved the plan in December 2023. The Naha branch of the Fukuoka High Court ruled that the prefecture's claim against the state's approval was invalid, stating that such decisions were part of the government's duties. [Kyodo News]

Meanwhile, a recent survey revealed that 70 percent of Japan's prefectural governments support revising the Japan-U.S. Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), which governs the legal status of U.S. military personnel stationed in Japan. This sentiment reflects growing nationwide concerns over the disproportionate concentration of U.S. military facilities in certain regions, particularly Okinawa, which hosts approximately 70 percent of U.S. military installations in Japan.

Okinawa Governor Denny Tamaki has been a prominent advocate for revising SOFA, arguing that the current agreement inadequately addresses issues such as environmental protection and local governance. The Supreme Court's ruling has intensified calls from local governments and residents for a more equitable distribution of U.S. military bases and a reassessment of the legal frameworks governing their presence.

The central government maintains that the relocation of the Futenma base to Henoko is essential for reducing the burden on densely populated areas and strengthening the U.S.-Japan security alliance. However, the combination of the court's decision and the survey results underscores a growing national discourse on the need to revisit and potentially revise the agreements that define the U.S. military's role and responsibilities in Japan. [Kyodo News 2]

Mongolia: Economic Affairs Committee conducts hearings for senior government agency appointments

(fs) The Standing Committee on Economic Affairs convened to assess nominees for senior positions in key Mongolian government agencies on January 14.

Seven candidates were reviewed for roles in the Financial Regulatory Commission, followed by four nominees for Non-Executive Members of the Monetary Policy Committee and six candidates for the Supervisory Board of the Bank of Mongolia.

A report summarizing the qualifications and rationale for each nominee will be compiled within two working days, shared with nominees and recommending parties within five days, and published on the parliamentary website.

The final decision on appointments will be made during a plenary session of Parliament after presenting the report and related conclusions. [GoGo]

Mongolia: New health regulations enhance access and services for students from rural areas

(fs) The Ministries of Health and Education have issued a joint order updating guidelines for student health support, focusing on preventive care, early detection, and overall health promotion. The regulation ensures students from rural areas studying in the capital can now access health services regardless of their residence.

Previous challenges, including gaps in health insurance coverage and limited access to preventive screenings, prompted a thorough revision of earlier regulations. Under the new guidelines, educational institutions must ensure that all students, including those in vocational schools, colleges, and universities, participate in screenings, medical check-ups, and diagnostic tests. [UB Post]

Mongolia: Uranium investment agreement with French Orano group signed

(fs) Mongolia and France's Orano Mining group signed an Investment Agreement to develop a uranium project in the Zuuch-Ovoo deposit, one of the world's top ten uranium reserves, on January 17, less than one month after reaching a preliminary agreement (see Asia in Review No. 53, December/2024, 5).

The project, expected to commence production in 2028, will have a lifespan of 30 years and an annual capacity of approximately 2,500 tons of uranium.

The agreement marks progress after years of delays stemming from debates over safeguarding Mongolia's strategic resources. It comes amid rising global demand for uranium as nations expand nuclear reactor capacity to support emissions-free energy.

Prime Minister Oyun-Erdene highlighted the agreement as a milestone, marking Mongolia's second major foreign investment deal with a third-neighbor country. He emphasized its potential to increase foreign investment, boost state and local budgets, create jobs, introduce advanced technologies, and expand international cooperation. [Montsame] [Mining.com]

Mongolia: Parliamentary committee backs additional loan for oil refinery project

(fs) The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Economy has approved a draft loan agreement between the Mongolian government and the Export-Import Bank of India, securing an additional USD 462.2 million in funding for Mongolia’s oil refinery project. This loan supplements the initial USD 1.2 billion financing provided by India and is aimed at ensuring the refinery's timely completion and operational launch.

The project aims to enable Mongolia to utilize crude oil to produce transportation and cooking fuels for domestic consumption. It represents the largest single line-of-credit initiative funded by India globally. Under this financing arrangement, India provides concessional interest rates to developing nations, with the stipulation that 75 percent of contracts associated with the project are awarded to Indian companies. [Rigzone]

Minister of Industry and Mineral Resources Ts. Tuvaan explained that the revised project cost of USD 1.7 billion reflects increased expenses due to global price hikes, the COVID-19 pandemic, and higher output targets for jet fuel and gasoline. The additional loan maintains favorable terms, including a 0.5 per cent service fee, a 20-year repayment period, and a five-year grace period.

While some lawmakers raised concerns about the loan's impact on the state budget, Minister of Finance B.Javkhlan emphasized that the refinery is a high-priority mega project expected to generate significant returns by reducing Mongolia's annual oil import bill by USD 1 billion. The refinery, which relies on crude oil

supplies from PetroChina Dachin Tamsag under a production-sharing agreement, is projected to start operations in May 2027.

The proposal will now be submitted to parliament for ratification, with the loan agreement expected to be signed on February 5. [UB Post]

Mongolia: Tax reforms to enhance business environment and infrastructure introduced

(fs) Mongolia implemented several tax reforms in 2025, aimed at addressing tax duplication and improving economic efficiency.

Key changes include a 2-3-fold increase in vehicle tax rates and a fivefold hike in road usage fees. These measures are expected to generate USD 35 million from vehicle taxes and USD 29.2 million from road usage fees for the city budget. According to the Head of the Capital City Road Development Agency, the additional revenue will improve road maintenance quality, which previously could only cover 1.5 per cent of required repairs annually.

In support of regional development, the government introduced differentiated tax policies. New regulations include a 90 per cent reduction in corporate income tax for import-substituting and export-oriented projects during their first five years of operation. Furthermore, import taxes on equipment classified as core assets for processing industries have been fully exempted.

Business representatives emphasize the importance of aligning taxable income thresholds with inflation and currency fluctuations to support enterprise growth and competitiveness. They also highlight the need to eliminate tax duplications and allow full deduction of operational expenses from taxable income. These adjustments could reduce costs, improve profitability, and enhance the competitive capacity of businesses. [Bloomberg TV]

Mongolia: Significant growth in savings and loan balances by end of 2024

(fs) As of December 2024, Mongolia recorded notable financial developments, with Tugrik (Mongolian currency) savings reaching approximately USD 6.5

billion, a year-on-year increase of about USD 1.4 billion.

Individual savings accounted for approximately USD 5.6 billion, while enterprises contributed around USD 900 million. In contrast, foreign currency savings decreased by 2.9 percent to approximately USD 1.4 billion.

Loan balances also saw significant growth, totaling approximately USD 10.9 billion, a 35.3 percent rise from 2023. Individuals held 61 percent of the loans, private organizations 36.5 percent, and the remainder split between public organizations and financial institutions.

Performing loans constituted 91.5 percent of the total loan balance, reaching approximately USD 10.0 billion, while non-performing loans decreased to approximately USD 600 million, representing 5.1 percent of the total. Watch-list loans amounted to approximately USD 400 million, a marginal 0.5 percent increase.

Mortgage loans issued by commercial banks and the Mongolian Mortgage Corporation totaled approximately USD 2.7 billion, a growth of about USD 500 million from November 2023. Of these, 97.7 percent were performing, 1.4 percent were watch-list, and 0.9 percent were non-performing loans. [Montsame]

Mongolia: Over 20,000 herders benefit from cooperative loans in 2024

(fs) The Mongolian government has been implementing the New Cooperative – Prosperous Herder program to bolster agriculture and livestock industries since April 2024.

Through this initiative, the central bank provides herders who form cooperatives with preferential loans of up to USD 14,573 via commercial banks. As of January 16, 7,814 cooperatives have been established nationwide, with 77,233 herders joining. Of these, 20,731 herders from 4,853 cooperatives received concessional loans, amounting to USD 192.37 million in 2024.

The loans have been utilized to prepare for winter, improve animal shelters, and enhance livestock breeds for increased productivity. Additionally, university faculty have been providing training to cooperatives on

livestock and dairy production, processing technology, and business planning.

A December 2024 survey revealed that 96 per cent of loan recipients encountered no challenges in proper utilization, and 87 per cent said the loans aided their winter preparations. Loan interest rates stand at 6 per cent annually, significantly lower than commercial bank averages.

Loan distribution varies by region, with Gobi-Altai receiving the largest amount (USD 14.3 million) and Darkhan-Uul the smallest (USD 1.46 million). [News.mn]

Mongolia: Citizens' protest demands government resignation, faces political resistance

(fs) A large-scale demonstration demanding the resignation of Mongolia's government began on January 11 at Sukhbaatar Square, with anti-government protesters organized by the Alliance of Freedom party blocking Genghis Avenue (see Asia in Review No. 2, January/2025, 2).

Protesters voiced frustration with the government's handling of issues such as smog, traffic congestion, poverty, corruption, and unemployment.

However, no members of the State Great Khural, the Mongolian parliament, have endorsed the motion. The ruling coalition, consisting of the Mongolian People's Party (MPP), Democratic Party (DP), and National Labour Party (NLP), has shown unified support for the government.

Opposition parties, including the National Coalition and the Civil Will-Green Party, have also refrained from proposing the government's removal, with political analysts suggesting alignment with MPP directives.

Key figures from the Civil Will-Green Party have expressed their intention to continue supporting the government's operations. [Sonin]

North Korea: Workers required to study party policies

(jb) Following an order by state authorities, all party members and workers are now required to study the

policies resulting from the 11th Plenary Meeting of the Eighth Central Committee of the ruling Workers' Party of Korea, held in December. Authorities have mandated that workers cover necessary plenary study material at the end of their work shifts.

The study material includes the party's 20 x 10 regional development policy goals, production goals and 2025 economic policies, which workers are to adhere to. Reports of dissatisfaction have emerged from coal miners in North Pyongan province, who argue that studying policy decisions after a long day of manual labor is impossible, and that local officials have become increasingly harsh in imposing the study sessions to prevent backlash from superior officers. [Daily NK English]

North Korea: Renewable energy projects invigorated

(jb) As part of a move to improve energy self-sufficiency, state authorities have begun extensively building and renovating the renewable energy industry and mineral extraction industry in South Pyongan and North Hamgyong provinces.

Following Cabinet orders, the iron ore and coal industries will be modernized to increase mechanized production and to eventually peter out manual labor in these industries. The mining industry is also currently focused on the extraction of phosphorous, zinc and magnesia clinker, the latter of which is an integral mineral for cement manufacturing. The aim of resource extraction is not only to improve national infrastructure but to also largely export mineral ores to earn foreign currency. Aside from these non-renewable energy and heavy industries, the renewable sector is also getting a boost through hydroelectric and solar power projects.

However, despite the elaborate plans for improving the renewables sector, the ever-present international sanctions make it increasingly difficult for North Korea to acquire materials for building solar panels and power plants in bulk, let alone impose on citizens the cost of erecting solar panels on small business and private homes. Sanctions have also made acquiring fossil fuels such as petroleum difficult, with Russia being the only nation to ship refined petroleum to North Korea in defiance of UNSC Resolution 2371. [EnergyWorld - Economic Times] Citizens have resorted to installing their own solar power panels due to irregular power supply from the state. [38 North]

Hydroelectric projects have also faced the onslaught of winter, making it difficult to extract hydroelectric energy in the face of frozen river systems. Citizens have repeatedly reported that such renewable projects need to be administered and planned better to ensure that the state bears the infrastructure costs. [Daily NK English]

South Korea: Yoon formally arrested amid violent protests and political unrest

(mc/jb) Impeached President Yoon Suk Yeol was formally arrested on January 19 after the Seoul Western District Court issued a warrant for his extended detention over his failed martial law declaration on December 3. The court's decision, citing the risk of evidence tampering, has deepened South Korea's political crisis, sparking violent protests and renewed scrutiny of the nation's democratic institutions. [Yonhap News Agency 1] [Yonhap News Agency 2].

Formal arrest warrant and court hearing

Yoon appeared at the Seoul Western District Court on January 19 for a hearing to determine whether he would remain in custody. The court ruled in favor of extended detention, citing serious allegations that Yoon abused his power to declare martial law and allegedly ordered troops to block the National Assembly from voting down the decree. The judge emphasized the risk of evidence destruction in granting the warrant. [Yonhap News Agency 1] [Yonhap News Agency 3]

Yoon has denied the charges, insisting that his declaration of martial law was a necessary act of governance to address political gridlock. His legal team argued that the move could not be judged as a criminal offence, framing it as an emergency measure for national stability. [Yonhap News Agency 4] [Yonhap News Agency 2]

Violent protests at the court

The warrant's issuance triggered violent protests outside the Seoul Western District Court. Thousands of Yoon's supporters gathered, with some storming the building, breaking windows, and throwing objects at police. The chaos resulted in dozens of arrests as security forces struggled to contain the escalating unrest. [Yonhap News Agency 1] [Yonhap News Agency 2]

Counter-protesters and citizens supporting the arrest applauded the court's decision, some celebrating it as a step toward justice. Police deployed hundreds of officers to secure the area, highlighting the heightened tensions surrounding the case. [Yonhap News Agency 1] [Yonhap News Agency 2] [Yonhap News Agency 3]

Investigations and next steps

The Corruption Investigation Office for High-ranking Officials (CIO), which initiated the investigation, now has 20 days to interrogate Yoon, including time already served since his January 15 detention. The CIO plans to transfer Yoon to prosecution custody after 10 days, during which prosecutors are expected to finalize the charges and seek an indictment before the detention period ends. [Yonhap News Agency 6] [Yonhap News Agency 1]

Yoon's arrest, the first of a sitting South Korean president in the country's modern history, has further polarized the political landscape. The Constitutional Court is reviewing the opposition-led National Assembly's December 14 impeachment and will determine whether he will be permanently removed from office [Yonhap News Agency 4] [Yonhap News Agency 2].

PPP leads in latest polls

A latest poll by Realmeter, a South Korean public opinion research organization specializing in surveys and polling, shows the PPP leading in political party preferences, with growing support for continuity in leadership amid Yoon Suk Yeol's impeachment and arrest. If the Constitutional Court upholds the impeachment, a presidential election must occur within 60 days.

According to findings released on January 20, 48.6 percent of respondents favored a candidate from Yoon's People Power Party (PPP), while 46.2 percent expressed preference for an opposition candidate. Support for the PPP rose to 46.5 percent, marking a 5.7 percentage point increase in one week and the party's highest rating in nearly a year.

Conversely, support for the Democratic Party of Korea (DPK) dropped to 39 percent, its lowest since August, creating a 7.5-point gap, according to a Gallup Korea poll released on January 17. This marks the largest in six months. [The Korea Herald 1] [The Korea Herald 2]

South Korea: National Assembly approves revised bill on special counsel investigation into President Yoon's insurrection charges

(mc) South Korea's National Assembly approved a revised bill on January 17 calling for a special prosecutorial investigation into President Yoon Suk Yeol's controversial declaration of martial law on December 3. The bill, submitted by the opposition Democratic Party (DP), was passed with 188 votes in favor and 86 against, despite strong resistance from the ruling People Power Party (PPP).

The revised bill removed allegations that Yoon had engaged in warmongering with North Korea, a charge vehemently denied by the PPP. However, the ruling party opposed the bill, citing concerns over vague provisions allowing the investigation to extend to "related cases." The PPP argued that these provisions could pave the way for a politically motivated inquiry aimed at serving the DP's interests.

PPP lawmakers criticized the DP for advancing the bill without bipartisan consensus. Some within the PPP also questioned the necessity of a special counsel, given that multiple investigative agencies, including the Corruption Investigation Office (CIO) for Senior Officials, had already examined the case extensively. Nevertheless, the PPP's limited support for a special counsel reflects the PPP's strategy to distance itself from Yoon while framing the investigation on its own terms.

The DP has portrayed the special counsel bill as essential for holding Yoon accountable for his unprecedented declaration of martial law. The declaration temporarily suspended parliamentary activities and reportedly included plans to arrest key lawmakers and election officials. Critics, however, argue that the DP's insistence on the investigation reflects a broader strategy to force an early presidential election and exploit public discontent with Yoon's actions. [The Chosung Daily] [The Korea Herald]

The special counsel investigation will begin after a 20-day preparatory period, aligning with ongoing trials related to the martial law case. The DP views this as an opportunity to strengthen accountability, while the PPP has expressed concerns about redundancy and excessive scope in the investigation. [Yonhap News Agency] [The Chosung Daily]

Despite the bill's passage, public opinion remains divided. Some consider the special counsel necessary

for ensuring transparency, while others view it as a politically motivated effort by the DP to gain an advantage ahead of a potential election. [The Chosung Daily] [The Korea Herald]

South Korea: Opposition party leader appears at hearing in trial on corruption charges

(jb) The leader of the main opposition Democratic Party (DP), Lee Jae-myung, attended a hearing for a court case against him at the Seoul Central District Court (SCDC) on January 17. [Korea JoongAng Daily]

The case revolves around his alleged collusion with private property developers in a public-private dealing for a major land development project during Lee's time as the mayor of Seongnam in Gyeonggi Province. The specific hearing on January 17 surrounded Lee's involvement in reaping windfall profits for private developers by fixing profit structures for the same project against the state-owned Seongnam Development Corporation.

The prosecution previously sought a two-year prison sentence for Lee in September 2024, alleging that he misled voters about the truth of his involvement in the land project leading up to his campaign in the 2022 presidential elections (see AiR No. 39, September/2024, 4). The SCDC gave Lee a suspended one-year prison sentence after the prosecution argued that Lee violated the Public Official Election Act.

The court's decisions in Lee's criminal cases, of which there are currently five, have constantly been perceived by members of the ruling People Power Party to be lenient, as the two-year prison sentence was reduced to one and then suspended altogether.

The prison sentence would prevent Lee from running for President for five years, which would disqualify him from the 2027 presidential elections. The court also acquitted Lee of perjury charges in a related case, further angering his opposition lawmakers who have pushed for his conviction at several junctures since the initial investigation into Lee's collusion began in 2022. [The Korea Herald]

South Korea: Ex-defense minister to take stand in impeachment trial

(jb) Former Defense Minister Kim Yong-hyun is scheduled to appear as a witness before the Constitutional Court on January 23, earlier than the original witness hearing date of February 6, following a request by President Yoon Suk Yeol's legal team. The request was made to allow Kim's testimony to precede that of five National Assembly lawmakers, reversing the initial order. The court has stated that failure to appear for the testimony could result in fines or imprisonment.

Kim, who was accused of insurrection and abuse of power during Yoon's brief imposition of martial law in December 2024 (see AiR No. 50, December/2024, 2), immediately claimed full responsibility for the declaration. He was arrested for ordering martial law troops to storm the National Assembly building and the National Election Commission headquarters.

The Constitutional Court plans to question senior security officials after Kim's hearing, including the Police Commissioner, the Army Special Warfare Commander, and the Defense Counterintelligence Commander, among others.

Yoon's legal team has also requested the court to expand the witness list and transfer key documents as evidence to strengthen their justification for declaring martial law. The defense argues that the National Election Commission was responsible for tampering with the April 2024 parliamentary elections, skewing the distribution of seats in the National Assembly in favor of the main opposition Democratic Party, which holds 170 of the 300 total seats. [Korea JoongAng Daily]

South Korea: Prosecution denies arrest warrant for Vice Administrator Kim Sung-hoon in Yoon case

(jb) The prosecutorial has denied an arrest warrant filed for the arrest of Vice Administrator Kim Sung-hoon by the Special Investigation Division of the National Police Agency.

Kim, who currently leads the Presidential security service after the resignation of the former chief of security Park Jung-joon, is charged with obstruction of special public duties along with the current chief of security, Lee Kwang-woo. Kim and Lee were reportedly responsible for blocking the police from arresting President Yoon Suk-yeol by dispatching the security services after the first arrest warrant for him was issued on December 3, immediately after his failed imposition of martial law. [Chosun Biz 1]

With the police preparing to execute a second arrest warrant for Kim, the prosecution rejected the first by stating that he appeared voluntarily during Yoon's second arrest attempt on January 19. [Chosun Biz 2]

South Korea: Emergency medical services to stay open during Seollal holidays

(jb) In a National Assembly meeting held on January 16, the ruling People Power Party (PPP) and the Ministry of Health and Welfare agreed to ensure to keep emergency medical services across the nation fully operational during the six-day-long Lunar New Year, or Seollal, holidays. The government will create a joint task force with the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency to monitor and treat the rise of influenza following a spike in flu rates in the past few weeks. [The Korea Herald]

The government has promised assistance to emergency medical centers and small clinics which accept non-critical patients as it eases pressure on arterial urban hospitals. [Korea JoongAng Daily]

In the move to invigorate operations, emergency rooms in hospitals and smaller clinics have been urged by the Health Ministry to remain open for inpatient services and surgical procedures, with pharmacies also being requested to operate round the clock for emergency medicine. Local emergency rooms have also been given permission to charge patients a 300 percent surcharge rate, up from last year's 200 percent which was set during the Chuseok holidays in September.

The government's support for the medical community and system comes at a time of renewed negotiations with protesting doctors (see AiR No. 2, January/2024, 2), rolling back the government's proposed inadequate medical school enrollment quotas. The 2024 Chuseok holidays previously saw a lull in emergency medical services following the year-long nationwide protest by doctors, forcing the government to form a task force to handle the swell in emergency medical cases (see AiR No. 38, September/2024, 3).

South Korea: Bank of Korea freezes key rate despite foreign exchange flux

(jb) The Monetary Policy Board of the Bank of Korea, on January 16, retained the base lending rate for the

central bank at 3 percent in the period between rate-setting meetings. [Yonhap News Agency]

The key rate, which is the interest rate at which the central bank lends money to other banks in the country, has remained stable despite concerns about uncertainties in the foreign exchange market. The policy board maintained that the key rate should stay at 3 percent to avoid domestic uncertainties and to build confidence in the domestic market as economic growth has risen by a slower rate than previously forecast for the 2024/25 fiscal year.

The bank expects that the GDP growth could possibly fall below the predicted 1.9 percent for 2025 owing to flux in global oil prices and the unpredictable economic stances of the incoming Trump administration. The central bank had to also take into consideration the consumer price index inflation rate which decreased from 1.9 percent to 1.8 percent between December 2024 and January 2025, assuming that the upper ceiling for CPI inflation would be around 2 percent for the foreseeable future. [Bank of Korea 1]

Previously, the Bank of Korea decreased its lending rate in its October and November meetings, proceeding to set its monetary policy for 2025 as a decrease in lending rate depending on economic conditions. The 2025 policy also promised that the bank will strengthen lending institutions and focus on stabilizing the financial market in the short-term through effective policy communication. [Bank of Korea 2]

The consecutive rate cuts in 2024 occurred for the first time since the global financial crisis in 2009. The Federal Reserve maintained that the lending rate should remain the same as it was confident in the economy's resilience. The monetary policy board promised that it will continue to monitor the rising situation and set its base rate to maintain economic stability in the weeks to come.

The Governor of the Bank of Korea announced in August 2024 that they will begin implementing a new system of lending rates called the Korea Overnight Financing Repo Rate (KOFR) which is tied to actual financial transactions as opposed to the professional predictions that decide the current benchmark lending rate of the central bank. The benchmark lending rate has also been manipulated globally in the past 50 years, according to the BOK, pushing South Korea to implement a new system that would provide a much closer diagnosis of the economy. The KOFR system will be implemented in 2025 with the help of the public-private partnerships in concert with the government's

Financial Services Commission and the Financial Supervisory Service. [Bank of Korea 3]

South Korea: Samsung, IBM to collaborate on developing UK frontline emergency system

(jb) The UK Home Office's Emergency Services Network is set to receive a boost as Samsung Electronics announced on January 16 that it will begin working on its first mission-critical solution (MCX) project in Europe in concert with tech giant IBM and other industry leaders.

Samsung will provide communications systems that allow real-time multimedia sharing which helps first responders identify and respond with high accuracy to rising emergencies. Samsung's reputation, which was bolstered through its development of the first 3GPP mobile broadband standard-compliant public safety network in its home base South Korea, and its successful implementation of the MCTPX solution to first responders in the US and Canada has boosted confidence in its involvement in the project among its industry partners. [Yonhap News Agency] [Samsung Newsroom]

South Korea: Production of L-SAM missile defense system approved

(mc) The South Korean government has approved the production of the Long-Range Surface-to-Air Missile (L-SAM) defense system to bolster the country's air defenses against North Korea's nuclear and missile threats, the Defense Acquisition Program Administration (DAPA) announced on January 16.

The Defense Projects Promotion Committee has allocated approximately USD 1.19 billion for the project, which is scheduled to run until 2030. The development of the L-SAM system was completed in November 2024, and it is designed to intercept threats at altitudes of 50–60 kilometers.

According to DAPA, the L-SAM will enhance South Korea's multi-layered defense capabilities and complement the U.S.-made Patriot Advanced Capability-3 (PAC-3) and M-SAM II systems, which target threats at altitudes below 40 kilometers. The L-SAM is also designed to operate in tandem with the U.S. Forces Korea's Terminal High Altitude Area

Defense (THAAD) system, which defends against threats at altitudes of 40–150 kilometers.

The missile defense system is expected to be deployed by 2027 and will serve as a critical component of South Korea's Korea Air and Missile Defense (KAMD) framework. KAMD is a cornerstone of the country's three-axis deterrence strategy, which also includes the Kill Chain preemptive strike platform and the Korea Massive Punishment and Retaliation (KMPR) system.

Once operational, the L-SAM is anticipated to significantly enhance South Korea's ability to counter evolving missile threats while further integrating its defense infrastructure. [Yonhap News Agency]

South Korea: Upgrade of destroyer project launched

(mc) According to the Defense Acquisition Program Administration (DAPA), South Korea has launched a project to modernize its 4,400-ton Chungmugong Yi Sun-sin class destroyers using indigenous technology and improve the fleet's operational efficiency.

As part of the refurbishment, an indigenous combat system, an improved towed array sonar and advanced guided missile equipment will be installed to strengthen the destroyers' anti-submarine and anti-air capabilities.

DAPA emphasized that using indigenous technologies will improve the operation and maintenance efficiency of the ships, which have been key naval assets since they entered service in 2003. [The Korea Herald] [Yonhap News Agency]

South Korea: Salaries of junior military officers and non-commissioned officers to be raised

(mc) The Ministry of National Defense announced on January 16 that the annual salaries of entry-level officers and non-commissioned officers will be increased by an average of 6 percent for 2025 in an effort to improve the working conditions of its armed forces.

The announcement was made during a defense policy briefing to Acting President Choi Sang-mok, reflecting

efforts to improve the welfare of South Korean soldiers. [The Korea Herald]

South Korea: Jeju air crash to herald wave of aviation safety reforms

(jb) Following the crash of Jeju Air flight 2216 at Muan International Airport on December 29 (see AiR No. 53, December/2024, 5), Acting President Choi Sang-mok promised on January 17 that a series of safety reforms pertaining to the operation of the aviation sector will be implemented nationwide pending safety inspections of key areas such as airports and runways.

The Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, and Transport (MOLIT) which has been tasked with the safety inspections has been ordered by the acting president to hold thorough inspections that would assure citizens of aviation safety.

The crash has spurred a series of investigations into 13 South Korean airports by the Ministry after an initial probe into Muan airport's operations which was led by the South Jeolla provincial police (see AiR No. 1, January/2025, 1).

The US National Transport Safety Board, which held a joint investigation with MOLIT into the retrieved black boxes on flight 2216 was able to recover data for all but the last four minutes of the flight, forcing experts to continue speculating the cause of the crash. [Korea JoongAng Daily 1] [Korea JoongAng Daily 2]

Taiwan: Opposition parties push through budget cuts in parliament

(dql) In a latest reflection of prolonged partisan politics in Taiwan, lawmakers the Kuomintang (KMT) and the Taiwan People's Party (TPP), the two major opposition parties, passed the central government budget on January 21, reducing spending by NTD 207.5 billion (USD 6.34 billion) from the Cabinet's original plan. The vote ended months of political disputes.

The Cabinet and opposition legislators had agreed on a NTD 3.1325 trillion budget (USD 95 billion) in November, but KMT and TPP lawmakers submitted over 3,000 proposals to cut spending across various sectors, including utilities, defense, and public relations. After extensive voting, legislators approved an annual expenditure of NTD 2.9248 trillion (USD 89,322 billion).

Key cuts included a NTD 100 billion reduction (USD 3 billion) for state-owned Taipower; a freeze half of the NTD 2 billion (USD 61.01 million) for Taiwan's domestic submarine program and half of the foreign ministry's operating expenses; a reduction of the expenses of the Control Yuan – the agency that is responsible for overseeing and monitoring the actions of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches – by half; as well as a 3 percent a reduction in military equipment and facilities budgets and a 60 percent cut in media budgets for government ministries. [Taipei Times]

Following the vote, the KMT criticized the DPP for wasting tax dollars and favoring certain groups, while the DPP condemned the cuts as unreasonable, arguing they would negatively impact government functions and people's livelihoods.

Premier Cho Jung-tai urged lawmakers to reconsider the cuts, while President Lai Ching-te called for bipartisan support for the national defense budget, emphasizing international expectations for Taiwan's resolve.

Several ministries opposed the cuts, with the foreign ministry warning that they would hurt Taiwan's diplomatic efforts and international standing. Taipower also expressed concern that the budget cut could lead to higher electricity prices, and the economic ministry noted that the reduction could harm Taiwan's global competitiveness. [Taiwan News]

Taiwan: First death penalty execution since 2020 carried out

(dql) In a move prompting widespread international criticism, Taiwan executed on January 16 a man sentenced in 2017 for the 2013 murder of his ex-girlfriend and her mother, marking the island nation's first execution in five years. The execution followed the Constitutional Court's conformation of the constitutionality of the death penalty for most serious crimes in a review of a petition filed by death row inmates (see AiR No. 39, September/2024, 4). [Ministry of Justice, Taiwan, in Chinese]

The International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and its member organizations Taiwan Association for Human Rights (TAHR) and Covenants Watch, as well as Amnesty International voiced strong condemnation of the execution calling it a "shameful setback" for human rights in Taiwan and questioning the government's willingness to pursue the abolition of the death penalty. [FIDH] [Amnesty International]

Similarly, the European Union reiterated its opposition to the death penalty, calling for a de facto moratorium and consistent efforts towards abolition. [EEAS]

Taiwan: Surveillance in areas near undersea cables to be reinforced

(dql) Taiwan's defense ministry has announced plans to increase surveillance in four key areas near undersea cables. The announcement comes after earlier this month the Cameroon-flagged Shunxin39 cargo ship allegedly severed an undersea fiber-optic cable near Keelung Harbor by dragging its anchor across an international subsea cable. This prompted suspicions of sabotage act by a Chinese-owned vessel (see AiR No. 1, January/2025, 1) and a call of the foreign ministry on democracies to “increase vigilance & deter such grey zone tactics.” [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Taiwan] [CNN]

The ministry unveiled that the military would establish four "key surveillance zones" off Toucheng Township (Yilan County), Bali District (New Taipei), Fangshan Township (Pingtung County), and Penghu, all located close to undersea cables. It added that the Navy will use radar and electronic intelligence systems to monitor suspicious vessels, focusing on those with unusual speed or behavior. [Focus Taiwan]

Meanwhile NATO has launched “Baltic Sentry”, a mission to safeguard critical undersea cables in the Baltic Sea. The mission will deploy frigates, maritime patrol aircraft, and naval drones for surveillance and deterrence.

The initiative responds to concerns over sabotage of undersea cables and broader destabilizing activities, such as cyberattacks and hybrid warfare. Recent incidents, including cable disruptions near Sweden and Finland, have raised alarm, with European officials suspecting sabotage linked to Russia, though the Kremlin denies these claims. In November, two telecommunications cables linking Sweden and Denmark were severed, with authorities suspecting the Chinese vessel Yi Peng 3 (see AiR No. 48, November/2024, 4). [AA]

Taiwan: Military helicopter exercise conducted

(dql) 602 Air Cavalry Brigade of Taiwan's Army conducted a field repair test for a Kiowa helicopter in Taichung on January 15 to assess the logistics and maintenance skills of ground personnel and enhance the military's combat readiness.

Personnel established a field maintenance station and simulated a helicopter communications malfunction during a reconnaissance mission. A mobile repair team fixed the issue under security protection and verified the helicopter's communication system. The drill also focused on evaluating how personnel integrate civilian resources and materials for tasks, including transporting repair equipment and setting up maintenance stations.

Kiowa helicopters are light, multi-role helicopters primarily used for reconnaissance, surveillance, and light attack missions. They are equipped with Stinger, Hellfire, and TOW (tube-launched, optically tracked, wire-guided) missiles. In 1991 and 1997 Taiwan purchased 26 Kiowas and 13 Kiowas respectively. Thirty-seven Kiowas remain active. [Taiwan News]

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

Bangladesh: Term of six reform commissions extended as BNP calls for consensus on transition

(lm) Bangladesh's interim government has extended the terms of six reform commissions until February 15, allowing additional time for these bodies to finalize

their reports on systemic reforms in governance, law enforcement, judiciary, anti-corruption measures, electoral systems, and constitutional structures. Originally established in October 2024, these commissions were tasked with addressing critical changes following the mass uprising that led to the ouster of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in August last year. [Dhaka Tribune]

The Public Administration Reform Commission, the Police Reform Commission, the Election System Reform Commission, the Anti-Corruption Reform Commission, the Constitution Reform Commission, and the Judiciary Reform Commission were initially given 90 days to submit their findings, with previous extensions granted earlier this year.

Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus, who introduced these commissions in September 2024, has also announced his leadership of a consensus-building initiative to facilitate dialogue among political parties. The aim is to integrate reform proposals into a broader political framework under the "July proclamation," a unity-focused initiative intended to guide future governance. Yunus expressed hope that this process would result in a "July Charter" by February, providing a foundation for democratic progress. [The Daily Star 1] [The Daily Star 2] [The Daily Star 3]

Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir emphasized the importance of consensus in implementing reforms. Speaking during the 89th birth anniversary of BNP founder and former President Ziaur Rahman, Fakhrul stated that no reform proposals would be acceptable without agreement among political parties. While the government has begun discussions on reform reports, the BNP remains cautious and asserts that meaningful reforms and democratic elections must go hand in hand. Fakhrul reiterated the party's commitment to advancing reforms should it come to power and stressed the need for timely elections. [The Daily Star 4]

Bangladesh: BNP gears up for political revival

(lm) The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), Bangladesh's main political party besides the Awami League of osuted Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, is seizing momentum following significant political and legal victories, including the Supreme Court's recent acquittal of party leader and former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia in a 2008 corruption case. The court

overturned a prior 10-year prison sentence issued in 2018, clearing Zia and other defendants, including her son and BNP acting chairman Tarique Rahman, of allegations involving the misappropriation of funds intended for orphans during Zia's tenure as prime minister from 2001 to 2006.

Zia's defense team maintained that the charges were politically motivated, accusing the previous government led by now-ousted Prime Minister Hasina of targeting Zia and the BNP for political gain. This acquittal follows Zia's release from house arrest after Hasina's resignation and flight to India amid mass protests in August 2024. Zia, 79, has since traveled to London for medical treatment, with her legal team expressing optimism about her potential participation in the upcoming parliamentary elections slated for late 2025 or early 2026. [Al Jazeera]

This ruling is part of a series of legal triumphs for the BNP, including the acquittal of Zia's son, BNP acting chairman Tarique Rahman, in a separate case involving a 2004 grenade attack on a rally led by Hasina. These developments have fortified the BNP's political standing, providing a platform for renewed efforts to reorganize and strengthen the party.

Against this backdrop, Tarique is spearheading the party's reorganization efforts. He recently emphasized the need to rebuild the BNP with competent, honest, and diligent individuals who can align with public expectations and implement the party's 31-point reform plan. Speaking at a membership renewal event, Tarique stressed that internal unity is essential to addressing the damage inflicted during the Awami League's tenure, which he described as a period of repression marked by over six million BNP members being targeted through enforced disappearances, killings, and persecution. [The Daily Star 1] [Dhaka Tribune]

The BNP has also leveraged recent events, including the commemoration of its founder Ziaur Rahman's 89th birth anniversary, to reaffirm its dedication to justice, unity, and accountability. Ziaur Rahman, the seventh president of Bangladesh and the husband of Khaleda Zia, remains a pivotal figure in the party's identity and ideological framework. During the event, BNP Vice-Chairman Abdul Awal Mintoo stressed that the party holds no inherent conflict with the Awami League but insists on justice for the crimes, corruption, and abuses of power alleged during its rule. Mintoo reiterated that the BNP's goal is to ensure transparency and rebuild the nation's institutions to better reflect the people's will. [The Daily Star 2]

Bangladesh: Commission reveals systematic evidence destruction and enforced disappearances

(lm) A commission investigating enforced disappearances in Bangladesh has unveiled a scathing report detailing systematic abuses, evidence destruction, and a deeply entrenched culture of impunity within security forces. Submitted to Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus, the findings focus on "Aynaghar," secret detention centers housed within the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI) headquarters, and broader practices of enforced disappearances between 2010 and 2024.

The commission, established in September 2024 after the ouster of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, has recorded 1,676 complaints of enforced disappearances. Preliminary findings implicate high-ranking officials, including Hasina, her defense adviser Maj Gen (retd) Tarique Ahmed Siddique, and others. The report highlights the pervasive involvement of the elite paramiltary Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), recommending its disbandment due to its central role in these crimes.

Notably, the report exposed that evidence of Aynaghar's activities was actively destroyed after August 5 last year – the day that Sheikh Hasina fled to neighboring India – even after the transition of power. The commission found walls freshly painted over detainees' carvings and incomplete structural alterations, pointing to hurried attempts to conceal past crimes. Newly appointed DGFI officials, despite assuming office after these events, were implicated in perpetuating a system of impunity by manipulating evidence. [The Daily Star 1]

Interim leader Yunus has announced plans to visit Aynaghar, following revelations of chilling abuses. His visit aims to give hope to victims' families and acknowledge the gravity of the commission's findings. [The Daily Star 2]

Bangladesh: Former minister critiques Yunus-led interim government and highlights security risks

(lm) Former Education Minister Mohibul Hasan Chowdhury, a key figure in the ousted Awami League government, criticized the Yunus-led interim

administration, claiming it lacks legitimacy and has failed to maintain law and order in Bangladesh. Speaking from exile, he emphasized that the government's inability to protect minorities, progressives, and secular groups from extremist threats has exposed its shortcomings.

Chowdhury warned against Bangladesh becoming a hub for Islamic extremists, citing the rising influence of groups like Hizbut Tahrir and Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh, which he claimed could destabilize not only the region but also the broader international system. He pointed to Hizbut Tahrir's recent calls for establishing an Islamic state in Bangladesh as a significant concern.

He also questioned the interim government's authority to implement constitutional reforms, arguing it has no mandate to redefine Bangladesh's ideological foundations of secularism and Bengali nationalism. Chowdhury linked the country's economic and industrial unrest to the government's inability to restore stability over the past five months.

Chowdhury further suggested that the future of the interim government may depend on the attitude of the incoming Donald Trump administration in the United States, given past tensions between Trump and Muhammad Yunus.

Reflecting on the events that led to the ouster of Sheikh Hasina's government in August 2024, Chowdhury revealed details of the student-led uprising and the internal discussions within the Awami League. He claimed the government had been planning a structured handover of power, but the protests escalated beyond control. Chowdhury also criticized the interim government for its failure to uphold the values of independence and ensure long-term peace and stability. [The Hindu]

Bangladesh: Petition challenges president's clemency powers

(lm) A Supreme Court lawyer has filed a writ petition with the High Court questioning the legality of the president's unrestricted clemency powers under Article 49 of the Constitution. Submitted as a public interest litigation, the petition seeks a court directive to formulate guidelines regulating the exercise of these powers, citing concerns over potential misuse and constitutional violations.

The petitioner argues that the absence of guidelines undermines constitutional principles, including equality before the law and access to justice, as enshrined in Articles 7, 27, 31, and 32. She highlighted past cases, such as clemency granted to high-profile convicts like Joseph, the brother of a former army chief, and Aslam Fakir, a former local leader of the Jubo League, the student wing of the Awami League, which have raised public concerns about fairness and judicial accountability. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Chief justice highlights progress on judicial independence reforms

(lm) Chief Justice Syed Refaat Ahmed has reported notable progress in advancing judicial independence in Bangladesh, following the announcement of the judiciary roadmap on September 21, 2024. Speaking at a seminar titled "Judicial Independence and Efficiency in Bangladesh," jointly organized by the Supreme Court of Bangladesh and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Chattogram, he highlighted key milestones achieved under the reform initiative.

The Chief Justice noted that the ordinance for the Judicial Appointment Council has been approved by the cabinet and is undergoing routine legislative vetting. Additionally, plans to establish a separate Supreme Court Secretariat are now prioritized, with a comprehensive proposal under active government review. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Chief Election Commissioner underscores commitment to restoring voting rights

(lm) Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) AMM Nasir Uddin has vowed to restore voting rights in Bangladesh, calling for nationwide unity and active public participation to achieve free and inclusive elections. Speaking at the launch of the "Voter List Update Programme-2025", the CEC emphasized that a fair electoral process hinges on an accurate and reliable voter list.

Nasir underscored the significance of last year's mass uprising, which resulted in the ouster of then-Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, describing it as a pivotal moment in the nation's democratic journey. He warned that missing this opportunity to ensure

electoral integrity could delay progress indefinitely. Highlighting the collective sacrifices made for voting rights, he urged civil servants, women, younger voters, and the broader public to engage actively in the electoral process. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: ACC raids ex-BB deputy governor's home, seizes assets worth USD 479,000

(lm) The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) raided the residence of former Bangladesh Bank deputy governor Sitangshu Kumar Chowdhury, also known as SK Sur, seizing cash equivalent to USD 18,850 and savings certificates worth approximately USD 460,000.

The raid followed Sur's arrest on January 14. He was detained for failing to submit his wealth statement within the stipulated timeframe. In October 2024, the ACC filed a case against Sur, his wife, and their daughter for non-compliance with wealth declaration requirements. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Anti-Corruption Commission uncovers irregularities at Rangpur Medical College Hospital

(lm) The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) of Bangladesh has found evidence of significant irregularities in the procurement of anesthesia vaporizer machines at Rangpur Medical College Hospital (RMCH). During a raid conducted on January 21, the team discovered that while invoices claimed the equipment was sourced from Germany, the machines were actually purchased from China at inflated prices. Additional discrepancies, such as missing serial numbers and inconsistent labels, were also identified.

The ACC also highlighted unsanitary conditions in RMCH's food supply section. Complaints about irregularities in the chicken supply were noted, and staff were directed to improve hygiene to ensure meals are safe for patients.

Hospital Director Brigadier General Ashiqur Rahman stated that the hospital was not involved in the procurement process, as equipment purchases were handled centrally. The ACC has announced plans for a detailed investigation and appropriate action to address the findings. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Draft Cyber Ordinance criticized as anti-democratic and against mass uprising spirit

(lm) A group of 100 citizens issued a statement condemning the draft Cyber Protection Ordinance, describing it as contrary to the ideals of last year's mass uprising and the vision of a democratic Bangladesh. They demanded its repeal, criticizing its potential for misuse and its infringement on human rights.

The statement noted that the ordinance follows the controversial Cyber Security Act of 2023, which was widely used against protesters during the July-August movement resulting in the ouster of ex-Prime Minsiter Sheikh Hasina. Rather than replacing the previous law with one that promotes freedom of expression and good governance, the interim government introduced an ordinance that, according to critics, paves the way for future authoritarianism.

Key sections of the ordinance, including 35 and 36, were highlighted as enabling arbitrary detentions and searches by the police, potentially leading to harassment. Section 8, which permits blocking content deemed harmful to national unity or religious sentiments, was flagged for its potential to suppress journalism and free expression. Sections 25 and 26, addressing harassment and insult, were criticized for being overly subjective, raising concerns about the targeting of satire, memes, and other creative forms of protest. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Economist critiques 'invisible government' and calls for comprehensive reforms

(lm) Eminent economist and academic Professor Anu Muhammad has raised concerns over the presence of an "invisible government" that dictates Bangladesh's policies without public accountability. Speaking at a seminar titled "From Autocracy to Democracy: In Search of an Equitable Bangladesh," organized by the quarterly journal Sarbojonakotha and the German-Bangladesh Forum at Dhaka University, he highlighted the pervasive influence of global institutions like the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and Asian Development Bank in shaping the country's economic and development policies.

Anu Muhammad argued that these institutions enabled what he termed the "looting and money-laundering development model" of the former Sheikh Hasina government. He emphasized that the same institutions had praised Hasina's policies as a "development miracle" while ignoring the adverse effects on critical sectors like education, health, energy, and water resources.

The economist criticized the interim government's reliance on these institutions, cautioning that continuing their prescribed policies without accountability would hinder meaningful change. He also called for the cancellation of financially burdensome power projects and reforms in fiscal policies, including imposing direct taxes on the wealthy to reduce inequality. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: RMG exports to non-traditional markets reach USD 6.33 billion in 2024

Bangladesh's ready-made garment (RMG) exports to non-traditional markets reached USD 6.33 billion in 2024, comprising 16.46 percent of the nation’s total RMG exports of USD 38.48 billion.

Key non-traditional markets included Japan, Australia, India, South Korea, and Turkiye, with Japan being the largest destination at USD 1.11 billion. Traditional markets, including the European Union and the United States, continued to dominate, with exports to the EU totaling USD 19.37 billion (50.34 percent of total RMG exports) and USD 7.20 billion to the US (18.72 percent). [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: Dhaka-Chattogram Highway to be upgraded to 10-lane expressway

(vk) The Bangladeshi government has revised its plan to expand the Dhaka-Chattogram Highway into a 10-lane expressway at a cost of BDT 732 billion (USD 6.9 billion), with the project set to begin by December 2025. Funded by international lenders, the highway will feature six toll-based express lanes and four service lanes for slower traffic. Implementation will occur in three phases, addressing the 229-kilometer route. The project aims to alleviate traffic congestion and enhance connectivity along this vital economic corridor. [Bss News]

Bangladesh: New uniforms for law enforcement to reflect institutional reform

(lm) Bangladesh's interim government has introduced new uniforms for Bangladesh Police, the elite paramilitary Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), and the Ansar & Village Defense Party (VDP), a paramilitary auxiliary force, symbolizing a broader effort to reform the image and conduct of the country's law enforcement agencies.

The new uniforms were approved during a meeting of the Law and Order Advisory Committee and feature three distinct colors: "iron" for the police, "olive green" for RAB, and "wheat gold" for Ansar. The Home Adviser Lt. Gen. (retd) Jahangir Alam Chowdhury emphasized that the uniform change symbolizes a shift in the mindset, behavior, and conduct of law enforcement personnel. He highlighted the need to combat corruption and rebuild public trust, especially following widespread criticism over police actions during last year's mass uprising, which resulted in the ouster of then-Prime Minister Shiekh Hasina but also led to numerous deaths and eroded public confidence.

The reform extends beyond uniforms, with the Police Reform Commission recommending measures to address allegations of custodial torture, extortion, arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, and human rights violations associated with RAB's activities. The Commission has also suggested a comprehensive review of RAB's role and effectiveness.

As part of the restructuring, Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) will soon receive non-lethal weapons, such as stun grenades and teargas, to enhance its operational capability. This decision follows recent border tensions with India, where such tools have proven effective for crowd control.

Additionally, the government is addressing the issue of foreign nationals overstaying their visas. The number of illegal residents in Bangladesh has dropped to 33,648 from a previous figure of 49,226 after the government imposed fines totaling BDT 10.53 million (USD 91,604) and set a January 31 deadline for compliance. Legal actions will follow for those who fail to regularize their status. Companies employing undocumented foreign workers without proper authorization will also face penalties. [The Daily Star]

Bhutan: Balancing growth, equity, and fiscal sustainability in a challenging economic landscape

(lm) Bhutan's fiscal strategy for 2025-26 reflects the government's attempt to balance ambitious growth objectives with the realities of rising debt, declining external grants, and the need for equitable resource allocation.

The Ministry of Finance has proposed a budget outlay of BTN 109.35 billion (USD 1.31 billion) for the fiscal year 2025-26, a 12 percent increase from BTN 97.63 billion (USD 1.17 billion) in the previous fiscal year. The budget allocates BTN 55.56 billion (USD 666.72 million) for recurrent expenditures and BTN 53.79 billion (USD 645.48 million) for capital expenditures, constituting 21 percent of the 13th Five-Year Plan's total budget. However, the government faces a fiscal deficit of BTN 20 billion (USD 240 million), equivalent to 5.85 percent of GDP, which it plans to address through external and domestic borrowings. [Kuensel 1]

Moreover, Bhutan's national debt is projected to rise by 12 percent in fiscal year 2024-25, increasing from BTN 285.18 billion (USD 3.42 billion) to BTN 319.07 billion (USD 3.83 billion). Despite this increase, the debt-to-GDP ratio is expected to decline slightly to 105.9 percent from 107.5 percent due to projected GDP growth. Hydropower-related debt, which accounts for 62.6 percent of external liabilities, remains the largest contributor, driven by projects like Mangdechhu, Puna-I, and Puna-II. Non-hydro debt, meanwhile, stands at BTN 112.06 billion (USD 1.35 billion), highlighting the need for diversification to reduce reliance on hydropower loans.

In response to fiscal challenges, the Ministry of Finance has emphasized sustainable deficit management and introduced measures to encourage innovation and efficiency in governance. Agencies are required to prioritize projects with clear economic and social returns, with a new initiative rewarding those that achieve increased revenue generation through innovative operating models. Successful agencies will receive augmented recurrent budget allocations in the following fiscal year, fostering what the government terms an "enlightened entrepreneurial bureaucracy." [Kuensel 2]

Efforts to ensure equitable development have also been strengthened. Following concerns raised by the Opposition Party over disparities in the allocation of Small Development Project (SDP) grants, the government has revised its approach to ensure fairness. Under the 13th Five-Year Plan, each gewog

will now receive BTN 34 million (USD 408,000). This resolution addresses earlier criticisms of favoritism toward constituencies represented by ruling party members or ministers, reaffirming the government's commitment to inclusivity. Of the BTN 10 billion (USD 120 million) allocated for SDP, BTN 7 billion (USD 84 million) is earmarked for gewogs, with BTN 1.5 billion (USD 18 million) each for thromdes and dzongkhags. [Kuensel 3]

Compounding fiscal pressures is Bhutan's reduced access to multilateral LDC-specific funding, which resulted in a 26 percent drop in external grants in fiscal year 2023-24. External grants fell from BTN 14.36 billion (USD 172.32 million) to BTN 10.62 billion (USD 127.44 million). Despite this decline, the Ministry of Finance projects an increase in grants to BTN 16.28 billion (USD 195.36 million) in fiscal year 2024-25, with India remaining the largest donor, followed by multilateral agencies such as the Asian Development Bank, European Union, and World Bank. [Kuensel 4]

Bhutan: Latest data highlights gender and urban-rural inequalities in labor market

(lm) Youth unemployment in Bhutan reached 17.7 percent in the fourth quarter of 2024, representing 6,598 individuals aged 15–24. This marks a 1.2 percentage-point rise from the previous quarter's 16.5 percent. The issue is particularly acute among women, with unemployment rates at 21.2 percent compared to 14.5 percent for men, and is more prevalent in urban areas (19.8 percent) than rural regions (15.5 percent). Youth unemployment now accounts for over half (54.8 percent) of the total unemployed population.

The broader unemployment rate also shows disparities. Overall unemployment stood at 3.11 percent, equating to 12,046 individuals, with women again disproportionately affected at 4.37 percent compared to 2.27 percent for men. Urban areas recorded an unemployment rate of 5.54 percent—more than three times the 1.75 percent seen in rural areas.

These figures underscore significant gender and urban-rural inequalities in Bhutan's labor market. The labor force participation rate (LFPR) mirrors this divide, with men participating at 74 percent compared to 54.6 percent for women. Urban areas saw a higher LFPR (64.8 percent) than rural areas (35.2 percent). While labor force participation peaks among individuals aged 40–44, younger populations (15–19 years) exhibit lower rates due to educational commitments, highlighting

the challenge of aligning education with employment opportunities. [Kuensel 1]

As Bhutan's labor market evolves, agriculture continues to play a dual role as a key economic contributor and employer, albeit with notable shifts. The sector's share of GDP rose to 14.7 percent in 2023 from 13.6 percent in 2018, but employment in agriculture fell sharply during the same period, from 54 percent to 43.5 percent.

This decline in agricultural employment is partly driven by the country's transition toward industrial and service sectors. However, rural areas remain heavily reliant on agriculture, with 64.9 percent of the rural workforce engaged in farming. Gender disparities persist, as 52.3 percent of women work in agriculture compared to 37.3 percent of men. Among rural women, 74.3 percent are employed in agriculture, while only 2.2 percent of urban women are engaged in the sector.

Despite its importance, agriculture faces several challenges, including low productivity, traditional farming practices, fragmented landholdings, and risks from climate change, water scarcity, and wildlife conflicts. Agricultural productivity lags behind other sectors, at 95.6 percent of the national labor productivity rate. Per capita Gross Value Added (GVA) in agriculture stands at BTN 235,102 (USD 2,821.22), 27.4 percent lower than the national GDP per capita, underscoring the need for modernization and commercialization of farming practices. [Kuensel 2]

These challenges are compounded by Bhutan's ongoing demographic transition. More than 35 percent of the country's working-age population—approximately 210,219 individuals—was economically inactive in 2024. Women comprised nearly two-thirds of the inactive population, with 128,964 women compared to 81,256 men. This inactivity is more pronounced in rural areas, where 121,964 individuals are not part of the labor force, compared to 89,147 in urban regions.

Bhutan's transition toward an aging society further complicates the picture. The elderly population is projected to rise from 7.4 percent of the total population in 2027 to 14 percent by 2050. Simultaneously, the fertility rate has declined from six children per woman in 1982 to just two in 2023, well below the global replacement level of 2.1 births per woman. [Kuensel 3]

Bhutan: Opposition raises key issues while defending its performance

(lm) The Bhutan Tendrel Party (BTP), as the Opposition in the National Assembly, has raised five critical issues with the government and other relevant agencies since its formation. While responding to public criticism of its perceived silence on national matters, the party emphasized that it has actively engaged in discussions during Parliament sessions and directly addressed urgent concerns to the appropriate authorities, prioritizing tangible outcomes over public visibility.

One of the key issues raised by the Opposition was the new certification policy for public transport drivers and conductors introduced by the Bhutan Construction and Transport Authority (BCTA) on September 1, 2024. In a letter to the Prime Minister on August 26, 2024, the Opposition questioned the necessity of the policy, arguing that professional drivers already undergo rigorous testing and licensing. The party expressed concerns about the additional bureaucratic requirements and the lack of consultations with stakeholders, highlighting the policy's potential adverse impact on public drivers and administrative bodies.

Another major issue was the allocation of Small Development Project (SDP) funds to gewogs and dzongkhags. On October 10, 2024, the Opposition wrote to the Prime Minister about perceived disparities in the distribution of these funds, pointing to favoritism toward constituencies represented by ruling party members or ministers. The Opposition stressed the need for equitable resource allocation to ensure fairness and inclusivity across all regions.

In November 2024, the Opposition submitted a detailed report to the Royal Civil Service Commission (RCSC) highlighting significant gaps in the civil service. The letter identified human resource shortages at the local government level, high attrition rates of experienced civil servants, and poor coordination of national planning and budgeting as critical challenges affecting the 13th Five-Year Plan. The party also criticized the forced ranking system in civil service performance assessments, arguing that it undermines workplace harmony and urging its removal.

The Opposition also raised concerns about the government's airfare subsidy, stating that it contradicts Bhutan's "high value, low volume" tourism policy and the Sustainable Development Fee (SDF). In a letter to the Prime Minister, the party warned that such subsidies could lead to market instability and dependency, especially once they are discontinued.

The Opposition suggested redirecting resources toward investments in ecotourism infrastructure and cultural preservation while reconsidering the SDF structure.

Finally, the Opposition addressed the last-minute withdrawal of the GST Amendment Bill in November 2024. In a letter to the Speaker of the National Assembly, the party criticized the government's lack of commitment to legislative processes and weak justification for the bill's withdrawal. It cautioned that such practices risk eroding public trust in Parliament and called for better assessment of bills before submission. [Kuensel]

Bhutan: National Education Policy 2024 sparks debate over political influence, need for reform

(lm) The endorsement of Bhutan's National Education Policy 2024, after years in draft form, has reignited concerns about the politicization of the education sector. While the policy aims to address gaps in the system, critics argue it remains vulnerable to political manipulation, undermining its potential effectiveness.

Educationists have emphasized the need for an Education Act to provide a robust legislative framework, noting that the policy's approval by the cabinet makes it susceptible to political agendas. An act, they argue, would ensure greater stability and accountability, as it requires a rigorous parliamentary process for amendments.

The Education Blueprint 2014–2024 had envisioned the creation of an Education Act and a National Teacher Council to standardize teacher registration, licensing, and professional conduct. However, these initiatives remain incomplete. Critics caution that the council's effectiveness could be compromised if it is tied to the policy or influenced by elected representatives.

During the first session of the fourth Parliament, discussions on the Education Bill were deferred due to disagreements among Members of Parliament (MPs). South Thimphu MP Tshewang Rinzin called for the bill, criticizing past governments for politicizing education without meaningful progress and underscoring the necessity of reforms.

Education Minister Yeezang De Thapa defended the National Education Policy 2024 as an interim measure, leaving open the possibility of an Education Act in the future. However, critics argue the policy lacks

enforceability and fails to protect the education sector from political interference.

Some educationists propose granting full autonomy to the education sector by abolishing the education ministry and creating an independent body separate from civil service control. They believe such a move would ensure sustainability, continuity of plans, and protection from political agendas. [Kuensel]

Bhutan: Fiscal incentives and corporate government streamlined

(lm) Bhutan has taken steps to streamline fiscal incentives and corporate governance, addressing challenges in both domains to bolster economic recovery, attract investment, and build a robust capital market. The initiatives aim to modernize the economic framework while fostering equity and sustainability.

The Fiscal Incentives Act, amended in 2021 to support businesses recovering from the Covid-19 pandemic, offers tax holidays, rebates, and exemptions. Newly established businesses pay only five percent Business Income Tax for the first five years, while rural enterprises enjoy full tax exemptions until 2026. However, a review by the Ministry of Industry, Commerce, and Employment highlights that businesses face challenges in utilizing these incentives due to regulatory complexities, policy contradictions, and inequitable distribution.

For instance, tourism-related businesses, such as travel agencies, face limitations like a single vehicle quota regardless of the number of tourists they serve. Critics argue that such fiscal incentives are illogical, discourage investment, and hinder growth. The review calls for simplified regulations, clearer guidance, and a transparent system to enable businesses, especially small and medium-sized enterprises, to access these benefits effectively. It also recommends regular evaluations, cost-benefit analyses, and fostering coordination among stakeholders to align incentives with national development goals.

In parallel, Bhutan's Corporate Regulatory Authority (CRA) has undertaken significant reforms to improve corporate governance and market integrity. The CRA revised four existing regulations and introduced five new ones, focusing on streamlining processes, boosting investor confidence, and providing alternative financing options.

One key reform is the amendment to the Regulations for Initial Public Offering (IPO) of Shares 2024, which reduces the operational record requirement from two years to one. This change enables companies with ongoing projects to access capital markets, provided they meet specific conditions such as land acquisition and partial project completion. Similarly, amendments to bond regulations now allow sovereign guarantees, supporting eco-friendly initiatives like green bonds for hydropower projects.

The CRA also revised its Regulations for Corporate Governance and Corporate Social Responsibility 2024, clarifying the roles of independent directors and promoting ethical practices. New regulations address company mergers, asset liquidation, share buybacks, and investor protection funds, ensuring fairness, transparency, and stakeholder trust. [Kuensel 1] [Kuensel 2]

Bhutan: Depletion of non-renewable resources raises sustainability concerns

(lm) Bhutan is facing a critical decline in its non-renewable resources, with coal and talc reserves fully exhausted and other key minerals showing troubling downward trends. Data from the Environmental Accounts Statistics 2024 reveals contrasting trajectories for minerals such as dolomite, limestone, gypsum, and iron ore over the past decade.

Coal, once an essential resource, was extracted at an average of 0.13 million metric tons (MT) annually from 2014 to 2023, peaking at 0.19 million MT in 2018 and 2019. By 2023, reserves were officially depleted due to over-extraction and increasing industrial demand, highlighting the urgent need for alternative energy solutions.

Talc reserves were exhausted in 2018, and annual extraction dropped to 0.0004 million MT in 2023, emphasizing the need for immediate interventions to replenish reserves.

Limestone and gypsum reserves are also steadily declining. Limestone extraction averaged 1.17 million MT annually, with closing stocks dropping to 149.95 million MT in 2023. Gypsum reserves, though more stable, showed gradual depletion, with an annual extraction average of 0.46 million MT and a closing stock of 128.24 million MT.

Dolomite reserves have remained stable, with an average annual extraction of 2.44 million MT and

closing stocks holding at 14,512.51 million MT by the end of 2023. Iron ore, the only accounted metal, maintained a consistent extraction rate of 0.03 million MT annually, with closing stocks at 2.41 million MT in 2023.

Sand, in high demand, experienced significant production fluctuations. Production peaked at 32.85 million cubic feet (Cft) in 2022 before dropping to 16.85 million Cft in 2023. The closing stock modestly recovered to 3.27 million Cft in 2023, up from 1.59 million Cft in 2018. [Kuensel]

Indian Navy commissions three vessels to strengthen maritime capabilities

(ad) India has bolstered its naval capabilities with the commissioning of three frontline vessels: the destroyer INS Surat, the frigate INS Nilgiri, and the submarine INS Vaghsheer. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, speaking at the event in Mumbai on January 15, described the simultaneous commissioning as a testament to India's growing maritime ambitions and its commitment to becoming a global leader in defense manufacturing and maritime security.

The vessels, built in India with high levels of indigenization, reflect New Delhi's focus on domestic defense production as part of its broader strategy to reduce reliance on foreign arms suppliers. In 2024, India spent a record USD 15 billion on domestic defense manufacturing, marking a 17 percent increase from the previous year. These efforts align with the country's goal of becoming a USD 5 trillion economy.

The commissioning of these vessels comes as India seeks to balance China's rapidly growing naval presence in the Asia-Pacific region. The Indian Navy has added 33 warships over the past decade and has ambitious plans to expand its fleet further, with 62 warships and a submarine currently under construction. This expansion aims to counter regional rival China, which has inducted 148 vessels – more than double the additions of New Delhi – over the same period. [Al Jazeera] [India TV] [The Hindu] [Times of India]

In related notable developments, India's Defense Minister Rajnath Singh recently echoed the prime minister's sentiments, linking maritime security directly to India's economic prosperity and emphasizing the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean, Gulf of Aden, and Red Sea. Singh highlighted the vital role of civilian workers, calling them "soldiers without uniforms," and

underscored the need for a collaborative national approach to security.

Singh reiterated India's vision of becoming a developed nation by 2047, emphasizing a 'Whole of the Government' and 'Whole of the People' approach to national security. He expressed confidence that such unified efforts could not only bolster India's strategic position in the region but also drive its economic and holistic development. [The Statesman]

India's Commerce Minister visits Brussels, Muscat for trade talks with EU and Oman

(lm/rsv) India's Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal is conducting high-level discussions in Brussels and Muscat to strengthen India's trade and investment ties with the European Union (EU) and Oman. These engagements are pivotal to advancing India's economic priorities amid global geopolitical shifts.

In Brussels, Goyal met with Maros Sefcovic, the European Union Commissioner for Trade and Economic Security, to review the progress of the India-EU Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and discuss the Trade and Technology Council (TTC). The FTA aims to eliminate trade barriers, open service and public procurement markets, and protect geographical indications, fostering mutual benefits. Goyal emphasized the importance of a fair, balanced, and equitable agreement, aligning with India's strategy to deepen trade relations with the EU, its second-largest trading partner.

With bilateral trade surpassing USD 180 billion in 2023–2024 and the EU contributing over USD 117 billion in Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), the partnership is a cornerstone of India's global trade ambitions. Goyal's visit also prepares for the upcoming EU-India summit and reinforces a strategic roadmap for 2025 focused on trade, technology, and economic cooperation.

In addition to the FTA discussions, Goyal is engaging with prominent figures, including WTO Director-General Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala and Belgian Foreign Minister Bernard Quintin, as well as Belgian industry leaders and the Indian diaspora. [Malaysia Sun]

In Muscat, Goyal will participate in the 11th session of the India-Oman Joint Commission Meeting from January 27, focusing on the proposed Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA). This agreement is expected to reduce tariffs on Indian

exports, which currently face duties of up to 100 percent in Oman, and boost trade in sectors such as petroleum products, urea, electronics, and machinery. [DD News] [The Hindu]

Bilateral trade between India and Oman reached USD 8.94 billion in 2023–2024. The CEPA will enable Oman to access India's vast market of 1.4 billion consumers while supporting India's push to expand its footprint in the Gulf. Oman, with a per capita income of USD 25,060 compared to India's USD 2,370, offers significant opportunities for high-value goods and services. [Business Standard]

Maldives: Ruling PNC admits to submitting fraudulent membership forms

(lm) The Maldives is currently witnessing an escalating political scandal centered on allegations of fraudulent membership practices by the ruling People's National Congress (PNC). This controversy, which involves the misuse of personal data, forged signatures, and unauthorized party registrations, has not only drawn widespread criticism from the main opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) but has also raised serious concerns about the integrity of the country's political and electoral systems.

Most recently, the PNC has admitted to submitting fraudulent membership forms during its post-election membership drives, including cases involving forged signatures and inaccurate data. The party cited its inability to verify all forms submitted by activists and supporters but pledged full cooperation with ongoing investigations by the Elections Commission (EC) and the police. The PNC also launched an internal inquiry and urged individuals wrongfully registered to contact the party directly. [the edition 1]

The PNC's membership drive, launched to establish itself as the Maldives' largest political party, reported significant growth, reaching nearly 29,000 members by August 2024 and surpassing 65,000 by October 2024, with a target of 75,000 by November. However, over the past six months, the EC has received 300 complaints of unauthorized party registrations, leading to growing public scrutiny of the party's practices.

The controversy intensified after Vaikaradhoo MP Hussain Ziyad of the MDP was unknowingly registered with the PNC due to a lapse in the Elections Commission's (EC) alert system. Ziyad's membership has since been restored to the MDP, with the EC

promising stricter procedures to prevent future occurrences. [the edition 2]

The controversy has drawn sharp criticism from the MDP, which accused Homeland Security and Technology Minister Ali Ihusan of facilitating unauthorized access to the Department of National Registration (DNR) database to inflate PNC membership. Allegations include the use of stolen personal data and forged signatures, with senior ministry officials reportedly signing as witnesses on fraudulent forms. Ihusan has denied the accusations, calling them baseless. Despite lacking the parliamentary majority to secure a no-confidence vote, the MDP has filed a motion for his removal and called for accountability for those involved. [the edition 3] [the edition 4] [the edition 5]

The MDP has also escalated the matter by submitting petitions to multiple agencies, including the Maldives Police Service, the Anti-Corruption Commission, and the Prosecutor General's Office. The party has demanded a thorough investigation into the fraudulent forms and announced free legal assistance for individuals wrongfully registered to political parties. It reported receiving over 3,000 complaints from affected individuals, citing cases of identity theft and forged signatures. [the edition 6] [the edition 7]

In response to the scandal, MP Meekail Naseem of the MDP has submitted a parliamentary motion seeking confirmation of action against those who signed as witnesses on fraudulent forms and urged measures to protect citizens' personal data. Meanwhile, former President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih criticized the EC for its shortcomings, questioning its competency and urging transparency and accountability to restore public trust. [the edition 8] [the edition 9] [the edition 10]

Amid these developments, political tensions escalated further as the MDP's head office in Malé was vandalized with black oil, following the party's public display of photographs of PNC members allegedly involved in submitting fraudulent forms. The incident, a recurring form of political aggression in the Maldives, is under investigation by the police. [the edition 11]

Maldives: Supreme Court concludes hearings on appeal in case involving ex-President Yameen

(lm) The Supreme Court of the Maldives has concluded hearings on an appeal to overturn the High Court's

decision to bar new evidence in the corruption and money laundering trial against former President Abdulla Yameen. This follows the second hearing in the case, submitted five months ago.

Yameen was initially convicted by the Criminal Court in December 2022, receiving an 11-year prison sentence for accepting USD 1 million in bribes and laundering money through the lease of Vaavu Atoll Aarah. However, the High Court annulled the conviction, citing errors in admitting new evidence during the trial, and ordered a retrial without the contested evidence. The same decision also quashed the conviction of former Felidhoo MP Yoosuf Naeem, implicated in the case.

The Prosecutor General's Office appealed the High Court ruling, arguing that excluding new evidence contradicts previous Supreme Court precedents and hampers justice. Prosecutors asserted that the new evidence, including documents and witness testimony, was critical to disproving false defense claims. They emphasized that the Criminal Procedure Code allows for evidence to be introduced at any trial stage in exceptional circumstances.

Yameen's legal team opposed the appeal, stating that admitting evidence at this stage undermines trial structure and causes unnecessary delays. His lawyers highlighted that the prosecution had sufficient opportunities to present evidence during the preliminary phase and accused the State of attempting to prolong legal proceedings.

The Supreme Court's decision will determine whether the retrial includes the contested evidence. Meanwhile, the Criminal Court has paused the Aarah case hearings, following a request from Yameen's legal team, pending the Supreme Court's ruling. [the edition 1] [the edition 2]

Maldives: Supreme Court sets trial date for former President Maumoon's case against MTCC

(lm) The Supreme Court of the Maldives has scheduled a trial for January 24 to hear the appeal filed by former President and Dhivehi Rayyithunge Party (DRP) founder Maumoon Abdul Qayyoom. The case challenges the Maldives Transport and Contracting Company's (MTCC) attempt to hold him personally liable for MVR 1.1 million (USD 71,500) in debts incurred by the now-dissolved DRP.

Qayyoom, who served as third president of the Maldives from 1978 to 2008, served as the president and founder of the DRP from its inception in 2005 until 2011, when internal disputes led to his departure. The DRP was officially dissolved in 2018 after the Election Commission determined it no longer met the minimum requirement of 3,000 members, as mandated by the Political Parties Act.

MTCC initially sought repayment from Maumoon, alleging his liability as DRP's president at the time. The Civil Court ruled in his favor, stating that liability could not be transferred to Maumoon since he had not consented to the debt. This decision was later appealed by MTCC to the High Court, which allowed the case to proceed. Maumoon's legal team then took the matter to the Supreme Court, arguing procedural and legal grounds against the claim.

Maumoon has denied responsibility, asserting that the debt originated before the Political Parties Act was enacted and that he was not DRP's top leader when the obligation was incurred. Election Commission records corroborate his position. He further argued that MTCC failed to address the debt during the dissolution process of DRP, which was dissolved due to insufficient membership.

The Supreme Court panel presiding over the case includes Judges Dr. Azmiralda Zahir, Ayesha Shujune Mohamed, and Dr. Mohamed Ibrahim. The trial will determine whether the liability can legally be assigned to Maumoon. [the edition]

This case follows Maumoon's controversial arrest during the 2018 political crisis, where he was accused of conspiring to overthrow the government. He was sentenced to 19 months in prison for obstructing justice after refusing to cooperate with authorities. Due to health concerns, Maumoon was placed under house arrest in September 2018 and later released on bail. All charges against him were ultimately dropped in October 2018.

Maldives: Prosecutor General cancels immunity agreements in corruption case involving former vice-president

(raa) The Prosecutor General's Office (PGO) of the Maldives has revoked immunity agreements granted to key figures implicated in the (MMPRC) corruption case, which involves former Vice President Ahmed Adheeb, former MMPRC Managing Director Abdulla Ziyath, and other key figures. The PG's decision to revoke these

immunity deals has led to the resumption of investigations and the possibility of prosecution for those involved in the embezzlement of MMPRC funds during former President Abdulla Yameen's administration.

The case centers on the misappropriation of MMPRC funds, which were largely deposited into the accounts of SOF, a company linked to several of the accused. Despite evidence supporting 150 charges that could have resulted in an 800-year sentence for Adheeb, he was given a 20-year sentence under a plea deal. He was also fined MVR 2 million (approximately USD 130,000). However, during President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih's tenure, Adheeb's sentence was commuted to just four years, which led to early release and sparked criticism for undermining justice in one of the country's largest corruption scandals. [the edition 1]

President Muizzu expressed his support for this decision, emphasizing the importance of holding all individuals accountable for corruption in order to eradicate it from the system. He pointed out that legal action must be consistently pursued against all those involved in such offenses. [the edition 2]

Maldives: Supreme Court emphasizes consistency in reasons for withholding information in RTI cases

(lm) The Maldives' Supreme Court has ruled that state entities must consistently state reasons for refusing Right to Information (RTI) requests and cannot introduce new justifications at different stages of the appeal process. The decision came in a case involving the Housing Ministry, which was ordered to disclose information regarding a construction project after initially withholding it.

The Supreme Court also addressed procedural distinctions between appeals and complaints under the RTI Act. It clarified that when information is not disclosed within the mandated timeframe, the appropriate recourse is to file a complaint, not an appeal, with the Information Commissioner's Office (iCOM). [the edition 1]

Notably, Justice Mahaaz argued that as per Article 64 of the RTI Act, the High Court is the final stage for hearing appeals concerning iCOM rulings, and cases should not proceed to the Supreme Court. He interpreted Article 64(b) as explicitly limiting appeals to the High Court, emphasizing that the streamlined appeal process

under the RTI Act reflects the urgency and importance of the right to information.

However, Justices Shujune and Dr. Azmiralda maintained that determining the Supreme Court's jurisdiction was unnecessary in this instance. The Attorney General's Office and iCOM also argued that the Supreme Court has jurisdiction to hear the case. [the edition 2]

Maldives: Parliament grants approval to ministers following mandate changes

(lm) The Maldives Parliament has approved four cabinet ministers whose mandates were altered following a cabinet reshuffle in December 2024, implemented by President Dr. Mohamed Muizzu. The approved ministers are Moosa Zameer as the Minister of Finance and Planning, Dr. Abdulla Muththalib as the Minister of Construction, Housing, and Infrastructure, Dr. Ali Haidar as the Minister of Higher Education, Labor, and Skills Development, and Dr. Maryam Mariya as the Minister of Agriculture and Animal Welfare.

All ministers, except for Dr. Haidar, received unanimous approval from attending MPs. Dr. Haidar's appointment faced opposition from six MPs of the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), although he still secured the required majority.

This is the second cabinet reshuffle undertaken by President Muizzu since taking office. [the edition]

Maldives: The Democrats elect interim president; party founder Nasheed steps back from party politics

(lm) Hussain Firushan, former MP for Madaveli constituency, has been elected as the interim president of The Democrats following the resignation of Hassan Latheef, one of the party's founders who announced his returned to the main opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) earlier this month. Firushan will serve as interim leader until a permanent president is elected within 50 days, as mandated by the party's regulations. [the edition 1]

Meanwhile, former President Mohamed Nasheed announced he would not actively engage in either of the political parties he founded—the MDP and The Democrats. Nasheed emphasized his commitment to

Maldivian politics but clarified his intention to avoid partisan involvement.

Following a split with President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih, Nasheed formed The Democrats in 2023, though the party has struggled electorally. Currently serving as Secretary-General of the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF), Nasheed is based in Ghana, focusing on global climate initiatives. [the edition 2]

Maldives: Parliament approves new Vice President of Human Rights Commission

(lm) The Maldives Parliament has unanimously approved the appointment of Moomina Waheed as Vice President of the Human Rights Commission of Maldives (HRCM). The position became vacant following the resignation of Dr. Ahmed Adhuham, the former Vice President.

Moomina, who has served as an HRCM member since 2020, was previously the commission's Acting Secretary. The HRCM, chaired by President Mariyam Muna, currently comprises members Aminath Shifa-ath Abdul Razzaq, Samau Ahmed Najeeb, and Ismail Habeeb. [the edition]

Maldives: Parliament approves Zahid and Solah as new Elections Commission members

(lm) The Maldives' Parliament has unanimously approved Mohamed Zahid, a former vice president of the Human Rights Commission, and Abdul Rahman Solah, a former secretary general of the Elections Commission (EC), as members of the EC.

The appointments come after the removal of EC Vice President Ali Nashath and member Mohamed Asif due to complaints reviewed by the Parliament's Committee on Independent Institutions. With three vacancies still unfilled, the EC remains non-operational as it currently lacks the quorum required for meetings. [the edition]

Maldives: Parliament approves two nominees for Anti-Corruption Commission

(lm) The Maldives Parliament has approved the appointments of Ahmed Nashid and Abdulla Nashid as

members of the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC). The decision was made during a parliamentary session held on January 20, following a review by the Parliament's Independent Institutions Committee.

The nominations were initially sent by the President with a priority list that included Ahmed Nashid and Asiya Azeema. However, Asiya's name was later replaced with Abdulla Nashid in a revised nomination letter submitted before the session. Both nominees received unanimous approval from all 67 members present during the voting session.

The appointments follow the resignations of the ACC's Vice President Abdul Salaam and member Thoha Mohamed, who stepped down amid ongoing parliamentary investigations into allegations against them. These resignations necessitated the nomination and approval of new members to fill the vacant positions. [the edition 1] [the edition 2]

Maldives: Audit report highlights inefficiencies and dissatisfaction in Transport Ministry's services

(lm) The Maldives' Auditor General's Office has released its 2021-2022 audit report, criticizing the Ministry of Transport and Civil Aviation for slow and inefficient public services, contributing to widespread dissatisfaction. The audit covers services provided between September 2021 and August 2022.

Key concerns include control issues and misuse in the sea vessel registration system, leading to regulatory risks. The report highlights persistent issues in integrating systems, with the unused 'TAVIS' and ineffective 'SIMS' systems failing to streamline operations. Moreover, the ministry lacks solid oversight and a long-term plan to enhance its IT infrastructure.

Statistics from the report reveal significant delays: 49 percent of 25,347 land vehicle registration applications and 43 percent of 6,587 sea vessel registration requests exceeded the published service timeframes in 2022. Public complaints have been further compounded by the absence of a functional procedure for the ministry's call center and unclear follow-up processes for emailed grievances.

Employee management also faced scrutiny, with abrupt changes to staff responsibilities and inadequate training programs to build capacity. [the edition]

Maldives: Former STELCO managing director's passport seized amid corruption investigation

(lm) The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) has seized the passport of Ahmed Shareef, former Managing Director of the State Electric Company Limited (STELCO), which is responsible for providing electricity services across the Maldives. The passport seizure, implemented under a court order, is linked to allegations that Shareef signed a settlement agreement resulting in a loss of USD 7 million to STELCO.

The agreement, signed with China's Dongfang Electric International Corporation (DEIC) in September 2023, was highlighted in parliament as violating instructions from the Privatization and Corporatization Board. It is alleged that Shareef misled STELCO's Board of Directors and justified the payment as compensation for losses incurred during the COVID-19 pandemic.

STELCO raised the matter with the ACC in July 2023, asserting that the settlement agreement leaves no alternative but to fulfill the payment. [the edition]

Maldives: Former football association president faces embezzlement, money laundering charges

(lm) The second legal counsel for Bassam Adeel Jaleel, the former president of the Football Association of Maldives (FAM), has withdrawn from his case involving embezzlement and money laundering charges related to misappropriated FIFA funds. The Criminal Court, which is handling the case, granted Bassam 10 days to appoint a new lawyer after the withdrawal was announced during a January 16 hearing. If Bassam cannot secure legal representation, he will be required to respond to the charges himself.

The charges stem from multiple allegations of financial misconduct during Bassam's tenure as FAM president. The court has combined all four charges into a single trial. The next hearing is scheduled for January 30. In total, the state is seeking to recover USD 1.21 million and seize Bassam's assets, including the penthouse apartment, as compensation for damages to FAM. [the edition]

Maldives: Supreme Court overturns High Court's decision on appeal in 2021 murder case

(lm) The Maldives' Supreme Court has ruled that the High Court erred in its decision not to hear the appeal against the Criminal Court's order releasing Haleemath Lamha, who is accused of involvement in the October 2021 murder of a Filipino nurse. Lamha faces charges of aiding in the crime and possessing unauthorized injections.

The Criminal Court had released Lamha on conditions in November 2023, a decision upheld by the High Court registrar. The Prosecutor General's Office later escalated the matter to the Supreme Court, which directed the High Court to accept the appeal if filed within 10 days.

While the Prosecutor General's Office confirmed plans to resubmit the case within the specified timeframe, Lamha remains released. The victim's husband accused of her murder, is still in custody. Lamha was previously released by the Criminal Court in 2023, but the High Court had initially ordered her return to custody. [the edition]

Maldives: MP urges establishment of local autopsy services amid rising unexplained deaths

(lm) Opposition MP Mohamed Ibrahim has called for the establishment of post-mortem facilities in the Maldives to address the rising number of unexplained deaths. In a letter to Health Minister Abdullah Nazim Ibrahim, Kudu cited seven suspicious deaths in the past two months and highlighted the high costs of sending bodies abroad for forensic examinations.

Referencing the Criminal Procedure Code and the Health Services Act, Kudu noted that police are empowered to conduct post-mortems in criminal cases, and legal frameworks, such as the National Standard for Forensic Medical Services, are already in place. He emphasized that there are no legal barriers to implementing domestic autopsy services and urged the Health Ministry to act promptly to ensure transparency and reduce costs. [the edition]

Maldives: President asked to intervene in delayed completion of Jaah Housing flats

(lm) A letter has been sent to President Dr. Mohamed Muizzu urging action to address the prolonged delays in completing Jaah Investment's "The Garden" housing project, initially scheduled for completion in 2019. Despite a seven-year timeline, the flats remain unfinished, causing financial and personal hardships for buyers.

The letter, authored by a law firm representing affected buyers, criticized the Housing Development Corporation (HDC) for its inaction and repeated deadline extensions without holding Jaah Investment accountable. It argued that HDC, as the project manager, has a responsibility to protect the public from losses and ensure compliance with contractual obligations.

Under the project agreement, failure to meet deadlines allowed for contract termination and reassignment to another developer, with Jaah Investment liable for resulting losses. Despite these provisions, HDC has not enforced them. Buyers also alleged that HDC failed to verify Jaah Investment's financial capability after the initial delay and ignored early signs of mismanagement.

The letter noted that Jaah Investment cited the COVID-19 pandemic as a reason for delays, but it emphasized that issues began long before the pandemic. Buyers, many burdened with loans, have faced severe financial strain. Additionally, complaints were raised about unpaid workers, some of whom stopped work and protested. [the edition]

Maldives: Government to repossess unlawfully acquired flats and land, warns against housing scams

(lm) Housing Minister Dr. Abdulla Muthhalib has announced that the government will confiscate flats and land obtained illegally and will not assume responsibility for losses tied to housing scams. Addressing issues related to the Binveriyaa and Gedhoruveriyaa housing schemes introduced by former President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih's administration, the minister emphasized ongoing investigations into fraudulent allocations.

The investigations will begin with properties issued from Hulhumalé Phase 2, where some plots and flats were distributed against regulations. The minister warned that even registered and fenced properties would be repossessed if found to have been acquired

unlawfully, including those issued through corrupt practices or scams.

He highlighted the resignation of former Housing Development Corporation (HDC) Managing Director Fazul Rasheed following revelations that a plot was allocated to his ineligible brother, Fazeel Rasheed. The case is under investigation by the police and the Anti-Corruption Commission.

To address these issues, the government plans to verify the previously announced list of 4,000 flat recipients instead of reviewing applications from over 20,000 awaiting allocations. The verified list will identify eligible recipients, with illegal agreements made by the prior administration being voided. Minister Muthhalib urged the public not to engage in scams involving inflated payments for land registrations, stressing that such actions would lead to repossession without compensation.

The government has yet to decide on the fate of any flats left unallocated after the verification process. [the edition]

Maldives: Ministry warns non-compliant Umrah companies to pay fines or face public disclosure

(lm) The Ministry of Islamic Affairs has announced it will reveal the names of 19 companies fined MVR 5,000 (USD 325) each for breaching Umrah regulations if they fail to settle the fines on time. Umrah regulations in the Maldives govern the standards and procedures for companies facilitating pilgrimages to Mecca, ensuring the safety, comfort, and proper arrangements for pilgrims.

The ministry is also investigating a company accused of fraudulently obtaining USD from the Maldives Monetary Authority (MMA) under the pretense of arranging Umrah pilgrimages but failing to send pilgrims.

The violations have caused significant difficulties for pilgrims. Al-Hijra Travels and Tours, which left 23 Maldivians stranded in Mecca with one-way tickets last December, was fined MVR 100,000 (USD 6,500), had its permit revoked, and is barred from future permits. The government covered the cost of returning the stranded pilgrims.

Another company, Al-Mashar Tours, faced similar allegations during Ramadan last year. Following an

investigation, the case has been forwarded for prosecution. The ministry has warned that companies found guilty of fraudulent activities could face fines up to MVR 30,000 (USD 1,950), license suspensions, and possible criminal charges. [the edition]

Maldives: Government denies rumors of social media ban

(lm) The Maldivian government has dismissed rumors about a potential ban on social media platforms, including TikTok and X. The government reaffirmed its commitment to upholding fundamental rights and freedoms, emphasizing that President Dr. Mohamed Muizzu's vision aligns with maintaining constitutional liberties. [the edition]

Maldives: Public Interest Law Center to challenge policy halting maternity leave

(raa) The Public Interest Law Center (PILC) plans to challenge a controversial government policy requiring bereaved mothers to return to work shortly after the death of an infant during their maternity leave. The case will be filed with the Employment Tribunal to seek legal redress for affected mothers.

The existing policy on maternity leave, amended on March 7, 2019, extended paid leave after childbirth to six months. However, PILC argues that the interpretation of the regulation in cases of infant loss undermines its intent and denies mothers their rightful time for recovery and mourning.

PILC Vice President Abdulla Nahid highlighted instances where grieving mothers were compelled to resume work as early as one day after their child's death. Nahid described the policy as inhumane, emphasizing the emotional and physical toll on mothers in such circumstances.

The first reported case involved a mother who, 1.5 years ago, was notified to return to work immediately following the death of her four-month-old child during her maternity leave. The Civil Service Commission reportedly justified the decision based on a letter from the President's Office. The matter was subsequently referred to the Employment Tribunal upon advice from the President's Office.

A second case involved a government ministry staff member whose newborn passed away two months

after birth. She was similarly instructed to return to work the following day. PILC criticized the policy as unacceptable, underscoring that maternity leave should encompass care for the mother, not just the child. [the edition]

Maldives: Development Bank rollout to proceed in three phases

(raa) The rollout of the Development Bank of Maldives (DBM) will be implemented in three phases, beginning with the institutional setup. Minister of Economic Development and Trade Mohamed Saeed stated that the first phase is progressing as scheduled, with the bank's office operational since November 2024.

The first phase includes drafting the DBM's business model, policies, and funding strategies, which are expected to be completed by the second quarter of 2025. Additionally, administrative tasks such as forming project pipelines and sharing information with foreign institutions are underway.

The Development Bank is designed to address funding challenges for Public Sector Investment Program (PSIP) projects through syndicated financing. It also aims to increase the retention of foreign currency within the Maldivian banking system and provide financing for both government and private sector projects. [the edition]

Maldives: Presidential approval now mandatory for financial relief in government transactions

(lm) New regulations issued by the Maldives' Finance Ministry mandate that financial relief in transactions involving government offices requires presidential approval.

Government agencies, excluding local councils, must secure the president's approval, based on the finance minister's recommendation, to provide such relief. Applications must include detailed transaction information and justifications. Local councils may grant relief only after assessing financial implications and must report their decisions to the Ministry of Local Government within seven days. [the edition]

Maldives: MMA reprints MVR 100 notes due to stock limitations

(lm) The Maldives Monetary Authority (MMA), the nation's central bank, has reprinted the MVR 100 (USD 6.50) note to address stock shortages. The newly printed notes will be released into circulation on January 19.

This reprint is part of MMA's routine process to manage currency availability, with the last reprint of MVR 100 notes occurring in September 2018. [the edition]

Maldives: Authorities expand biometric data collection, target illegal immigration

(lm) The Maldives' government has intensified efforts under Operation Kurangi, launched in May 2024, to address illegal immigration and regulate expatriates. The initiative, led by the Ministry of Homeland Security and Technology, aims to collect biometric data from all expatriates in the country and regularize their status. This operation, set to conclude in April 2027, has so far recorded biometric data from 25,483 expatriates across 55 islands.

A major data collection event in the Male' region recently documented biometric information from 1,455 expatriates in a single day. This effort targeted foreign workers in the education sector and employees at large companies. Data collection includes fingerprints and facial recognition, with plans to extend the initiative to 185 islands nationwide. The operation has already led to the deportation of over 5,000 illegal expatriates. [the edition 1] [the edition 2

Simultaneously, the government is dealing with challenges in curbing illegal immigration. During a recent operation at Emerald Maldives Resort & Spa in R. Atoll, 60 illegal foreign workers fled to nearby islands. Local authorities managed to locate 19 individuals, who were later returned to the resort due to delays in receiving clear instructions. The remaining individuals are reportedly hiding with the help of other expatriates. [the edition 3]

Maldives: Police commence basic training for over 200 recruits

(lm) The Maldives Police Service (MPS) has launched basic training for 210 new recruits at the Addu Academy. The batch includes 162 male and 48 female recruits, marking a significant step in expanding the nation's policing capacity. [the edition]

As of January 2023, the MPS employs over 10,000 personnel, serving a population of approximately 517,887. This equates to roughly 1,930 police officers per 100,000 inhabitants, significantly higher than the 2006 global median of 300 officers per 100,000 inhabitants reported by the United Nations.

Nepal: Government-opposition tensions intensify ahead of Parliament's winter session

(lm) The government of Nepal has announced that the winter session of Parliament will convene on January 31. This decision was made during a cabinet meeting on January 20, with a formal request to President Ramchandra Paudel to summon the session. The announcement comes over four months after the conclusion of the monsoon session on September 16, 2024. [The Kathmandu Post 1]

Crucially, the government's announcement comes against the backdrop of heightened political tensions between the ruling Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist) (CPN-UML) and opposition forces over the approval of five ordinances ahead of the parliamentary session. These ordinances amend critical laws on governance, foreign investment, public service delivery, and land use, with provisions to raise the retirement age for civil servants from 58 to 60, promote Nepali IT investments abroad, streamline social security schemes through national IDs, and expedite arbitration for contractors.

Notably, President Paudel initially withheld one ordinance concerning amendments to the Land Act, Forest Act, and National Park Act, citing its sensitive nature. However, following assurances from Prime Minister and CPN-UML leader KP Sharma Oli to address the President's concerns through a replacement bill, the ordinance was later approved. [The Kathmandu Post 2] [The Kathmandu Post 3]

Opposition leaders, including those from the main opposition Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre), Rastriya Swatantra Party, and Unified Socialist, have criticized the ordinances as arbitrary and regressive. They argue that bypassing Parliament disrespects its role and accuse the government of attempting to rule

through ordinances, warning of calling a special session if the government failed to act promptly. [The Kathmandu Post 4] [The Kathmandu Post 5]

By contrast, Oli argued that the delay in convening the winter session of Parliament was due to bills stuck in parliamentary committees and assured that the ordinances would be presented as replacement bills within 60 days of the House sitting. [The Kathmandu Post 2] [The Kathmandu Post 3]

Amid the controversy, opposition parties led by Pushpa Kamal Dahal of the Maoist Centre have escalated demands for Prime Minister Oli's resignation. They accuse the government of moral and administrative failures, including delays in parliamentary sessions, issuing ordinances allegedly benefiting corrupt individuals, and fostering public discontent. Dahal, a former prime minister, criticized the Nepali Congress-CPN-UML coalition as "unnatural" and accused it of lacking legitimacy due to non-transparent formation processes.

The opposition has also condemned the government for neglecting corruption investigations, such as the fake Bhutanese refugee scam, which came to light in 2023 and involved senior political and bureaucratic figures accused of taking bribes to illegally register non-refugees as Bhutanese refugees, enabling them to resettle in Western countries. [The Kathmandu Post 6]

In response, Prime Minister Oli defended his administration, emphasizing that the CPN-UML prioritizes national interests and remains committed to non-alignment and balanced diplomacy with neighbors India and China. He accused past governments of complicating foreign relations through unclear policies and power struggles and dismissed allegations of governance failures, reiterating his government’s focus on economic diplomacy and protecting national interests.

CPN-UML General Secretary Shankar Pokharel echoed Oli’s sentiments, accusing geopolitical and domestic forces of targeting the party to undermine its prospects in the 2027 elections. He alleged that smaller political parties were spreading misinformation to weaken the party’s leadership. [The Kathmandu Post 7]

Nepal: Tension between two key parties in ruling coalition emerge

(lm/rs) Tensions within the ruling coalition of the Nepali Congress and Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist) (CPN-UML) have surfaced as Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli's recent unilateral decisions and statements spark dissatisfaction among Nepali Congress leaders.

The coalition, established under a seven-point agreement in July 2024, with the Nepali Congress as the largest party in Parliament's lower house, is beginning to show strain due to disagreements over governance, constitutional amendments, and decision-making processes.

A major source of contention is Oli's recent statement that constitutional amendments would not be possible before 2030, citing a lack of the necessary two-thirds majority in Parliament. This remark contradicts the coalition's earlier agreement to prioritize constitutional amendments for electoral reform and other changes. Nepali Congress leaders, including General Secretary Gagan Thapa, have voiced concerns over Oli's unilateral announcement, arguing that such decisions should involve consultation with coalition partners. [The Kathmandu Post 1]

Against this backdrop, Nepali Congress President Sher Bahadur Deuba recently convened a meeting with party ministers to assess the government's performance, amid growing internal criticism of Oli's leadership. While Deuba emphasized maintaining the coalition's unity, some ministers expressed frustration over Oli's interventions in their ministries. Deuba instructed his ministers to focus on delivery, listen to public grievances, and work closely with CPN-UML counterparts. Despite these efforts, dissatisfaction persists within the Nepali Congress, particularly among the faction led by Shekhar Koirala, a senior Nepali Congress leader and nephew of Nepal's first elected Prime Minister, Bishweshwar Prasad Koirala, who has been vocal about the coalition's shortcomings. [The Kathmandu Post 2] [The Kathmandu Post 3] [The Kathmandu Post 4]

Adding to the friction, opposition parties led by the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre) are predicting the coalition's collapse and urging the Nepali Congress to form a new alliance without the CPN-UML. However, Deuba appears reluctant to abandon the coalition, as he remains committed to the power-sharing agreement that guarantees him the prime ministership in the latter half of the government's term.

Nepal: Concerns rise over delays in constitutional appointments petition

(lm) Nepali lawmakers across the political spectrum have expressed concern over repeated deferrals in the Supreme Court's hearing of petitions challenging appointments to constitutional bodies made in December 2020 and Mai 2021 during the second tenure of incumbent Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli.

These appointments, conducted without parliamentary hearings, were based on an amendment to the Act governing the Constitutional Council – a high-level body responsible for recommending appointments to key constitutional positions – through an ordinance in December 2020. As a result, a total of 52 appointments, including the chair and four commissioners of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), were made by a reduced Council quorum of three members out of six. Fifteen writ petitions against this process remain unresolved after four years, despite appearing on the cause list 32 times.

In related updates, at a parliamentary committee meeting, National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) officials called for action on a draft bill to amend the NHRC Act, submitted to the Prime Minister's Office five months ago. The amendment aims to align the NHRC's autonomy and federal structure with the Paris Principles, which outline criteria for national human rights institutions. However, the government has yet to table the bill in Parliament.

The NHRC faces operational challenges under existing legislation, which places its budgetary powers under government control, requiring finance ministry approval. These constraints have drawn criticism from the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI), which emphasizes the importance of autonomy in investigations and financial management. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Ex-Prime Minister Dahal retains control over main opposition Maoist Centre

(lm) Pushpa Kamal Dahal, Chair of the main opposition Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre), has retained his grip on the party despite months of internal dissent led by Deputy General Secretary Janardan Sharma. The discord peaked in August 2024 when Sharma presented a 14-page document at a

Standing Committee meeting, challenging Dahal's decades-long leadership and proposing a ceremonial role for him. The rift deepened with accusations from both sides, including claims that Sharma intended to split the party.

The conflict appeared resolved after the party's central committee meeting on January 7, where Dahal incorporated some of Sharma's demands into his political document and promised to address others during the next general convention. Sharma softened his stance following the party's improved performance in local by-elections and Dahal's inclusion of former Vice President Nanda Bahadur Pun in active politics, a move seen as a strategy to counterbalance dissenting leaders.

This is not the first instance of internal challenges within the Maoist Centre. Since joining mainstream politics in 2006 after a decade-long insurgency, Dahal has consistently maintained his dominance by playing rival leaders against each other. Previous dissidents like Baburam Bhattarai and Mohan Baidya left the party due to ideological differences, while current conflicts are often attributed to personal ambitions rather than fundamental disagreements.

Sharma's opposition is partly linked to his unsuccessful bid for the general secretary position during the eighth general convention in December 2021. Despite challenges from Sharma, Barshaman Pun, and Haribol Gajurel, no leader within the current Maoist Centre commands the stature to pose a significant threat to Dahal's leadership. For now, the party remains united under Dahal's leadership, with further discussions deferred to the next general convention. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Madhesh-based parties mull alliance as possible electoral reforms threatens political survival

(lm) Madhesh-centric political parties in Nepal are exploring the formation of a "loose alliance" to counter proposed electoral law amendments that could threaten their political survival.

The government plans to raise the proportional representation (PR) threshold from the current 3 percent to 5 percent in the House of Representatives and from 1.5 percent to 3 percent in provincial assemblies. The proposed changes, supported by the ruling Nepali Congress and Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist) (CPN-UML), aim to reduce

the number of smaller parties in the legislature, which they claim contribute to political instability.

The alliance-building effort comes as Madhesh-based parties face diminishing electoral influence compared to their strong performance following the 2008 Madhesh movement, which sought to address grievances of the Madheshi people, who share cultural, linguistic, and historical ties with neighboring Indian states. Leaders of parties like the Janata Samajbadi Party-Nepal (JSP-Nepal), Janamat Party, Loktantrik Samajbadi Party (LSP), and Nagarik Unmukti Party believe that collaboration is essential to protect the rights of Madheshi people and marginalized communities.

However, internal discord, past failed alliances, and mistrust between leaders have cast doubt on the viability of such a coalition. In fact, the first meeting to discuss the alliance revealed divisions, with some parties absent or hesitant to commit. JSP-Nepal leaders missed the meeting, citing other engagements, while the Nagarik Unmukti Party claimed they were not informed.

Despite this, attendees expressed optimism about future participation and agreed to revisit the idea in subsequent meetings. Key leaders, including Hridayesh Tripathi of the Janata Pragatisheel Party and Abdul Khan of the Janamat Party, emphasized the need for unity to resist the "unilateral actions" of the major parties. [The Kathmandu Post 1] [The Kathmandu Post 2] [The Kathmandu Post 3]

Nepal: RSP chair Rabi Lamichhane faces multiple cooperative fraud allegations across districts

(lm) Rabi Lamichhane, chair of the opposition Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) and a former home minister, continues facing significant legal challenges as multiple courts address his alleged involvement in large-scale cooperative fraud cases. Lamichhane has been accused of embezzling funds from cooperatives through Gorkha Media Network, where he previously served as managing director.

In the Swarnalakshmi Cooperative case, the Kathmandu District Court released Lamichhane on bail despite evidence suggesting his role in the misappropriation of NPR 1.199 billion (USD 8.8 million). Along with 38 alleged accomplices, including former Gorkha Media officials, Lamichhane is accused of illegally diverting funds for personal use, including

vehicle loans and other payments. Lamichhane denies the charges, claiming ignorance of the transactions and pledging full cooperation with investigations. The court proceedings were marred by clashes between RSP supporters and legal representatives of cooperative victims, requiring police intervention. [The Kathmandu Post 1]

In Rupandehi, supplementary charges were filed against Lamichhane and 41 others in connection with the Supreme Savings and Credit Cooperative fraud case. Allegations include the misappropriation of NPR 1.31 billion (USD 9.6 million), with specific claims of NPR 510.1 million (USD 3.74 million) against Supreme's former chair and NPR 140 million (USD 1.03 million) transferred to Gorkha Media Network. Of the 42 accused, 14 are newly implicated, while 17 from the original case face additional charges. [The Kathmandu Post 2]

Similarly, in Chitwan, police concluded a year-long investigation into Sahara Chitwan Multipurpose Cooperative, recommending charges against Lamichhane, former Nepal Police DIG Chhabilal Joshi, and others. The case alleges NPR 108 million (USD 792,000) in cooperative funds was funneled to Gorkha Media Network. [The Kathmandu Post 3]

Nepal: Foreign Minister Deuba urges diplomatic missions to prioritize economic diplomacy

(lm) Foreign Minister Arzu Rana Deuba has instructed Nepal's diplomatic mission chiefs to prioritize economic diplomacy and national interests, emphasizing foreign investment promotion and efficient service delivery.

In a virtual address, she urged missions to explore investment opportunities, promote Nepali products and tourism, and advocate for climate justice, especially in preparation for the Sagarmatha Dialogue —an international forum hosted by Nepal that addresses global challenges like climate change and sustainable development.

Foreign Secretary Amrit Bahadur Rai reinforced the importance of safeguarding the rights of Nepali migrant workers and leveraging the diaspora for national development. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Donor support sought to fund USD 292 million transitional justice process

(lm) Nepal's government has estimated that concluding the long-delayed transitional justice process will cost approximately NPR 40 billion (USD 292 million) over four years. This estimate, calculated by the Ministry of Law, Justice, and Parliamentary Affairs, includes reparations and operational expenses for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Commission of Investigation on Enforced Disappeared Persons, both established under the 2006 Comprehensive Peace Accord.

The government has requested financial assistance from bilateral and multilateral partners, including the United Nations, citing insufficient domestic resources. While most agencies, except the Swiss Embassy, have declined monetary commitments, they have offered technical support, such as expertise in human resources and forensic investigations. A peace fund, envisioned in the transitional justice law, has been allocated NPR 1 billion (USD 7.3 million), but its implementation is delayed due to the absence of office bearers in the commissions.

The commissions face significant challenges, including handling over 63,700 registered cases and identifying victims for reparation. Compensation for families of enforced disappearances and victims of sexual violence has been uneven, with many neglected due to social stigma or administrative hurdles. The lack of resources, including experts for exhuming bodies from the Maoist insurgency (1996–2006), further complicates the process. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Lawyers protest assault on senior advocate

(lm) Lawyers in Nepal staged a protest at the Nepal Bar Association in Kathmandu, wearing black armbands to condemn the physical assault on senior advocate Dinesh Tripathi. The incident occurred on January 16, allegedly perpetrated by supporters of the Rastriya Swatantra Party as Tripathi exited the Kathmandu District Court after presenting arguments in a cooperative fraud case involving GB Rai, Rabi Lamichhane, and Chhabilal Joshi.

The protest, organized by the Supreme Court Bar Association, called for justice and heightened security for legal professionals. Nepal Bar Association President Gopal Krishna Ghimire highlighted the vulnerability of

legal practitioners and stressed the need for broader legal protections. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Child marriage and teenage pregnancy persist in midwestern Dang district

(lm) Despite being outlawed in 1963, child marriage remains widespread in Dang district, Lumbini Province, where cultural norms, gender discrimination, and a lack of education perpetuate the practice. According to the 2021 national census, 33.7 percent of girls aged 15-17 in Dang are married, while 36.9 percent marry between 18-20 years. Many of these young brides, unaware of the legal provisions under the Civil Code 2017, believe early marriage is customary and necessary for economic and social reasons.

The Criminal Code 2017 prescribes penalties of up to three years in prison and fines of NPR 30,000 (around USD 219) for arranging or committing child marriages. However, enforcement is weak, and some legal actions inadvertently penalize the victims instead of the perpetrators.

Teenage pregnancy remains a significant concern, with 14 percent of women aged 15-19 nationwide having experienced pregnancy, including 10 percent with live births. In Lumbini Province, the figure is 10 percent. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Border disputes stall revenue generation in three municipalities in Madesh Province

(lm) A prolonged boundary dispute between Chandrapur, Bagmati, and Brindaban municipalities in Rautahat district, part of Nepal's southern Madhesh Province, has halted sand, gravel, and stone extraction from the Bagmati River for three years, leading to significant revenue losses. The conflict, rooted in overlapping claims on the riverbank, has impeded Chandrapur Municipality's ability to renew extraction contracts.

Efforts to mediate, including interventions by the District Administration Office, have been unsuccessful, with all three municipalities asserting jurisdiction over the area. Former Bagmati Mayor Bharat Thapa provided GPS data supporting Bagmati's claims, even

redirecting the river flow, sparking protests from Chandrapur and Brindaban.

In Chandrapur, a special task force led by Mayor Sanjay Kafle is working to negotiate a resolution. Kafle emphasized the importance of a non-political, collaborative approach, potentially using advanced GPS mapping to clarify boundaries.

Further complicating matters, Chandrapur faces disputes with Gujara Municipality over areas like Bholantar and Ipilighari, where both municipalities claim jurisdiction based on federal maps and historical authority. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Kaligandaki Corridor Road enhances connectivity in border areas

(lm) The Kaligandaki Corridor Road, spanning 435 kilometers from Sunauli in India to the Korala border in China, has significantly reduced travel time and costs for residents in Nepal's Baglung, Parbat, and Gulmi districts. Cutting the distance from Baglung to Butwal by 100 kilometers, the road has improved access to healthcare, education, and goods, benefiting an estimated one million people across ten districts.

Ongoing blacktopping work, expected to conclude by December 2025, includes projects costing NPR 3.33 billion (USD 24.3 million) and NPR 990 million (USD 7.2 million) in Baglung and Gulmi. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Police investigate viral video of officer assaulting individual

(lm) Authorities in Nepal are investigating a viral video showing a police officer assaulting a man in Bharatpur. The footage, which has sparked widespread public outcry, depicts the officer repeatedly kicking the individual while checking a motorcycle license and shouting, "Call whoever you want."

The officer in question has been suspended, with further action to be taken under the Police Act following verification of the incident. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Home Minister pledges to safeguard citizens' data in National

Identity Card system

(rs) Home Minister Ramesh Lekhak emphasized the significance of the National Identity Card for improving governance, enhancing service delivery, and combating crime. Addressing parliamentarians during a meeting of the State Affairs and Good Governance Committee under the House of Representatives on January 17, Lekhak underscored the card's role in fulfilling national and international commitments, particularly in combating money laundering.

The National Identity Card project, launched in 2018, is a government initiative aimed at creating a centralized database of citizens' personal and biological information to improve administrative efficiency and public service delivery. The card is designed to consolidate multiple identification documents into a single, secure system while supporting efforts to strengthen national security and combat fraud. However, concerns over data security and public apprehensions about privacy have posed challenges to its implementation.

Reaffirming the government's commitment to data security, Lekhak assured that citizens' information collected for the card would remain secure and protected from misuse. He stressed that safeguarding personal data is a state priority and encouraged public trust in the system.

The Home Minister clarified that while the National Identity Card is a mandatory state initiative, it is not obligatory for senior citizens, children, or individuals with disabilities. He called on lawmakers to assist in reassuring the public about the secure handling, storage, and processing of card-related data. [The Himalayan Times]

Nepal: Fake police emails used to dupe, intimidate people

(rs) The Cyber Bureau of Nepal Police has alerted the public about a rising wave of fraudulent emails from individuals impersonating high-ranking law enforcement officers. These emails falsely claim that recipients are under investigation for criminal activities and demand urgent responses. The emails often appear official, using police ranks and formats to deceive victims.

Though no money is requested initially, the emails serve as a precursor to larger scams aimed at blackmail or financial fraud. The Cyber Bureau has

received complaints of these emails, which have been circulated widely. In neighboring India, similar scams have led to a loss of USD 14.5 million in the first quarter of 2024. [The Kathmandu Post]

Pakistan: Political deadlock deepens as Imran Khan's PTI threatens to boycott reconciliation talks

(lm/an) Pakistan's political impasse has further deepened as reconciliation talks between the main opposition Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party, led by imprisoned former Prime Minister Imran Khan, and government parties have reached yet another. The talks, initiated in December 2024, have yielded limited progress so far, with both sides at odds over the terms of engagement.

In the latest episode, the PTI threatened to boycott the reconciliation talks unless judicial commissions are formed to investigate violent incidents during mass protests on May 9, 2023, and November 26, 2024. The May 9 protests, sparked by Khan's arrest in a corruption case, saw unprecedented attacks on military installations, leading to dozens of civilians being sentenced to jail terms by military courts. Similarly, November 26 protests turned violent, with PTI alleging the deaths of 12 supporters, while the government reported four troops killed.

The PTI has set a seven-day deadline for the government to meet its demands, which also include the release of political prisoners and accountability for human rights abuses during the protests. In response, the government, represented by Senator Irfan Siddiqui, has formed a committee to craft its reply to the PTI's demands. [Arab News 1] [DAWN]

Importantly, the ongoing reconciliation talks are complicated due to Khan's ongoing legal battles. In the latest challenge, Khan, who has been imprisoned since August 2023, is facing a 14-year sentence in the Al-Qadir Trust corruption case. The case alleges that the PTI leader and his wife, Bushra Bibi, misused authority to accept land as a bribe, causing significant losses to the national treasury. PTI leaders argue the charges lack evidence and are intended to suppress Khan's influence. [Arab News 2] [Al Jazeera]

Adding to the political tensions, Khan has announced "Black Day" protests on February 8 to mark the anniversary of the 2024 general elections, which the PTI claims were rigged. Despite securing the most seats through independent candidates, the party was

barred from contesting as a party, enabling the formation of the Sharif-led coalition government. The elections were marred by delayed results and allegations of manipulation, which Islamabad has denied despite calls for international investigations. [Arab News 3]

Against this backdrop, it is noteworthy that PTI representatives recently held a meeting with Army Chief General Asim Munir, a breakthrough after nearly two years of the party's defiance against the military, which intensified following Khan's ouster in 2022 and his arrest in 2023. The PTI has presented two primary demands during ongoing talks: the release of political prisoners and judicial probes into the violent protests of May 9 and November 26. [Arab News 4]

Pakistan: Coalition government stable despite PPP-PML-N rifts

(lm) Despite ongoing disagreements between key ruling coalition partners, the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), analysts believe there is no immediate threat to Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's government. The rifts stem from policy issues such as proposed canals in the Indus River, which the PPP fears will reduce water supply to Sindh province, and alleged inadequate federal funding for Sindh's infrastructure projects.

Political analysts argue that these tensions are more about political positioning than an actual intent to leave the coalition. The PPP's dissatisfaction is seen as an attempt to safeguard its future prospects amid the PML-N's perceived economic recovery. Analysts also highlight that the PPP's demands are typically addressed within high-level government committees, reducing the likelihood of a coalition collapse.

While the PPP holds the power to destabilize the government, its withdrawal of support would likely occur only if directed by Pakistan's military, which wields significant influence in the country. Both parties recognize the importance of maintaining stability, especially as the government navigates a critical IMF program and early signs of economic improvement.

PPP officials have warned that continued sidelining could lead to drastic measures, but they remain hopeful for a resolution through dialogue. The PML-N, acknowledging its dependence on the PPP's support, has reaffirmed its commitment to addressing the party's grievances to ensure coalition stability. [Arab News]

Election Commission of Pakistan removes three political parties

(afk) The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) has delisted three political parties—Pakistan National Party (PNP), National Democratic Party (NDP), and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Nizam (PTN), for failing to conduct mandatory intra-party elections within the prescribed timeframe. As required under the Political Parties Order of 2002, all parties must conduct regular intra-party elections every four years to ensure democratic practices and accountability within political entities.

Meanwhile, the ECP has registered Tehreek-e-Suba Hazara Pakistan (TSHP) and Awaam Pakistan (AP) following successful intra-party elections in 2024. Former Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi and former Finance Minister Miftah Ismail founded Awaam Pakistan after leaving the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) amidst a clash with leadership. Abbasi serves as president, while Ismail serves as secretary general. [The Express Tribune] [Duniya News]

Pakistan: Government intensifies action against human trafficking in response to second maritime accident

(lm) Pakistan has ramped up efforts to combat human trafficking in response to recurring tragedies involving migrant boats.

Recently, a boat carrying 86 passengers, including 66 Pakistanis, capsized near Morocco's Dakhla port, leaving at least 44 Pakistanis presumed dead. Moroccan authorities rescued 36 survivors, 22 of whom were Pakistani nationals. [Arab News 1] [Arab News 2] [Arab News 3]

This tragedy follows the December 2024 boat disaster off Greece's coast, which claimed the lives of five Pakistani nationals. Earlier, in June 2023, one of the deadliest maritime accidents occurred when 262 Pakistanis drowned in a shipwreck in the Mediterranean Sea. These incidents have exposed the dire consequences of illegal migration and the exploitation of vulnerable individuals by trafficking networks.

Against this backdrop, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif recently directed the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) to collaborate with Interpol for the extradition of

human traffickers abroad and called for stricter measures against those involved. Authorities have already arrested dozens of traffickers, seized assets worth over PKR 500 million (approximately USD 1.8 million), and dismissed or prosecuted complicit government officials. [Arab News]

In parallel, the FIA recently arrested a suspected trafficker linked to the Greece tragedy. The suspect is accused of extorting PKR 4.5 million (approximately USD 16,200) from a victim who later perished in the shipwreck. Evidence retrieved from the man's mobile phone indicates his involvement in human smuggling, and investigations are ongoing to apprehend his associates.

Separately, the government is implementing systemic measures to prevent future tragedies, including developing an Integrated Border Management System (IBMS) and expanding collaboration with international agencies. [Arab News 5]

Pakistan: Government to launch new energy market system, renegotiate IPP agreements to reduce costs

(mra/lm) Pakistan is set to reform its energy sector by implementing a new energy market system in March 2025 and renegotiating contracts with 14 independent power producers (IPPs) to address the country's mounting circular debt crisis, which has exceeded PKR 2.4 trillion (USD 8.6 billion).

The new energy market system, approved by the Cabinet Committee on Energy, will end the government's monopoly as the sole buyer of electricity. Instead, consumers will have the option to purchase electricity from multiple suppliers through an Independent Electricity Market. This shift is expected to reduce circular debt, stabilize electricity prices, and enhance competition within the energy sector. Energy Minister Awais Ahmad Khan Leghari highlighted that this move aligns with the government's broader goals to mitigate financial strain caused by circular debt, power theft, and transmission losses, which have historically led to blackouts and high electricity costs. [Arab News 1]

In tandem with the energy market reform, the federal cabinet has approved revised agreements with IPPs, targeting outdated contracts signed in the 1990s and 2000s. These agreements have been a significant source of circular debt due to capacity charges—payments made to IPPs regardless of electricity

consumption. The renegotiated contracts are expected to save the government PKR 1.4 trillion (USD 5 billion) over their duration, with PKR 802 billion (USD 2.9 billion) saved in reduced costs and profits, and PKR 35 billion (USD 126 million) in cuts to past excess profits. Annual savings of PKR 137 billion (USD 493.2 million) will directly benefit consumers. [Arab News 2]

Pakistan: Central bank expected to deliver sixth consecutive rate cut to boost economy

(lm/afk) The State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) is expected to announce its sixth consecutive policy rate cut during the upcoming Monetary Policy Committee meeting on January 27. Analysts predict a 100-basis-point reduction, bringing the policy rate to 12 percent, following a cumulative 1,000 basis points cut since June 2024. The central bank's December 2024 reduction of 200 basis points, lowering the rate to 13 percent, aimed to stimulate economic growth amid easing inflation pressures.

The SBP projects inflation to average significantly below its earlier forecast of 11.5 to 13.5 percent for the fiscal year ending June 2025. Polls indicate that 56 percent of respondents believe inflation will remain under 8 percent. Despite monetary easing, real interest rates remain high at 950 basis points compared to the historical average of 200–300 basis points. Economic recovery remains challenging, supported by a USD 7 billion International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan secured in September 2024, with the central bank emphasizing the need for sustained reforms to meet revenue targets under the IMF program. [Arab News 1]

In a major boost, Pakistan's current account surplus reached USD 1.2 billion during the first half of fiscal year 2025 (July–December), marking a 15-year high. This represents a significant turnaround from a deficit of USD 1.397 billion during the same period the previous year. The surplus was driven by a 33 percent increase in remittances and a 7 percent growth in exports, which totaled USD 16.2 billion. December alone recorded a surplus of USD 582 million, a 109 percent year-on-year increase.

The UAE's decision to roll over USD 2 billion in deposits with Pakistan's central bank bolstered reserves, further stabilizing the economy. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif commended the surplus as evidence of effective economic management, marking the third consecutive

month of positive current account performance. [The News International] [DAWN]

In related updates, the IMF projects Pakistan's economy to grow by 3 percent in 2025, with further growth to 4 percent in 2026. This signals a gradual recovery from recent economic challenges, aligning with global economic growth projections of 3.3 percent for the same period. However, Pakistan's economy continues to grapple with structural issues such as inflationary pressures, fiscal imbalances, and reliance on external funding.

In response, the government has implemented reforms in taxation, governance, and energy management, aiming to stabilize the economy and boost long-term growth. Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb emphasized the importance of adhering to IMF-mandated reforms under the USD 7 billion loan program as essential for recovery. [Arab News 2]

Pakistan: Prime Minister raises SME loan limits, plans support for women entrepreneurs

(lm) Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has directed an increase in the loan limit for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) under the Prime Minister's Youth Program, raising the cap from PKR 500,000 (USD 1,794) to PKR 1.5 million (USD 5,381). He also called for a special package for women entrepreneurs to enhance their participation in the economy.

Highlighting SMEs as the backbone of Pakistan's economy, Sharif emphasized their role in boosting exports and generating employment. The government plans to introduce a category for micro and home-based businesses, simplifying loan procedures and providing additional support. Sharif reiterated the need to empower women and youth to foster self-employment and create jobs.

To improve SME facilities, the government will conduct a nationwide survey and roll out financial literacy and training programs through the Small and Medium Enterprises Development Authority (SMEDA) by February. By mid-year, efforts to integrate modern technology into SME operations will also commence. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Prime Minister calls for enhanced cargo scanning to strengthen trade hub aspirations

(lm) Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has directed officials to implement a world-class cargo scanning and tracking system to combat smuggling and enhance fiscal efficiency. Chairing a meeting in Islamabad, Sharif emphasized the importance of integrating modern technology and phasing out outdated tracking systems, particularly in Karachi and other major trade centers.

Sharif highlighted that enhanced cargo tracking has significantly reduced smuggling, enabling the export of goods like sugar worth USD 211 million to Afghanistan during the current fiscal year. He also stressed the need for third-party validation of cargo tracking providers to ensure system reliability and accountability.

These developments come amid broader efforts to attract investment and strengthen economic ties with nations such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, China, and Central Asian countries, as Pakistan seeks to revitalize its economy. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Minister calls for strict measures to combat smog crisis in Punjab province

(lm) Pakistan's Law Minister Azam Nazeer Tarar has called for stringent policies to reduce carbon emissions from vehicles to address the severe smog problem in Punjab, particularly in the province's capital Lahore, which ranked as the world's second most polluted city on January 19. The smog, an annual occurrence in Punjab, results from vehicle emissions, industrial activities, construction work, and crop residue burning during the wheat planting season.

At a committee meeting on the National Climate Change Policy, Tarar emphasized adopting Euro-5 or higher-grade fuels to improve air quality. Officials also highlighted ongoing efforts to transition Pakistan to renewable energy, including investments in solar, wind, and hydropower projects. The government remains on track to achieve a 30 percent share of renewables in the energy mix by 2030 and is actively promoting electric vehicles to mitigate transportation's environmental impact.

Pakistan, contributing less than 1 percent to global carbon emissions, is highly vulnerable to climate change. In 2022, catastrophic floods, attributed to climate change, caused over 1,700 deaths, affected 33 million people, and inflicted more than USD 30 billion in economic losses. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Eight Chinese-built Hangor submarines to join naval fleet soon

(lm) Pakistan's Chief of Naval Staff, Admiral Naveed Ashraf, has announced that eight Hangor-class submarines, a cornerstone of China-Pakistan naval cooperation, will soon be integrated into the Pakistan Navy. The submarines, equipped with advanced weapons, sensors, and an Air Independent Propulsion (AIP) system, are expected to significantly enhance Pakistan's naval capabilities, particularly in stealth, maneuverability, and firepower.

The agreement for the submarines was signed in 2015, with the project involving the construction of four submarines in China and the assembly of the remaining four in Pakistan under a technology transfer arrangement. The project, valued at approximately USD 4-5 billion, marks the largest arms export contract in China's military history. While initial plans aimed for deliveries between 2022 and 2028, delays, including reported challenges in obtaining export licenses for German MTU 396 diesel engines, have affected the timeline.

Admiral Ashraf confirmed in an interview with China's Global Times that the submarines remain on schedule and are expected to join the fleet "very soon." The fifth Hangor-class submarine, and the first constructed in Pakistan, underwent a steel-cutting ceremony in December 2021, demonstrating progress in the technology transfer initiative. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Violence, kidnappings, and unrest continue in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province

(sn/mra) Pakistan has intensified its counterterrorism operations in response to escalating violence and cross-border militancy, particularly in the volatile regions of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Balochistan. Security forces recently conducted a series of intelligence-based operations (IBOs), resulting in the elimination of dozens of militants linked to the

Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and other separatist factions.

In KP, security forces recently neutralized 17 militants in three separate engagements. On January 13, six militants were killed in Tank District, followed by the elimination of two more in the Tirah Valley. The following day, an operation in North Waziristan's Spinwam area led to the deaths of four militants and the recovery of weapons and ammunition. In another Tirah operation, five militants, including a senior TTP commander, were killed. [ISPR 1] [ISPR 2] [ISPR 3] [The Associated Press]

In Balochistan, operations have similarly targeted militant strongholds. Five militants attempting to infiltrate from Afghanistan were killed in Zhob district, while a separate operation in Kacchi district resulted in the deaths of 27 highly wanted militants. These actions highlight the dual threats posed by Baloch separatist movements and the TTP, which has extended its presence into the province. [DAWN 1] [The Nation] [APP]

The security situation has also exacerbated local tensions. In the Lakki Marwat district, armed protestors congregated in response to the abduction of three civilians on January 13. The abductors reportedly attacked the civilians as they returned from a harvest, causing locals of the district to block a road before the block was removed at the arrival of the police. This news comes after the release of 10 Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission (PAEC) workers in Lakki Marwat, with authorities still seeking the release of the remaining eight abductees. The recent surge in kidnappings has become an increasing concern for the community as locals grow increasingly frustrated. [ANI News]

Pakistan has criticized Afghanistan's interim government for failing to prevent cross-border attacks. Islamabad alleges that militant groups use Afghan territory to orchestrate operations against Pakistan. Kabul denies these claims, asserting that Pakistan's security issues are domestic. In fact, the military has conducted nearly 60,000 operations in 2024 alone, reportedly killing 925 militants but suffering significant losses, with 685 security personnel killed in 444 terror attacks. [DAWN 2]

Against this news, General Asim Munir, Pakistan’s army chief, recently expressed that Pakistan had “exhausted all options” at curbing attacks on the border with Afghanistan as Kabul fails to restrain separatist factions. The statement was made on January 14 during a meeting in Peshawar, as various political

representatives expressed their concern over the increasing extremist violence. Member consensus remained on avoiding additional conflict, as continual negotiations were encouraged. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Security operation underway in conflict-hit Kurram following aid convoy attacks

(lm/am) Pakistani authorities have initiated a military-led operation in Kurram district, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, following escalating tribal and sectarian violence and a series of attacks on aid convoys. The district, home to approximately 600,000 residents, has been embroiled in unrest since November 2024, resulting in at least 136 fatalities and severe shortages of food, medicine, and fuel. [Arab News 1] [Arab News 2]

The operation targets militant hideouts, particularly in the volatile Bagan area of Lower Kurram, where unidentified gunmen on January 16 attacked an aid convoy, killing two security personnel, injuring several others, and torching supply trucks. This was the second such attack this month, further impeding relief efforts. A previous ambush on January 4 left five people injured, including a senior official, exacerbating the humanitarian crisis. [Arab News 1] [DAWN]

Despite the implementation of a peace agreement on January 1, requiring tribes to dismantle bunkers, surrender heavy weapons, and resolve land disputes, violations have persisted. Offenders face terrorism charges and a fine of PKR 10 million (USD 35,933). Authorities have cited the urgent need for sustainable peace to justify continuing the operation despite local elders' concerns about adverse weather and the limited capacity of Temporary Displaced Persons (TDP) camps.

Drones and ground forces are being used to target identified militant compounds, with police and other security agencies providing support. Over 20 families have been relocated to TDP camps in Thall, Hangu, where the Provincial Disaster Management Authority (PDMA) has provided relief items, including tents and food. [Arab News 1] [Arab News 2]

Pakistan: 2024 Polio tally reaches 73

(sn) Polio samples recorded in December 2024 have detected poliovirus type 1 (WPV1), confirming Pakistan's three additional virus cases. The resurged cases are reportedly all present in children, with the first case from Jacobabad, the second from the Dera Ismail Khan district in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), while an additional case was in the southern Thatta district, the first individual polio case in the region. [Arab News] [DAWN] [PPEP]

Pakistan's first polio program of 2025 is scheduled to resume between February 3 and February 9. Of the 73 reported cases, 27 resurged in Balochistan, 22 were in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 22 were in Sindh, and a single case was from Islamabad and Punjab. [PPEP 2]

Sri Lanka: Opposition UNP and SJB parties begin alliance talks

(lm) The United National Party (UNP) and the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), two political parties that share a historical connection, have officially commenced talks to explore the possibility of forming a broad right-wing alliance. UNP Deputy Leader Ruwan Wijewardene confirmed that the UNP working committee unanimously endorsed the dialogue proposal, with discussions having started on January 20. [Daily Mirror 1] [Daily Mirror 2]

The UNP, established in 1946 by Don Stephen Senanayake, has traditionally promoted center-right policies focusing on economic liberalization and free-market principles. Currently led by Ranil Wickremesinghe, who has served as prime minister six times, the UNP is exploring collaboration with the SJB, a party formed in 2020 under Sajith Premadasa's leadership. The SJB, translating to "United People's Power," emerged as a progressive offshoot of the UNP, prioritizing socio-economic reforms and inclusive governance.

This dialogue unfolds against the backdrop of significant political changes following the September 2024 presidential election, which saw Anura Kumara Dissanayake of the left-wing National People's Power (NPP) alliance ascend to the presidency. The NPP, with its Marxist-leaning platform, secured a commanding two-thirds parliamentary majority in subsequent elections, enabling an ambitious reform agenda.

Sri Lanka: President Dissanayake demands accountability from former presidents

(lm/raa) Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Dissanayake has announced measures to hold former presidents accountable for their use of government resources, while separate investigations continue into allegations of illegal land use linked to former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa.

In a notable decision, Dissanayake recently demanded that former President Mahinda Rajapaksa pay LKR 4.6 million (USD 15,640) monthly for his official residence or vacate the premises. This aligns with laws entitling former presidents to government-provided housing or a cash allowance equivalent to one-third of their salary, or LKR 30,000 (USD 102). The President also revealed plans to evaluate the government-provided residence of former President Chandrika Kumaratunga. Further cost-cutting measures include auctioning luxury government vehicles in February and ending parliamentary food subsidies, with meals priced at market rates. [Daily Mirror 1]

In response, Mahinda Rajapaksa stated that the residence was allocated to him during Maithripala Sirisena's presidency through a cabinet decision for his protection and as a constitutional privilege for former heads of state. While he expressed readiness to vacate the residence if given an official written request, he accused Dissanayake of engaging in publicity stunts instead of addressing national concerns. Rajapaksa highlighted his contributions, such as ending the civil war and initiating development projects, and claimed the government is using this issue to distract from its own shortcomings. [Daily Mirror 2]

MP Namal Rajapaksa, Mahinda Rajapaksa's son, echoed these sentiments, accusing President Dissanayake of political revenge. Namal criticized the move as an attempt to tarnish his father's legacy and speculated that the government might plan to sell the residence. He argued that providing housing to former presidents is a common international practice and accused Dissanayake of prioritizing political vendettas over public welfare. [Daily Mirror 3]

In another notable case involving the Rajapaksas, former President Gotabaya Rajapaksa – Mahinda's elder brother who had to flee the country in 2022 at the height of mass protests against his government – denied involvement in an illegal construction on state reservation land near Menik Ganga in Kataragama. The Criminal Investigation Department (CID) is investigating the property, which reportedly features 12 rooms and

is linked to electricity bills registered under the name "G. Rajapaksa."

The building, reportedly constructed before 2010 using military labor, is said to have been occupied by a Sri Lankan Navy member assigned to Yoshitha Rajapaksa, another son of Mahinda's. Both Yoshitha Rajapaksa and Major Neville Wanniarchchi, a former security officer to Mahinda Rajapaksa, have denied knowledge of the property during CID questioning.

This investigation, initially launched during the Yahapalana Government, was paused when Gotabaya Rajapaksa assumed the presidency. The CID's efforts now aim to clarify the building's origins and potential misuse of government land. [Daily News]

Sri Lanka: Government to review IMF agreement to increase public concessions

(lm) Deputy Minister of Finance Harshana Sooriyaperuma announced in Parliament on January 21 that the Sri Lankan government plans to further review its agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to introduce additional concessions aimed at easing the financial burden on citizens.

The Deputy Minister highlighted that some adjustments have already been implemented, including raising the PAYE tax threshold to LKR 150,000 (approximately USD 510) and waiving VAT on milk products. Additionally, a new measure has been introduced to provide LKR 6,000 (approximately USD 20) to children from non-Aswesuma recipient families to purchase school stationery, broadening the scope of government support for education.

This review follows increasing public pressure to ensure that IMF-backed economic measures do not disproportionately affect vulnerable segments of the population. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: JVP urges Local Government election victory to advance NPP government agenda

(lm) The Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), a core member and driving force of the National People's Power (NPP) left-wing alliance led by President Anura Kumara Dissanayake, has emphasized the importance of winning the upcoming Local Government elections

in April 2025 to sustain the government's transformative initiatives.

Speaking in Colombo, JVP General Secretary Tilvin Silva highlighted that the government has embarked on a program to address both physical and moral changes in the country and acknowledged the challenges involved.

He noted the significant progress made by the NPP-led government over the past two months in stabilizing the economy, reducing waste, and implementing social welfare measures. Key accomplishments include increasing pensions by LKR 3,000 (USD 10.20), providing a LKR 6,000 (USD 20.40) allowance for school children's stationery, raising the Aswesuma social welfare payments, and reducing electricity tariffs.

Silva refuted opposition claims of economic instability, asserting that the NPP administration had kept the Sri Lankan rupee below LKR 300 (USD 1.02) against the dollar and maintained a stable share market. He also highlighted cost-saving measures, such as President Anura Kumara Dissanayake limiting the size of his foreign delegations, exemplified by his recent visit to China.

He called on supporters to remain undeterred by opposition criticism, emphasizing that resistance from those benefiting from corruption and inefficiency is expected as the government enforces reforms. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Former Minister Vijith Vijayamuni Soysa arrested and released on bail

(lm) Former Minister Vijith Vijayamuni Soysa, a seasoned Sri Lankan politician with ties to the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and later the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA), was arrested on January 19 over allegations related to the illegal assembly of a lorry. Soysa has held multiple ministerial roles in past governments, including positions focusing on irrigation and regional development, and has been a prominent figure in Sri Lankan politics, especially in rural and agricultural policy.

On January 20, the court granted him release on personal bail amounting to LKR 200,000 (USD 680), with the next hearing scheduled for February 6. [Daily Mirror 1] [Daily Mirror 2]

Sri Lanka: President directs Attorney General to expedite proceedings in e-passport case

(sl) President Anura Kumara Dissanayake has instructed the Attorney General to accelerate court proceedings related to the e-passport tender dispute, as the country grapples with a severe passport issuance crisis and the current passport stock is being expected to last only until mid-2025. [Daily Mirror 1] [Daily Mirror 2]

The tender, awarded in July 2024 by the previous administration to Thales and its local partner Just in Time Technologies (JITT), included the supply of 750,000 machine-readable passports (MRPs) and five million biometric e-passports compliant with International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) standards. However, a petition by losing bidder Epic Lanka led the Court of Appeal to suspend the contract in September 2024 [see AiR No. 44, October/2024, 5].

The dispute stalled the issuance of e-passports and prompted an emergency procurement of 750,000 MRPs, approved by the court in October, to address immediate needs. Despite this measure, the passport shortage persists, with over 100,000 applications submitted in December 2024 alone. [Biometric]

However, officials estimate it will take at least a year to finalize e-passport readiness. As a temporary solution, the government plans to procure 500,000 additional P-series passports through an open tender to bridge the supply gap.

Sri Lanka: Central bank identifies 21 companies engaged in prohibited schemes

(lm) The Central Bank of Sri Lanka (CBSL) has concluded investigations into violations under Section 83(C) of the Banking Act, identifying 21 companies engaged in prohibited financial schemes. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Three parliamentary employees dismissed for sexual harassment

(sl) Three employees of Sri Lanka's Parliament were dismissed from service following confirmation of their involvement in sexual harassment against female staff members.

The incidents, reported in 2021 and 2022, came to light through media coverage in mid-2023, prompting the establishment of an internal investigative committee in August 2023. The committee's findings led to the suspension of two employees and were further reviewed by the Attorney General, who referred the case to the Bureau for the Prevention of Abuse of Children and Women under police direction. Another employee was later arrested and suspended on January 30, 2024.

A formal disciplinary inquiry, led by retired High Court Judge Kusala Sarojini Weerawardena, concluded in December 2024, recommending the dismissal of the accused employees. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Special Task Force to bolster Colombo police amid rise in organized crime

(lm) In response to a surge in organized shootings tied to underworld gang rivalries, Sri Lanka Police has decided to deploy the Special Task Force (STF) to six critical police stations in Colombo. This marks a significant operational shift, as the STF has typically been housed in its own camps and only called in for emergencies. Additional measures, including snap roadblocks and increased mobile patrols in high-crime areas, will complement the STF deployment.

Since January 1, seven organized shootings have occurred across the country, with five fatalities reported in Colombo alone. Incidents have also been recorded in Weligama, Mt. Lavinia, Kohuwala, Badowita, and Mannar, largely linked to narcotics-related gang conflicts. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Government to recruit 10,000 police officers to address critical staffing shortage

(raa) Acting Inspector General Priyantha Weerasuriya announced that the government has approved the recruitment of 10,000 new police officers to address the severe shortage within the force. The police currently face a deficit of 22,000 personnel, exacerbated by retirements, health-related issues, and fatalities.

To mitigate the impact of the shortage, approximately 2,000 officers from VIP security units have been

reassigned to regular police duties, providing significant relief to daily operations. In 2024 alone, 241 officers lost their lives while on duty, further straining the force's capacity. [Daily News]

Sri Lanka: Police seize largest drug money haul in nation's history

(axc) The Police Narcotics Bureau (PNB) seized over LKR 283 million (approximately USD 952,200) in cash, marking the largest drug-related cash recovery in Sri Lankan police history. The funds, believed to be proceeds from drug trafficking, were discovered hidden in a house in Kurunegala, alongside two vehicles. [Daily Mirror] [Mawrata news]

Sri Lanka: Over 3,000 dengue cases recorded in first 20 days of 2025

(lm) As of January 19, Sri Lanka has recorded 3,185 dengue cases, with the highest concentration in the Gampaha district, reporting 482 cases. The Western Province leads province-wise with 1,442 reported cases. [Daily Mirror]

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

Brunei: 735 foreign nationals deported in 2024, according to INRD report

(ga) The Immigration and National Registration Department (INRD) reported the deportation of 735 foreign nationals following 347 enforcement operations in 2024. These included independent efforts and collaborations with agencies such as the Royal Brunei Police Force (RBPF) and the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB).

The department recorded 44 court prosecutions, issued 2,849 compound fines, and collected BND1,319,700 (USD 965,715) in fines. Common immigration offenses included failure to renew work passes, overstaying, and breaching immigration pass conditions. The INRD has called on the public to adhere to immigration laws and report violations via hotlines in Bandar Seri Begawan and Kuala Belait. [Borneo Bulletin]

Cambodia: New law enhances inspection ministry's governance role

(sal) A directive, issued on January 13 by Prime Minister Hun Manet, aims to strengthen oversight mechanisms and promote ethical practices within government bodies.

Under the new law, the Ministry of Inspection is tasked with developing and implementing policies, legal frameworks, action plans, and strategic initiatives to address governance challenges. This includes submitting proposals and findings to ministries, institutional leaders, public entities, provincial governors, and administrative bodies to hold individuals and institutions accountable for any misconduct or violations.

In addition to its oversight role, the ministry will conduct research and surveys to identify systemic issues and devise solutions. These measures are expected to enhance problem-solving capabilities and ensure greater integrity across Cambodia's public sector. [The Phnom Penh Post]

Cambodia: New project in Kratie province combats child malnutrition

(mfr) World Vision has launched the ReactsIn project in Kratie province, an initiative that addresses child malnutrition and promotes gender equality, with funding of USD 434,074 from Global Affairs Canada. By

2029, it aims to benefit more than 31,000 people, including 3,000 children, across 25 villages.

ReactsIn is part of a global initiative active in Bangladesh, Kenya, Somalia, and Tanzania. It integrates gender equality into efforts to improve nutrition and support women, adolescent girls, and children under five. The project focuses on advancing nutrition-related rights and empowering both mothers and fathers in caregiving roles, in collaboration with Cambodia's Ministry of Health, Ministry of Women's Affairs, and Ministry of Rural Development.

Currently, 22 percent of Cambodian children under five suffer from stunted growth due to chronic malnutrition. ReactsIn aims to address these challenges through strengthened local services, advocacy, and policy dialogue that promote gender-equitable roles in health, nutrition, and reproductive rights. [The Phnom Penh Post]

Cambodia: Banteay Meas District becomes nation's first smoke-free zone

(sal) Banteay Meas district in Kampot province has become the first district in Cambodia to be officially designated as smoke-free. Residents have transitioned from using charcoal and wood to gas and electricity for cooking, marking a major step towards cleaner and more sustainable living.

This program, initiated in 2022, has been led by the Netherlands Development Organization (SNV) in collaboration with the Banteay Meas district administration. The initiative aims to mitigate health, environmental, economic, and social challenges associated with traditional cooking practices.

When the program began, only 41 percent of families used clean fuel sources, such as liquefied petroleum gas, solar stoves, or electricity. By 2025, all families in the district—amounting to approximately 92,000 people—have adopted clean cooking practices, significantly improved public health and reducing environmental harm.

This transformative project is being implemented across 487 villages in Battambang, Kampong Speu, and Siem Reap provinces, setting an example for other regions in Cambodia to follow suit in creating healthier, smoke-free communities. [The Phnom Penh Post] [The Better Cambodia]

Cambodia: Modern landfill facility launched

(mfr) A new USD 6.5 million landfill in Banteay Meanchey province was inaugurated on January 17. Spanning 11 hectares in Kampong Svay commune, Serei Saophoan town, the facility will serve approximately 130,000 residents across multiple communes until 2040. Funded by an Asian Development Bank loan, the project is part of phase two of an environmental management initiative surrounding the Tonle Sap Lake.

The landfill features two primary cells, the first accommodating 51,414 tons of waste and the second 84,060 tons. Additionally, a reserve cell has a capacity of 270,989 tons. Construction began in December 2023 and was completed within 10 months.

Modern landfill projects have also been implemented in other provinces, including Preah Sihanouk, Battambang, Pursat, and Kampong Cham, to improve waste management and sanitation nationwide. [The Phnom Penh Post]

Cambodia: Advancement in sustainable fisheries for livelihoods and ecosystem conservation

(mfr) Cambodia is advancing sustainability in its fisheries sector through the EU-funded CAPFISH Capture program, which aims to balance ecological conservation with community livelihoods. A Fisheries Administration delegation and the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) recently visited Preah Sihanouk province to assess progress in mangrove reforestation, vessel monitoring, and community fisheries initiatives.

Manuel Barange, FAO's assistant director-general, noted global fisheries' stability but highlighted overexploitation concerns. He emphasized Cambodia's potential for aquaculture growth, citing its 5% annual global increase since 2000. FAO Representative Rebekah Bell stressed the importance of sustainable management, noting that fish provide 75–80 percent of Cambodians' protein intake.

Under CAPFISH, significant achievements include safeguarding 136 hectares of mangroves, mapping coral and seagrass ecosystems, and implementing advanced monitoring systems tracking 925 marine vessels. Grants to 250 community groups and training

for over 1,250 people have bolstered fisheries management and collaboration.

The program also prioritizes women's roles in the aquatic food value chain, advocating for recognition and safety. FAO officials highlighted sustainability, climate adaptation, and market opportunities to ensure the fisheries sector's future resilience and benefits for local communities. [The Phnom Penh Post]

Indonesia: 5.2 percent growth projected

(gk) Chief Economic Affairs Minister Airlangga Hartarto has informed in a statement that Indonesia is aiming to exceed the World Bank's 2025 growth projection of 5.1 per cent, targeting 5.2 per cent. Domestic consumption and local investment will be encouraged to achieve this target.

He added that the government is also working on finalizing a policy to encourage exporters to keep their foreign exchange earnings (DHE) in domestic financial markets, a move that could strengthen the domestic economy and buffer it against global economic turbulence.

This statement came as the Bank of Indonesia has lowered its growth forecast for 2025 to a range of 4.7 percent to 5.5 percent, slightly down from the earlier range of 4.8 percent to 5.6 percent. The central bank expects export performance to be slow and domestic consumption sluggish.

The World Bank has projected a global growth of 2.7 per cent in 2025 and 2026. But for Indonesia, the World Bank has projected a growth forecast of 4 percent higher than the projections for developing economies. [Jakarta Globe]

Indonesia: Ministries deepen cooperation on eradication of poverty through food security

(gk/dql) The Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry of Agriculture have agreed to intensify their cooperation in combatting poverty by enhancing food security, particularly through accurate data mapping of the poor who can be empowered via agricultural programs.

During a coordination meeting between Social Affairs Minister Saifullah Yusuf and Deputy Minister of

Agriculture Sudaryono data integration and the role of agriculture in poverty eradication were discussed. The focus was on using agriculture to support the poor, especially in rural areas. Sudaryono emphasized that the agricultural sector is more accessible to the poor, particularly in villages, and can help boost agricultural production.

The collaboration aims to provide the poor with seeds and seedlings to plant and manage independently, reducing their expenses and helping curb inflation in commodities like chilies, vegetables, and fruits. [Antara]

Indonesia: Ministries of Transmigration and Higher Education aim to improve transmigration development

(gk) The Ministry of Transmigration is planning to team up with the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, and Technology to develop new economic centers in transmigration areas through programs that are targeted to increase access to education and develop industrialization.

According to Minister of Transmigration M. Iftitah Sulaiman Suryanagara, such programs will not merely relocate people but also build a new integrated economic ecosystem in transmigration areas, for which his ministry is partnering with the education ministry. Minister of Higher Education Satryo Brodjonegoro conveyed his ministry's readiness to assist the improvement of transmigration. Distance learning in collaboration with local universities, supporting scholarships, assisting in developing industrialization in transmigration areas are some of the key areas that the ministry expressed its support for. [Antara]

Indonesia: Stunting to be reduced by 14.2 percent by 2029

(gk) The Indonesian government aims to reduce stunting in children by 14.2 per cent by the end of 2025-2029 National Medium-Term Development Plan, as announced the Ministry of National Development Planning at a retreat.

Currently, according to the last recorded figures in 2023, stunting in Indonesia is at 21.5 per cent. Figures for 2024 are yet to be announced, and the Ministry

aims to reduce the stunting at the end of 2025 to 18.8 per cent.

The ministry added every year, the aim is to reduce stunting by 1.5 to 2 percentage points and reach a figure of 14.2 percent by 2029. He also observed that the free nutritious meals program of the government is an important initiative that helps in tackling stunting. [Antara]

Indonesia: Automotive industry investments see 43 percent growth over last five years

(gk) The Ministry of Investment and Down Streaming has unveiled in a press statement that the nation's automotive industry has recorded a 43 percent rise overall in the last five years. Director of Investment Deregulation, Dendy Apriandi, said that as of September 2024, the ministry has recorded investments of IDR 31.7 trillion (USD 1.945 billion), a rise of 43 percent from 2019, which saw an investment of IDR 11.04 trillion (or USD 780.8 million in 2019).

The investments so far include foreign investments of IDR 28.15 trillion (USD 1.72 billion) and domestic investments of IDR 3.6 trillion (USD 221 million). In the 2019-2024 period, Japan invested USD 4.61 billion, which is followed by South Korea which invested USD 2.72 billion and Singapore's investment of USD 337.7 million. In the same period, Hong Kong's investment was USD 220.4 million, and China's investment was USD 63.8 million.

Within the automotive industry, three industries saw major growth: the four-wheeled vehicle industry saw a growth of 73 per cent, while the battery industry and two-wheeled vehicle industry saw 15 per cent and 11 per cent respectively. [Antara]

Indonesia: International carbon trading launched

(gk) Indonesia officially launched its first international carbon trading through the Indonesian Carbon Exchange (IDX Carbon), a carbon trading platform developed by the Indonesia Stock Exchange (IDX). Through this initiative, Indonesia has reiterated its commitment to carbon trading in a transparent and credible manner and hopes for a global support to fully leverage the opportunity, thus helping the nation in

reducing emissions and inspiring a sustainable global movement.

The carbon credits opened at a price of approximately USD 5.86 per ton for units under the Indonesia Technology-Based Solution (IDTBS) category and approximately USD 8.80 per ton for units under the IDTBS Renewable Energy (IDTBS-RE) category.

The carbon trading will include many strategic energy projects such as the operations of the Gunung Wugul Mini-Hydro Power Plant (PLTM) and the New Natural Gas Power Plant at the Priok Block 4 Gas and Steam Power Plant (PLTGU), converting single-cycle power plants to combined cycles at the Grati Block 2 PLTGU and Block 2 power plant units in Muara Tawar and constructing the New Natural Gas Power Plant at PLTGU Block 3 PJB Muara Karang. These large projects are estimated to be able to reduce emissions by up to 750 thousand tons of CO2 eq, making a significant contribution to decarbonize the energy sector, and meeting Indonesia’s climate targets, as outlined in its Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) document.

In a related event, environment minister Nurofiq explained that the trading will be carried out by ensuring the optimization of the National Registry System, as well as related infrastructure and instruments. He further added that the government would guarantee the validity of every certificate issued for international carbon trade, which can be later approved to protect against double counting, double payments and double claims. [Antara 1] [Antara 2] [Antara 3] [Tempo.Co]

Indonesia: Defense expenditure to be increased

(lp) Indonesia's Ministry of Defense intends to increase the national defense budget from 0.8 percent to 1.5 percent of the national gross domestic product (GDP). This increment will be implemented progressively. Moreover, Indonesia's GDP is projected to reach USD 1,440.00 billion by the end of 2025.

On January 16, the Head of the Ministry's Information Bureau, Brigadier General Frega Inkiriwang, stated that this increase was essential for acquiring weapons and military equipment, as well as for enhancing defense infrastructure and personnel quality. The ultimate result of the augmented budget was to enhance the national defense posture.

The Ministry of Defense recognizes that Indonesia's solid economic condition will be a crucial component in facilitating this increase. Therefore, the stability of the economy should be reinforced by advancements in the down streaming of natural resources and the enhancement of foreign investment. [Antara News] [Trading Economics]

Laos: Leveraging satellite technology to increase carbon credit potential

(tas) Laos is utilizing satellite remote sensing technology to calculate carbon stocks across nine forest areas totaling 170,556 hectares, aiming to unlock its carbon credit potential and secure certification by late 2025.

This initiative aligns with the country's goal of achieving carbon neutrality by 2050 and the global "30×30" target to protect 30 percent of the world's land and oceans by 2030. Officials project significant revenue generation to support biodiversity conservation, community development, and forest management, with feasibility studies confirming strong potential for carbon credit generation. Beyond forestry, the project explores expanding satellite monitoring to agriculture, promoting sustainable practices and boosting rural incomes [Laotian Times].

Laos: Government focuses on achieving fifth consecutive budget surplus

(tas) The Lao government is aiming for a budget surplus by 2025, focusing on self-reliance through improved revenue collection, reducing tax exemptions, and careful spending to reduce debt, as announced by Sonexay Sithpaxay, Governor of the Bank of Laos, during the Second Open Government meeting held earlier this month.

Sonexay stated that the government plans to promote local production, promote sustainable mining, tighten mining regulations particularly for gold, and streamline business processes to attract investment.

Additionally, the government will implement strict monetary policies, support the use of the Lao kip in cross-border transactions, and enhance production values in industries like biofertilizers and expedite development of ore processing plants to boost the economy [The Laotian Times].

Malaysia: PDRM, SUHAKAM to discuss police mobile phone checks

(ga) The Royal Malaysia Police (PDRM) and the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM) have agreed to soon hold a meeting to discuss the legality of police inspecting mobile phones. Home Minister Saifuddin Nasution Ismail directed Inspector-General of Police Razarudin Husain to clarify the matter from a law enforcement perspective, emphasizing that such checks must be intelligence-driven and not arbitrary.

The meeting follows SUHAKAM's statement that random mobile phone checks during roadblocks violate human rights. Razarudin previously stated that police are authorized under Section 23(1) of the Criminal Procedure Code to inspect mobile phones if there is credible suspicion of criminal activity, ensuring no obscene, offensive, or harmful content is present. [Bernama]

Malaysia: Gag order on talk of ex-PM Najib's bid for house arrest underway

(oc) Malaysia's Attorney-General's Chambers has initiated discussions for a gag order that would prohibit public discourse on former Prime Minister Najib Razak's ongoing court review. The review could allow him to serve the remainder of his prison sentence under house arrest.

Najib was convicted for his role in the multi-billion-dollar 1MDB public fund scandal and was sentenced to 12 years in prison for corruption. He is currently engaged in a legal battle to prove that an executive order was issued by the former Malaysian King, granting him permission to serve the remainder of his sentence under house arrest. Under the Malaysian constitution, the King has the authority to grant pardons, making this claim legitimate if proven true.

Shamsul Bolhassan, Deputy Chief of the Chambers Civil Division, confirmed that the gag order was filed in court on January 20. He previously stated that the trial is a sensitive issue that has caused division within Malaysian society. [Reuters]

Malaysia: Government to reassess nuclear energy for future power needs

(ga/oc) The government is reviewing the potential of nuclear energy as a power source due to the nation's increasing energy demand, which is driven by industrial growth, data center expansions, and electric vehicle adoption. Deputy Prime Minister Fadillah Yusof, concurrently the Energy Transition and Water Transformation Minister, emphasized that the decision will be based on informed findings and international standards.

Nuclear energy, recognized as one of the cleanest energy sources, is one of the options being considered. Fadillah noted that his ministry has commissioned studies through MyPower Corporation, with support from the Malaysian Nuclear Agency, to explore advanced nuclear technologies, safety measures, security, and regulatory frameworks.

Malaysia is also focused on achieving net zero carbon emissions by 2050, with a priority on decarbonizing the energy sector. The country's energy plan includes a diverse mix of energy sources, such as hydro, biomass, and solar energy, alongside efforts to improve energy efficiency and develop new technologies like battery storage systems. [Bernama]

In a related development, Fadillah introduced the national energy sector's open data gateway called MyEnergyStats on January 16 to replace the Malaysia Energy Information Hub, in operation since 2012.

Fadillah statetd that MyEnergyStats is an important tool for providing complex data and analysis to inform future strategic decision-making regarding energy policies featuring data visualization, interactive maps and a great ability to collect data. [Bernama]

Malaysia: Sabah launches large-scale operation to tackle drug issues

(ga) A large-scale integrated operation will be launched to combat drug issues in Sabah, involving the Narcotics Crime Investigation Department (NCID), the General Operations Force (GOF), and the Marine Police Force (PPM). NCID Director Khaw Kok Chin announced that the collaboration is necessary due to limited NCID personnel in Sabah, with only 436 members, compared to GOF's 4,054 and PPM's 949.

The operation aims to address border security and target drug syndicate hotspots, particularly in areas like Tawau, Sandakan, and the eastern coastal regions. These locations are believed to serve as transit points for drugs being transported to neighboring countries,

where higher demand and prices make drug trafficking lucrative.

Khaw urged the public to report any suspected drug syndicate activities and emphasized strict actions against any police personnel involved with drug syndicates, regardless of rank. Strategies for the operation remain undisclosed to maintain its effectiveness. [Bernama]

Malaysia: Ministry of Defence allocates MYR 12 billion for defense asset upgrades in 2025

(ga) The Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF) has been allocated MYR 12 billion (USD 2.66 billion) in 2025 to strengthen national defence capabilities through asset acquisitions, announced Defence Minister Datuk Seri Mohamed Khaled Nordin. Key acquisitions include 105 mm cannons, surface-to-surface missiles for the KD Jebat frigate, and three Medium Altitude Long Endurance Unmanned Aerial Systems (MALE UAS).

The Defence Ministry is also progressing with major asset construction projects, such as the Littoral Combat Ship (LCS) program. LCS1, currently 96.52% complete, has entered Harbour and Sea Acceptance Tests, while LCS2 is undergoing further work, and LCS3 is preparing for its January 2026 launch. Meanwhile, the second batch of Littoral Mission Ships (LMS) is expected to reach 13.8% completion by mid-2025.

The FA-50M Block 20 fighter aircraft program, contracted in 2023 for RM4 billion, has achieved 48% progress, with the first two jets scheduled for delivery in October 2026. Additionally, two Maritime Patrol Aircraft (MPA) are set to enhance maritime surveillance, with deliveries planned for June and September 2026. [Bernama]

Malaysia: Anti-Corruption Commission seizes thousands of documents in investigation

(oc) The Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) has seized 4,000 documents as part of an investigation into a group involved in securing loans worth USD 150 million, which were approved by civil servants.

Azam Baki, the MACC Chief Commissioner, stated that the group was identified following raids at 24 locations earlier this week, leading to the arrest of 12 individuals. He noted that the group includes financial consultancy firms and banks, with individuals holding various positions and some having been employed for up to 20 years.

The MACC has also frozen 70 accounts linked to the group and seized 9 luxury vehicles.

It is alleged that the accused consultancy firms profited from service fees related to debt settlement and investment schemes. The MACC's investigation is ongoing, and Baki anticipates that 16 individuals will be called in for questioning. [Malay Mail]

Myanmar: Seven NCA signatories meet to discuss current situation

(hw) Seven ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) who had signed the Nationawide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) had met on January 14 to discuss the current situation. In March 2024, out of ten NCA signatories, the seven groups organized themselves as 7 EAO Alliance, following a meeting between representatives in Chiang Mai, Thailand. The aim of the group is to keep peace discussions alive. [The Irrawaddy]

The meeting on January 14 was chaired by the leader of Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS) General Yawd Serk and attended by 22 individuals. The announcement made after the meeting explains that participants had discussed the difficulties the people face and proposed potential solutions for the issues. [BBC News, in Burmese]

Myanmar: Junta leader reports population drop by four million

(hw) Myanmar junta leader and acting president Min Aung Hlaing announced on January 17 that the country's population has decreased by four million over the past two years. He explained that, according to a 2022 report from the Ministry of Immigration and Population, Myanmar's population was 55.8 million. However, the preliminary census conducted in 2024 revealed that the current population is just over 51 million.

Min Aung Hlaing further stated that the decline in population could lead to a labor shortage and impact

the upcoming election. Due to ongoing security concerns, the junta conducted the census in only 145 of the country's 330 townships. [Radio Free Asia 1, in Burmese]

The junta leader attributed the population decline to a mass exodus of young people to foreign countries, which was driven by the enforcement of the National Service Law. [Democratic Voice of Burma, in Burmese] [East Asia Forum]

The primary purpose of conducting the census was to prepare for the general election, which the parallel government, the National Unity Government (NUG), has already boycotted. [Radio Free Asia 2, in Burmese]

Myanmar: Forced conscription intensifies in Meiktila and Tharzi

(anl) In Meiktila and Tharzi townships of Mandalay Region, local sources reported that Myanmar junta officials and village administrators are intensifying efforts to recruit both youth and elderly men for military service. Since December, the pressure has increased, with residents reporting heightened pressure by junta officials. A resident of Meiktila township stated that a young man summoned for conscription fled his village to avoid service. Junta officials have reportedly threatened arrests and conscription of men aged 50-60 in the coming days.

Similarly, in Tharzi township, 14 young men were selected for conscription through a lottery system. However, many fled to evade recruitment, prompting junta officials to conduct forcible arrests, leading to mass displacement. According to Ye Baw Bo Gyi, a member of the People's Defense Force (PDF) in Tharzi, the situation is dire, with terrified villagers seeking refuge in forests. Previously, paying a fee could exempt individuals from conscription, but now even those who pay are reportedly still forced to serve. Since February 2024, the military junta has enforced mandatory conscription, deploying new recruits to frontline areas after training. [Mizzima]

Myanmar: HRW 2025 report highlights junta's escalating atrocities and humanitarian crisis

(anl) Human Rights Watch highlighted Myanmar's junta escalating "scorched earth" tactics in its conflict with

armed resistance groups. In its World Report 2025, Human Rights Watch reported that the military has committed unlawful attacks against civilians and their infrastructure, including indiscriminate airstrikes, killings, rape, torture, and arson—actions amounting to war crimes and crimes against humanity. The Myanmar military has intensified aerial and artillery assaults using explosive weapons in residential areas, significantly increasing the risk of civilian casualties. Myanmar is now one of only four countries using banned cluster munitions and landmines.

Bryony Lau, Deputy Asia Director at Human Rights Watch, stated that the military's grave crimes against civilians are in response to rising resistance from anti-junta armed groups and ethnic minority armies. Additionally, the junta continues to block humanitarian aid, exacerbating the suffering of villagers in conflict zones. These blockages, combined with economic collapse, have left millions at risk of starvation, with half the population living in poverty. Over three million people have been internally displaced. [Mizzima]

Myanmar: Unregulated mining in Kachin State spurs environmental devastation

(nf) Rare earth and jade mining in Kachin State have been expanding so fast, fed by political turmoil in Myanmar since the military coup in 2021, that they have caused severe socio-economic and environmental crises, according to reports by Myanmar Resource Watch and local accounts.

Intensive mining by different factions, including the military, militias, and the KIA, has devastated agriculture, eroded livelihoods, and contaminated water sources on a large scale in places like Chipwi and Hpakant.

Chipwi Township 70 percent rely on agriculture; with the destruction brought about by rare earth mining, unemployment rises together with health issues, lack of clean water to at least 96% of its households. For this reason, KIA now undertakes this region and promises to regulate mines, creating a policy for sustainable management despite ongoing challenges. [Mizzima]

Meanwhile, jade mining in Hpakant remains wildly unregulated: a recent mudslide killed at least 12 people and left dozens missing in Sa Paut village. Lack of oversight and unsafe working conditions have heightened risks for the approximately 400,000 people who depend on jade scavenging. Though the KIA works

to better conditions, systemic problems continue to make the mining sector unsafe and unsound.

The MRW report and local activists recommend that this collaboration between the local authorities and civil society organizations should be immediate, so the socio-economic impacts, infrastructure, environmental, and safety regulations can be brought under strict control. [Radio Free Asia]

Myanmar: Deep-sea port development to be continued amid critical military situation in Rakhine State

(nf/hw) The Myanmar military regime is pushing ahead with the construction of the Kyaukphyu Special Economic Zone (SEZ) and deep-sea port in Rakhine State, despite the escalating military conflict and encirclement of Kyaukphyu town by the ethnic Arakan Army (AA). The project is a critical component of the $1.3 billion China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, which seeks to connect China's Yunnan Province to the Indian Ocean via Kyaukphyu, which also serves as the terminus of the China-Myanmar natural gas pipeline.

At a Myanmar Central Working Group for Special Economic Zones meeting in Naypyidaw on Jan. 14, Junta Minister of Investment and Foreign Economic Relations Kan Zaw reaffirmed the government's commitment to the $7.3 billion project. He underscored the need to bring the two parties to work together -- Myanmar's Kyaukphyu SEZ Deep Seaport Co. Ltd. and China's CITIC Myanmar Port Investment Limited, the Chinese consortium in charge of the project. The Initial Memorandum of Understanding was signed in Naypyidaw in 2009, a ceremony attended by then Vice-president Xi Jinping. In 2015, Myanmar parliament and the government CITIC to construct a deep-sea port and a Special Economic Zone in Kyaukphyu. In 2018, it was agreed that CITIC will contribute 70 percent for the project, while the remaining 30 percent will be contributed by Myanmar government. [ISP-Myanmar, in Burmese]

One of the few remaining townships that the junta controls in Rakhine State, Kyaukphyu has seen AA seize control of 14 out of 17 townships in the state. Areas include those hosting Chinese-funded wind power projects while increasing challenges to the development of the SEZ. Whereas the AA has declared its readiness for political dialogue and pledged to safeguard investments that would serve the interest of Rakhine State, this military face-off in Kyaukphyu

symbolizes the fragile balance between economic priorities and armed struggle.

Beijing also called on both parties to safeguard its investments and personnel. In this regard, the military junta is helping Beijing to establish a joint venture security company that will secure Chinese projects. The Kyaukphyu SEZ is one of the critical nodes in the 1,700 km China-Myanmar Economic Corridor and thus will remain a point of economic and geopolitical interest highlighting the challenges in implementing large-scale infrastructure in this war-torn region. [Irrawaddy 1] [Irrawaddy 2]

Myanmar: MNDAA and junta military agree on ceasefire

(hw) Representatives from Myanmar military and Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) held a meeting, sponsored by China, for the second time in Kunming on January 16. The meeting lasted for two days and was mostly about posting of troops and trade. [BBC News 1, in Burmese]

The Chinese government announced on January 20 that the talk resulted in ceasefire. Both sides also expressed their gratitude to China for its intervention. China also reopened border gates in MNDAA-controlled areas on the same date, although the transportation of military equipment is still prohibited. [BBC News 2, in Burmese]

MNDAA captured the military's Northeastern Command in August 2024, making it the first regional command to fall into rebel hands. [Radio Free Asia 1, in Burmese] Shortly afterward, China imposed a blockade on MNDAA-controlled territory, prompting it to not only agree to meet with the military but also declare its decision not to cooperate with the National Unity Government. [Myanmar Now] [Radio Free Asia 2, in Burmese] [VOA, in Burmese]

The imprisonment of MNDAA's leader in China had also contributed to the group's decision to hold talk with the military. [The Diplomat]

The first meeting took place on December 15 and 16, 2024, but the discussion broke down due to the military's demands. During the first meeting, the military delegation was led by Lieutenant-General Ko Ko Oo, but the identity of the current meeting delegation's leader hasn't been identified yet. [BBC News, in Burmese]

Myanmar: Junta reports deportation of over 50,000 individuals involved in online scam industry

(hw) The military regime junta announced on January 20 that it had arrested over 50,000 foreigners involved in the online scam industry and deported them to their respective countries. The deportation was done during the period from October 5, 2023, to January 13, 2025, during which about 53,000 Chinese nationals, more than 650 Thai nationals, and 20 Korean nationals were sent back to their home countries.

The junta also announced that, in cooperation with the Chinese government, it had twice curtailed the scam industry in Muse, a town situated on Sino-Burmese border. [Radio Free Asia, in Burmese].

Recently, the Chinese government announced that it is attempting to eradicate new scam businesses in Myawaddy, a town near Thailand-Myanmar border, while Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi requested ASEAN countries to act against the scam industry. [VOA 1, in Burmese] [VOA 2, in Burmese]

According to the United Nations, USD 37 billion has been lost due to online scams in Southeast Asia. [VOA 3, in Burmese] Because of the scam industry, Hong Kong had cautioned its citizens against travelling to Myanmar while mass cancellation of trips to Thailand occurred among Chinese tourists due to the fact that several Chinese celebrities were deceptively taken into scam sites in Myanmar via Thailand in early January. [Democratic Voice of Burma, in Burmese] [The Irrawaddy, in Burmese]

The junta also announced that the scam businesses on Thailand-Myanmar border get electricity and internet access from Thailand. [BBC News, in Burmese]

Myanmar: Rising female casualties amid escalating violence reported for 2024

(anl) On January 20, the Burmese Women's Union (BWU) reported that 478 women were killed in armed conflicts across Myanmar in 2024, a significant increase from 392 female casualties in 2023. This rise of nearly 100 deaths reflects the escalating violence in the country. The majority of fatalities resulted from aerial bombardments and artillery shelling. Ma Yin Myo Hlaing, BWU Joint Secretary General-2, attributed the

surge in deaths to the increased use of these tactics. The Sagaing Region recorded the highest number of female deaths in 2024, with 109 casualties, followed by Shan State (92), Rakhine State (83), and Mandalay Region (67). Additionally, 412 women were injured, with airstrikes and artillery fire identified as the primary causes. The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) reported that, from the 2021 coup to December 2024, 6,186 civilians have been killed by the junta, including 1,374 women, though many of these deaths remain under verification. [Mizzima]

Myanmar: Batch-9 of military training for newly recruited personnel commences

(hw) The junta announced on January 20 that training for the 9th batch of newly recruited personnel commenced on the same day. [Radio Free Asia, in Burmese]

Facing severe manpower shortages, the Myanmar military activated the dormant National Service Law on February 10, 2024, prompting thousands of young people to flee the country. [Myanmar Now, in Burmese]

Under the law, men aged 18 to 45 and women aged 18 to 37 are eligible for conscription.

Military spokesperson General Zaw Min Tun stated that 5,000 recruits are being enlisted for each batch. Reports have surfaced of individuals paying bribes to avoid conscription, while recent months have seen an increase in cases of forced recruitment. [VOA, in Burmese] [BBC News 1, in Burmese] [BBC News 2, in Burmese] [BNI, in Burmese]

Myanmar: Junta increases security in Ayeyarwaddy Region

(hw) Following the fall of Majizin Village to the Arakan Army (AA) on January 9, locals reported that the junta has increased security in the southern Ayeyarwady Region. Personnel were redeployed to the area around Majizin, and battalions stationed in Yangon were sent to Pathein, the capital of the Ayeyarwady Region. [Radio Free Asia, in Burmese]

Until the AA's recent incursion, the Ayeyarwady Region had remained mostly peaceful. In 2023, it was among

the regions designated by the British government as safe for travel. [VOA, in Burmese]

Myanmar: Arakan Army seizes three cargo ships enroute to Bangladesh

(hw) The Arakan Army (AA) seized three cargo ships en route from Yangon to Bangladesh on January 16. The ships were intercepted by AA personnel patrolling the Naf River along the Myanmar-Bangladesh border. United Land Port Limited General Manager Mohammad Jasim Uddin Chowdhury reported that the Arakan Army has not yet released the vessels, which are carrying 50,000 bags of dried fish, betel nuts, coffee, and other goods.

Trade between Bangladesh and Myanmar has been disrupted since the Arakan Army captured key trading posts and ports, bringing the entire Myanmar-Bangladesh border under its control. These three cargo ships marked the first shipment of goods from Myanmar to Bangladesh after more than a month-long hiatus. [Dhaka Tribune]

While the three cargo ships are said to be the first to leave Myanmar in a month, Bangladesh authorities had, in December 2024, seized a rice cargo ship carrying an export authorization document signed by the Arakan Army. [The Daily Star]

Despite the disruptions, Bangladesh's Home Advisor, Md Jahangir Alam Chowdhury, stated that the government maintains relations with both the State Administration Council (SAC) and the Arakan Army. [The Financial Express]

Myanmar: Junta leader blames foreign interference, resistance forces for instability during Karenni State Commemoration

(anl) Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, Myanmar's military leader has blamed foreign interference and resistance forces for the country's instability. He accused certain foreign entities, misinformation campaigns, and activities by the National Unity Government (NUG), the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), and the People's Defence Forces (PDF) of creating division and unrest.

Min Aung Hlaing made this accusation in his address on January 15, commemorating the 73rd Karenni State Day.

The commemoration was marred by attacks the previous night, January 14, when the Brave Warriors for Myanmar (BWM) resistance group launched five 107-mm rockets at a dinner hosted at Loikaw State Hall and two more at the regional military command. [Mizzima]

Philippines: President Marcos denies ex-President Duterte's allegations of a 'blank' 2025 budget

(lm) Philippines' President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. strongly refuted former President Rodrigo Duterte's claims that the Congress-approved 2025 budget contained "blank" allocations for certain agencies. Speaking on January 20, Marcos labeled Duterte's allegations as untrue, emphasizing that the General Appropriations Act (GAA) always specifies the projects, expenditures, and allocated funds for each item.

Duterte's remarks originated from statements made by Davao City 3rd District Representative Isidro Ungab, a known ally, during an online program. [Rappler]

The recent exchange between President Marcos Jr. and his predecessor highlights underlying political tensions between the two families as the Philippines approaches its midterm elections in May 2025, particularly concerning the allocation of confidential funds. Vice President Sara Duterte, daughter of former President Duterte, has been at the center of controversies over the use of such funds. In 2022, the Office of the Vice President (OVP) under Sara Duterte spent PHP 125 million (approximately USD 2.23 million) in confidential funds within 11 days, leading to scrutiny from the Commission on Audit (COA). The COA issued a notice of disallowance for PHP 73 million (around USD 1.3 million) of these funds due to irregularities.

For the 2025 budget, the OVP did not request confidential funds. However, during budget deliberations, Vice President Duterte declined to defend her office's proposed budget before the House of Representatives, leading to a reduction of over PHP 1.3 billion (approximately USD 23.2 million) from her office's funding.

Philippines: Marcos and Villar campaign ads exceed PHP 1 billion, raising questions of self-funding

(lm) Senator Imee Marcos and Representative Camille Villar have spent over PHP 1 billion (USD 17.6 million) each on political advertisements from January to September 2024, ahead of the 2025 senatorial elections, according to the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism. Their combined spending accounts for nearly half of the PHP 4.1 billion (USD 72 million) total ad expenditure by candidates in the same period.

Both candidates come from influential political families with histories of significant ad spending. Villar, the daughter of billionaire real estate tycoon Manuel Villar Jr., has spent heavily on television, radio, and social media ads, emerging as the top spender on Facebook with PHP 13 million (USD 228,800) by December 2024. Marcos, the sister of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., has similarly ramped up ad placements to bolster her position in the Senate race.

Observers suggest that such expenditures may indicate the use of personal funds or family wealth, a practice that raises concerns about the potential for post-election corruption. Analysts also note that heavy spending reflects a need to boost voter awareness and maintain competitiveness, particularly as both candidates remain in precarious positions in pre-election surveys. [Rappler]

Philippines: Former Quezon City mayor convicted of graft

(lm) A court in the Philippines has convicted former Quezon City Mayor Herbert Bautista and former city administrator Aldrin Cuña of graft for violations of the Anti-Graft and Corrupt Practices Act in connection with the occupational permitting tracking system project. The court found them guilty beyond reasonable doubt of unjustly favoring Geodata Solutions, Inc. by facilitating payment of PHP 32.1 million (USD 567,000) despite incomplete delivery of the project.

Both were sentenced to six years and a month up to 10 years in prison and perpetually barred from holding public office. [Manila Times]

Philippines: Audit commission orders food authority to refund USD 4.3 million in incentives and subsidies

(lm) The Commission on Audit (COA) has ordered the National Food Authority (NFA) to return over PHP 231 million (approximately USD 4.3 million) in cash incentives and rice subsidies, deeming the payments irregular. The issue stems from discrepancies between the performance scores reported by the NFA and those validated by the Governance Commission for Government-Owned and Controlled Corporations (GCG).

COA's 2023 audit revealed that the NFA used performance ratings of 85 percent and 75 percent for 2020 and 2021, respectively, to justify granting Collective Negotiations Agreement Incentives (CNAI) totaling PHP 144.045 million (approximately USD 2.7 million). However, the GCG validated significantly lower scores of 26.32 percent for 2020 and 43.96 percent for 2021, rendering the incentives ineligible under Department of Budget and Management (DBM) circulars, which require a minimum 70 percent performance score. [Rappler]

Philippines: President signs law promoting natural gas industry development

(elr) President Marcos Jr. has signed Republic Act No. 12120, the Philippine Natural Gas Industry Development Act, into law to advance the development of the country's natural gas sector. Enacted on January 8, this landmark legislation seeks to establish the Philippine Downstream Natural Gas Industry (PDNGI) to bolster energy security, promote renewable energy, and position the Philippines as a Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) trading and transshipment hub in the Asia-Pacific region.

The new law promotes natural gas as a safe, efficient, and cost-effective energy source while encouraging the conversion of existing fossil-fuel facilities to natural gas. It also enables the development of natural gas applications for power and non-power sectors, including commercial, industrial, residential, and transportation uses. To attract investments, the law offers incentives to support fair competition, transparency, and policy responsiveness.

The Department of Energy (DOE) is tasked with regulating the natural gas sector, including

aggregation, the integration of indigenous and imported natural gas for local and international markets. PDNGI facilities will undergo evaluations for potential inclusion in the Strategic Investment Priority Plan for incentives. [Philippines News Agency] [GMA Network]

Philippines: Job fairs hire 65,000 workers on the spot in 2024

(elr) The Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) announced that around 65,000 job seekers were hired on the spot through 1,800 nationwide job fairs in 2024. These events, conducted in partnership with local government units via Public Employment Service Offices (PESO), attracted over 400,000 participants.

The most in-demand jobs were in the retail and manufacturing sectors, while emerging industries such as the digital economy, healthcare, green economy, and blue economy are expected to provide more employment opportunities in the future, according to DOLE Secretary Bienvenido Laguesma. [Philippine News Agency]

Philippines: Migrant workers department takes down 71,000 fake job postings on Facebook and TikTok

(lm) The Department of Migrant Workers (DMW) removed 71,653 fake and illegal job postings from Facebook and TikTok in 2024, with 50,220 posts on Facebook and 21,433 on TikTok. These postings were created by illegal recruiters duplicating the pages of licensed agencies to deceive potential overseas Filipino workers (OFWs). [Rappler]

Singapore: Government details plan to meet 2030 climate targets

(lm) Singapore has detailed its plan to meet 2030 climate goals, focusing on energy efficiency, carbon capture, and importing clean energy. The measures aim to cut nearly 12,000 kilotons of greenhouse gas emissions, about 20 percent of 2022 levels. Energy efficiency in industries is expected to contribute up to 3,360 kilotons, while carbon capture could remove 2,500 kilotons annually by 2030. Singapore is also set to import renewable electricity from neighbors like

Indonesia and Vietnam, with operations beginning in 2028.

While these efforts align with the Paris Agreement, Singapore's targets are seen as modest compared to its net-zero ambitions by 2050. Updated climate pledges for 2035 are due by February 2025. [The Straits Times]

Singapore: Army commissions new Hunter Armoured Engineer Vehicle

(lm) The Singapore Army has introduced the Hunter Armoured Engineer Vehicle (HT-AEV), a new variant of the Hunter armored fighting vehicle (AFV) designed for battlefield engineering tasks.

This addition follows the October 2022 commissioning of the Hunter Armoured Vehicle-Launched Bridge (HT-AVLB), another engineering-focused variant.

Earlier, in February 2022, the army commissioned the Hunter Recovery Vehicle (HT-HRV), equipped with a telescopic knuckle boom crane, recovery winch, and stabilizing mechanisms for heavy-duty recovery operations. [Asian Military Review]

Thailand: Administration of Prime Minister Paetongtarn under renewed legal pressure

(msz/lm) Thailand's Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra and her administration face a new series legal challenges and calls for the premier's removal, with recent pressure over allegations of ethical misconduct, an ongoing high-profile land disputes, and questions surrounding the treatment of her father, former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

Paetongtarn's appointment of Nattawut Saikuar – a prominent figure in the so-called red shirt movement – as an advisor has drawn criticism, with activist Sonthiya Sawasdee filing a petition alleging constitutional violations. Nattawut was previously jailed for two years in 2020 for a violent 2007 protest organized by the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) against the interim military-backed government that followed the 2006 coup against then-Prime Minister Thaksin.

Beyond the 2007 incident, Nattawut's prominence is closely tied to the red-shirt movement's broader campaign against military-backed administrations and royalist elites. He played a central role in the 2010 protests in Bangkok, during which tens of thousands of red-shirt supporters occupied key areas of the city, demanding fresh elections and criticizing the government of then-Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva.

The 2010 protests culminated in a military crackdown that left over 90 people dead and hundreds injured. Nattawut and other UDD leaders were charged with terrorism for their alleged roles in the unrest, though he has denied these charges, claiming the movement was peaceful and that the violence was provoked by state forces.

Nattawut's political activism and convictions make his appointment as an advisor to Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra controversial. Critics argue that his history undermines the ethical standards required for cabinet appointments under Section 160 of the Constitution. His political ban, stemming from past legal issues, further fuels claims that his advisory role violates constitutional provisions. [Bangkok Post 1]

Adding to the challenges is the long-standing Alpine Golf Club case, where a plot of monastic land was controversially sold to private companies, including one linked to the Shinawatra family. The land, originally donated to a temple, was transferred to Alpine Real Estate and Alpine Golf and Sports Club, sparking legal and ethical questions about violations of laws governing monastic property. Paetongtarn's transfer of her shares in the club to her mother in September 2024 has done little to ease scrutiny.

Calls for the revocation of the title deeds, led by opposition figures and Interior Minister Anutin Charnvirakul, cite a Council of State ruling that the land's monastic status was unlawfully altered. If reversed, the move could require compensation of up to THB 7.7 billion (USD 223 million), intensifying political and financial pressure on the administration. [Bangkok Post 2] [Bangkok Post 3]

In September 2024, former Deputy Interior Minister Chada Thaised signed an order for nullification before leaving office. However, the final authority to execute the revocation lies with Deputy Permanent Secretary for Interior Chamnanwit Terat, who faces increasing pressure to act before his retirement in September 2025. Failure to act could result in allegations of dereliction of duty under Section 157 of the Criminal Code. [Bangkok Post 4] [Bangkok Post 5]

Meanwhile, investigations into Thaksin Shinawatra's six-month hospital detention further complicate the Shinawatra family's political narrative. Thaksin, whose eight-year prison sentence was reduced to one year, avoided standard incarceration by citing health concerns and stayed in a VIP room at Police General Hospital at a personal cost of THB 8,500 (USD 247) per night. The National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC) and the Medical Council of Thailand are probing potential misconduct by state officials and medical ethics violations. Critics argue that Thaksin's extended hospital stay undermines the justice system, with civil society groups calling for greater transparency. [Bangkok Post 6] [Bangkok Post 7]

Thailand: Civil sector included in charter amendment review amid criticism

(lm) The Thai Parliament has approved a motion to allow civil sector representatives to join the parliamentary committee tasked with scrutinizing charter amendment bills. The joint sitting of the House of Representatives and the Senate passed the measure with 415 votes in favor, 185 against, and three abstentions. The change, proposed by a main opposition People's Party lawmaker, aims to ensure a comprehensive review of proposed amendments by involving non-parliament members, aligning with regulations for other legislative drafts.

While proponents argue the move promotes broader participation, critics warn it could diminish lawmakers' roles. Concerns were raised about how civil sector representatives would be selected, with some senators suggesting the process might be manipulated for political gain. The debate became contentious as senators disagreed over nominations for the scrutiny committee, leading to a temporary suspension of the session.

The revised regulation mandates that one-third of the scrutiny committee members be from the civil sector, a point of contention among lawmakers. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Main opposition People's Party seeks public input for censure debate

(lm) The main opposition People's Party (PP) has called on the public to provide information to support its no-confidence debate against the government, expected to take place in March. Opposition leader Natthaphong

Ruengpanyawut announced that the debate's timing is planned to avoid conflicting with mid-February discussions on constitutional amendments.

The PP has prepared up to 20 issues for censure, focusing on suspected government mismanagement, policy-oriented corruption, and conflicts of interest among coalition parties. Natthaphong expressed gratitude to citizens and state officials who have already shared information and urged others to contribute further. He refrained from detailing specific allegations, reserving them for the debate. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Government continues push for casino and online gambling legalization despite concerns

(lm/acs) The Thai government is advancing plans to legalize casinos within entertainment complexes and regulate online gambling, citing potential economic benefits and enhanced regulatory oversight.

The Entertainment Complex Bill, recently approved in principle by the cabinet, aims to attract international tourists and generate an estimated THB 1 trillion (USD 29 billion) annually. The government plans to allocate casino licenses through open bidding and impose strict regulations, including age and income thresholds for patrons.

Speaking against this backdrop, former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, the de facto leader of the ruling Pheu Thai party and father of incumbent Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra, recently emphasized that casinos would constitute less than 10 percent of entertainment complexes, which would include hotels, theaters, and other attractions. He argued that these initiatives could generate significant revenue, create jobs, and curb underground gambling operations. Thaksin also supports legalizing online gambling to redirect illicit activities into the formal economy and increase tax revenue. [Bangkok Post 1] [Bangkok Post 2]

Additionally, Deputy Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul, leader of the coalition core Bhumjaithai Party, the main party behind the de-listing of cannabis as a narcotics in 2022, has proposed a National Gambling Commission to oversee online gambling operations, ensuring financial accountability and addressing risks such as gambling addiction and debt exploitation. The framework is expected to include measures like monitoring financial transactions and

restricting loan extensions to indebted individuals. [Bangkok Post 3]

In parallel, the government is expediting the legalization of online gambling, with legislation expected to be finalized within a month. The Digital Economy and Society (DES) Ministry is spearheading the effort, focusing on amending secondary laws in collaboration with the Ministry of Interior and the Council of State. The initiative aims to regulate underground gambling operations, ensuring proper taxation and integrating popular forms like online football betting and traditional sports gambling into a formal framework. Public hearings will precede final legislation. [Bangkok Post 4]

While the government argues that these initiatives align with its broader policies to legalize underground businesses, critics argue that the casino bill was not part of the ruling Pheu Thai Party's election manifesto and appears to favor business elites. Opposition groups, including the main opposition People's Party (PP), have raised concerns about money laundering, organized crime, and inadequate safeguards against gambling addiction. Critics also question Thailand's capacity to compete with established gambling hubs such as Macau and Singapore. [Bangkok Post 5] [Bangkok Post 6]

Despite skepticism, the government has urged political parties to unite in supporting the bills, accusing underground operators of opposing legalization to protect their interests. [Bangkok Post 7]

Thailand: House passes Community Liquor Bill, enabling market entry for small entrepreneurs

(bk) Thailand's House of Representatives has approved the Community Liquor Bill, aimed at loosening the longstanding oligopoly in the alcoholic beverage industry. The bill, which allows small entrepreneurs, cooperatives, and farmers' groups to obtain licenses for liquor production and trade, was passed with overwhelming support. Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra emphasized that the legislation would enable small-scale producers to compete fairly, fostering economic growth in rural areas.

The bill seeks to challenge the dominance of industry giants Thai Beverage and Boon Rawd Brewery, which collectively control most of Thailand's beer and spirits market. The legislation is also expected to boost niche

alcoholic beverage production, particularly among restaurants and pubs catering to foreign tourists.

This move builds on earlier reforms in 2022 that removed minimum capital and production capacity requirements for small producers. With domestic liquor sales totaling 2.97 billion liters in 2023, the industry remains a significant contributor to the economy.

The bill, once approved by the Senate, will require additional ministerial regulations before permits can be issued. If implemented on schedule, it could take effect by October. Opposition MP Taopiphop Limjittrakorn, who has campaigned for years against the liquor monopoly, expressed optimism about the reform but pledged to continue advocating for further liberalization through his Progressive Liquor Bill. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Phase 2 of 'digital wallet' scheme set to launch days before PAO elections

(bk) The Thai government is set to distribute THB 10,000 (USD 290) per person to 3.5–4 million eligible seniors aged 60 or older under the second phase of its so-called "digital wallet" scheme starting January 27. Phase 1, implemented in September 2024, provided similar payments to 12.4 million state welfare cardholders and 2.15 million individuals with disabilities.

The Finance Ministry announced that eligibility criteria for phase 2 include an annual income for 2023 not exceeding THB 840,000 (USD 24,374), bank deposits of no more than THB 500,000 (USD 14,508) as of June 30, 2024, and exclusion from social welfare institutions or prisons as of November 30, 2024. Recipients must also not have received payments from the 2024 stimulus program. [Royal Thai Government]

The timing of the handout has drawn criticism from the opposition People's Party and its affiliates. Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, a former leader of the party's predecessor, the Future Forward Party, questioned whether the ruling Pheu Thai Party had strategically timed the distribution to coincide with the February 1 provincial administrative organization (PAO) elections. While avoiding direct accusations, Thanathorn encouraged voters to consider the timing and its potential implications.

Beyond concerns about the digital wallet scheme, Thanathorn also criticized the Election Commission's decision to schedule the PAO elections on a Saturday, a regular workday for many. He argued that this could hinder voter participation and called on employers to grant workers time off to vote. The People's Party has fielded candidates for the presidency of 17 PAOs, including key provinces such as Songkhla, Phang Nga, Phuket, and Surat Thani, in an effort to showcase their capacity for effective local governance. [The Nation]

Thailand: Police recommend fraud and money laundering indictment for celebrity lawyer

(lm) Police have submitted an investigation report to prosecutors recommending the indictment of celebrity lawyer Sittra Biabungkerd, also known as "Lawyer Tam," and six others on fraud and money laundering charges. The case involves multiple offenses both within Thailand and abroad.

The charges include a THB 71 million (USD 2.06 million) fraud involving a fake online lottery, a THB 39 million (USD 1.13 million) cryptocurrency scam, and a THB 1.53 million (USD 44,370) profit from the sale of a falsified Mercedes-Benz purchase. Domestically, the suspects are accused of reaping THB 5.5 million (USD 159,500) in profits from a fraudulent hotel design scheme.

The suspects, including Sittra's wife and other alleged collaborators, are accused of document forgery and financial misconduct. Police have already seized assets worth over THB 70 million (USD 2.03 million), including a luxury home, high-end vehicles, and cash.

Prosecutors will now form a panel to review the case before the suspects' detention expires on January 30. Sittra and his wife have been in custody since their arrest in November, following complaints filed by a lottery jackpot winner alleging fraud. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Public Health Ministry to revise surrogacy law following Marriage Equality Act

(msz) Thailand's Public Health Ministry is updating the surrogacy law to align with the Marriage Equality Act and accommodate international couples seeking surrogacy services in the country. The amendments to

the Protection for Children Born through Assisted Reproductive Technologies Act include replacing gender-specific terms like "husband" and "wife" with "spouses," thereby extending surrogacy rights to same-sex couples.

Foreign couples, including those with foreign surrogates, will also be eligible under the revised law, which permits the export of embryos, sperm, or eggs back to their home countries. Currently, only foreigners married to Thais can access surrogacy services.

To address concerns about child custody and guardianship in cases of separation, the amendments propose stricter oversight by a special committee. Measures to combat illegal surrogacy and human trafficking include enhanced penalties, such as longer prison terms and higher fines, for violations committed both within and outside Thailand.

The revised law upholds the prohibition of commercial surrogacy and advertising for surrogacy services. Surrogates must be relatives of the intended parents, ensuring transparency and accountability.

The reforms aim to reduce underground surrogacy activities and promote ethical practices while reflecting growing interest in surrogacy among single women and international couples. The proposal is under review by the Health Ministry and will proceed to the cabinet for approval. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Farmers demand action to restore ecosystems, compensate for invasive fish

(hrs) Farmers and environmental advocates protested in Bangkok, urging the government and Charoen Pokphand (CP) Group to address the spread of blackchin tilapia, a highly invasive fish species devastating Thailand's waterways and ecosystems. Approximately 150 demonstrators from 19 affected provinces gathered outside Government House and CP Tower, delivering letters to CP Foods, the prime minister’s office, and parliamentary committees. They carried signs, fishing nets, and specimens of the invasive fish caught in Bangkok.

The protesters outlined four demands: establishing an independent committee to determine responsibility within 30 days, providing financial relief to affected farmers, forming committees to eradicate the species and restore ecosystems by 2026, and pursuing legal

action against those responsible for the fish's spread to ensure compensation.

The controversy centers on CP Foods, a subsidiary of CP Group, Thailand's largest agricultural conglomerate. The company imported 2,000 blackchin tilapia from Ghana in 2010 for research. Although CP Foods claims it destroyed the fish after the experiment failed, activists and farmers allege the company is responsible for the species' spread.

Legal battles are ongoing. In September 2024, the Lawyers Council of Thailand filed a lawsuit against the government on behalf of 1,400 farmers, accusing authorities of failing to act promptly. A separate lawsuit against CP Foods seeks compensation for livelihood losses. CP Foods has denied responsibility, supported government-led eradication efforts, and filed a defamation suit against a prominent NGO for linking the company to the outbreak.

The crisis has caused widespread economic harm. Aquaculture farmers have lost access to vital natural resources and income, with one subdistrict in Samut Songkhram province alone reporting losses of THB 132 million (USD 3.8 million) in 2020. Nationally, the impact is estimated to exceed THB 10 billion (USD 293 million). [Mongabay] [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: MP raises concerns over foreign beggars with children

A main opposition People's Party MP for Bangkok has urged the government to address the growing issue of foreign beggars in the Asok-Nana area, many of whom bring young children to solicit sympathy and money. Investigations by the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration and other agencies found some children to be as young as one month old.

The lawmaker highlighted that most of the beggars are Cambodians, accompanied by elderly individuals claiming to be relatives. He suggested DNA testing to confirm these claims and stressed that using children for solicitation violates Thai laws.

Concerns were also raised about public safety, with reports of pickpocketing and theft involving these networks. Authorities believe many of the beggars operate illegally or have overstayed visas, earning significant daily incomes while operating as part of organized networks. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Indian nationals face frequent 'slap attacks' by motorcyclists

(lm) Indian visitors in Thailand's eastern city of Pattaya have become targets of repeated assaults, with motorcyclists and pillion riders slapping their heads as they ride past, often late at night. Closed-circuit television (CCTV) footage and witness accounts reveal young men, sometimes in school uniforms, perpetrating these attacks. Reports also include instances of spitting on victims. [Bangkok Post 1] [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: Blood donation crisis in the Northeast prompts urgent appeal

(lm) Hospitals across northeastern Thailand, including Nakhon Ratchasima, Chaiyaphum, Buri Ram, and Surin, face a severe blood shortage, with only 30-40 percent of required supplies available. Officials at Regional Blood Centre V report that Nakhon Ratchasima alone requires 13,000 to 15,000 units monthly, but current donations total just 3,000 units, reflecting a shortfall of up to 80 percent.

The shortage stems from irregular donations, insufficient new donors, and health issues such as thalassemia and anemia among potential donors. Officials urge individuals, especially young people aged 17 and older, to donate regularly to mitigate the crisis. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Affordable housing and debt relief programs face overwhelming demand and challenges

(msz/acs) The Thai government's affordable housing initiative, "Home for Thais," launched on January 18, witnessed overwhelming demand as over 12 million people registered within hours, causing the official website to crash.

Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra introduced the project at an exhibition in Bangkok, highlighting its goal to address the housing needs of 5.87 million households, or 27 percent of the population, who currently lack their own homes. The project, backed by the ministries of Transport and Finance, aims to improve living standards and provide long-term security for Thai families.

Designed for low-income earners and recent graduates, the program offers housing with no down payment and monthly mortgage payments starting at THB 4,000 (USD 116). The pilot phase will focus on four locations near mass transit systems: Bang Sue Km 11, Thon Buri, Chiang Rak, and Chiang Mai. The Bang Sue Km 11 site will feature 1,232 condominium units priced between THB 1.76 million (USD 51,000) and THB 3 million (USD 87,000), while other areas will offer a mix of condominiums and single houses.

Using 38,000 rai (6,080 hectares) of unused State Railway of Thailand land, the program allows buyers to acquire properties under leaseholds of up to 99 years. Eligibility criteria include being a Thai national of legal age, earning less than THB 50,000 (USD 1,450) per month, and not being blacklisted by the National Credit Bureau. [Bangkok Post 1]

Meanwhile, former Prime Minister and de facto leader of the Pheu Thai Party, Thaksin Shinawatra, promised to establish one million housing units for low-income people to address the housing problem. During his speech in Bueng Kan Province, he asserted that the government had built 7,000 housing units so far. However, he pledged that over 100,000 housing units would be constructed this year to meet the excessive demand. Furthermore, he stated that all newly constructed housing units would be connected to railways to provide transportation facilities. [Bangkok Post 2]

In parallel, the government's "You Fight, We Help" debt relief program, launched in December 2024, has also seen significant participation, though many applicants failed to meet eligibility criteria. The scheme aims to alleviate Thailand's household debt crisis, which stood at 90 percent of GDP in the third quarter of last year. It offers measures like suspending interest payments for three years and step-up repayment plans for mortgages up to THB 5 million (USD 145,000), car loans up to THB 800,000 (USD 23,200), and small business loans up to THB 5 million (USD 145,000). Borrowers must have been in debt before January 1, 2024, with repayment defaults between 30 to 356 days.

Out of 461,029 registrants, only 220,296 loan accounts were approved, with many applicants misunderstanding the eligibility criteria. Tisco Financial Group and Kiatnakin Phatra Financial Group reported approval rates of just 30 and 50 percent, respectively, highlighting the need for better communication of the scheme's conditions. [Bangkok Post 3]

Thailand: Bangkok tops social issue complaints handled by emergency center

(lm) The Human Security Emergency Management Centre (HuSec) managed over 188,000 social issue cases in 2024, with Bangkok accounting for 119,107 complaints, the highest among all regions. The cases spanned domestic violence, homelessness, disabilities, elderly care, and other social challenges.

Most complaints (171,204) were filed via the Social Assistance Centre Hotline, with additional reports submitted through social media, walk-ins, and ministry referrals. Issues affecting working-age individuals dominated (97,455 cases), followed by complaints involving people with disabilities (33,051), the elderly (31,306), and children (23,337).

HuSec addressed 4,712 violence-related cases, with children making up the majority of victims, particularly in domestic violence and public violence incidents. Physical abuse and sexual molestation were the most reported issues.

In response, the center provided welfare and protection assistance to 31,619 individuals facing poor living conditions, income shortages, and family issues. Additionally, 69,791 complainants received advice on topics such as welfare rights, government handout programs, and health concerns, highlighting the critical role of HuSec in addressing Thailand's social challenges. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Consumer confidence hits six-month high, driven by stimulus and tourism

(bk) Thai consumer confidence climbed for the third straight month in December 2024, reaching a six-month high of 57.9, up from 56.9 in November 2024, according to the University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce (UTCC).

This rise was driven by government stimulus measures, including subsidies for rice farmers of THB 1,000 per rai (0.4 acres) for up to a total of 10 rai (4 acres), launched in November 2024, and the anticipated distribution of THB 10,000 (USD 290) under the "digital wallet" scheme for the elderly, scheduled for late January 2025. Tourism also played a significant role in bolstering confidence, with 35.5 million foreign arrivals in 2024, marking a 26.3 percent increase from

2023 and approaching the record 40 million visitors in 2019.

Finance Minister Pichai Chunhavajira projected economic growth above 3 percent in 2025, following an estimated 2.7-2.8 percent in 2024, with tourism continuing as a major economic pillar. [Bangkok Post 1] [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: Deputy Prime Minister calls for younger Bank of Thailand chief

(lm) Deputy Prime Minister Pichai Chunhavajira has emphasized the need for the next Bank of Thailand (BoT) governor to come from a younger generation, with a broader vision and forward-thinking approach to address evolving financial challenges. The current governor, Sethaput Suthiwartnarueput, will conclude his term on September 30. The Ministry of Finance is also addressing the selection of a new BoT board chairman after candidate Kittiratt Na-Ranong was deemed ineligible due to prior political roles.

The selection process for the new governor is expected to begin in June, in line with legal requirements to initiate the process at least 90 days before the current term ends. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: BOI prepares new measures to boost Thai-made automotive parts

(bk) Thailand's Board of Investment (BOI) is collaborating with the Federation of Thai Industries (FTI) and the Thai Automotive Parts Manufacturers Association to safeguard the nation’s automotive industry, particularly in response to the growing presence of Chinese electric vehicles (EVs). The BOI aims to boost the use of domestically produced automotive parts, with a focus on those made by Thai SMEs.

While existing regulations encourage the domestic use of essential parts, new incentives are being developed to further promote Thai-made components. For the EV sector, the BOI prioritizes sustainable development across the entire value chain, from raw material sourcing to downstream battery management. By 2025, the government, in partnership with the Ministry of Industry, plans to establish a robust battery recycling infrastructure.

These measures, expected to be finalized within two months, align with the government's strategy to position Thailand as a regional hub for both internal combustion engine (ICE) and EV manufacturing, reinforcing its status as a top 10 global automotive production base. [The Nation]

Thailand: New industrial estate in Sri Racha planned to open in 2027, boosting key industries

(bk) The Industrial Estate Authority of Thailand (IEAT) is collaborating with Pinthong Industrial Park Plc to develop the Pinthong Industrial Estate 8 in Sri Racha, Chonburi, on a 1,101-rai (446-acre) plot of land. The project aims to attract a total investment of THB 34.4 billion (USD 998 million) and create approximately 8,350 jobs.

The new industrial estate is planned to open in 2027 and will focus on attracting manufacturers from various industries, including auto parts, electronics, logistics, and clean energy. Companies eligible for investment privileges from the Board of Investment and the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) Policy Committee are anticipated to establish operations at the estate. This development is part of Thailand's broader strategy to enhance industrial growth and create job opportunities in these key industries. [The Nation]

Thailand: Korat mass transit project approved

(lm) The government has approved a long-anticipated electric rail mass transit project for Nakhon Ratchasima, Thailand's third-largest city. The 11.2-kilometer Green Line will connect Save One Market to the Baan Naree Sawat Protection and Career Development Centre in Muang district.

The rubber-tyred tram system, chosen for its elevated design and automatic electric operation, is estimated to cost THB 8.2 billion (USD 237.8 million). A public-private partnership model is proposed for investment, with fares initially set at THB 10 (USD 0.29) per journey.

Design work will begin this year, followed by public hearings in 2026. Construction is planned after completing the Bang Pa In-Nakhon Ratchasima Motorway (M6) and the Sino-Thai high-speed railway

linking Bangkok and Nakhon Ratchasima. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Government revises Deep South strategy

(msz/lm) The Thai government is revamping its strategy for the country's so-called Deep South, a Muslim-majority region comprising the provinces of Yala, Pattani, Narathiwat, and parts of Songkhla, which has faced decades of insurgent violence driven by ethnic and religious tensions. The revised strategy is supposed to focus on peace dialogues, infrastructure development, and addressing ongoing security challenges.

In recent developments, Defense Minister Phumtham Wechayachai has tasked National Security Council Secretary General Chatchai Bangchuad with drafting a new strategy aimed at fostering dialogue with insurgent groups, including the Barisan Revolusi Nasionale (BRN). The plan envisions lifting the state of emergency and reducing troop deployments in the region by 2027, while incorporating measures for employment, development, and political restructuring. This comes amidst criticism of budgetary inefficiencies, particularly the entitlement of Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC) personnel who reportedly receive risk stipends without being stationed in the conflict zones of Yala, Pattani, and Narathiwat. [Thai PBS World]

In parallel, Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra recently visited Narathiwat, Pattani, and Yala to engage directly with locals and expedite development projects. She emphasized decentralization, arguing that local governments are better positioned to address community needs. Key infrastructure initiatives discussed include a parallel bridge over the Kolok River in Sungai Kolok, set to begin construction in June in collaboration with Malaysia, and the Hat Yai-Sungai Kolok double-track railway, which promises to enhance goods transportation and reduce costs.

The prime minister also underscored the government's commitment to utilizing advanced technology in transport and boosting agricultural exports. Additionally, scholarships for students pursuing studies in future industries were announced as part of the broader development agenda. Paetongtarn presided over a Justice Ministry-organized debt settlement fair for Student Loan Fund debtors, reflecting the government's focus on economic and social support for the region. [Bangkok Post 1]

However, security challenges persist in the Deep South, highlighted by a series of violent incidents in January. A bomb in Narathiwat's Sri Sakhon district killed two border patrol officers on January 14, just days before Paetongtarn's visit. Another attack in Pattani injured six paramilitary rangers, and a separate pipe bomb assault on a border patrol base caused minimal damage due to protective nets.

Since the start of 2025, security forces have reported 14 violent incidents in the region, underlining the continued threat of unrest. [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: Government plans major crackdown on drugs, scams, and trafficking

(lm) The Thai government is launching a six-month campaign to combat drug abuse, call center scams, and human trafficking, with details set to be announced by Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra on January 30. Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Phumtham Wechayachai emphasized the urgency of addressing these issues, particularly along Thailand's porous borders.

The campaign will involve coordinated efforts from the Interior Ministry, Royal Thai Police, Office of the Narcotics Control Board (ONCB), Anti-Money Laundering Office (Amlo), and armed forces. A two-layer border security system is planned across 14 provinces, 51 districts, and 76 police stations to curb illegal activities. Phumtham highlighted the importance of evaluating the campaign's effectiveness after six months and warned that stricter measures could follow if significant progress is not made.

Former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, the de facto leader of the ruling Pheu Thai Party, has also pledged to eliminate drug abuse and cross-border scams by the end of the year. Phumtham noted that natural crossings along the Mekong River and other border areas remain a key challenge to security. He added that officers unable to meet their responsibilities would face reassignment, underlining the campaign's seriousness in addressing these long-standing issues. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Woman arrested over sale of stolen police guns to Myanmar's Karen Army

(hrs) Thai authorities have arrested a woman in Umphang district, Tak province, for allegedly purchasing and reselling 43 stolen M16 rifles to the Karen army across the border with neighboring Myanmar. These rifles were stolen in December 2022 from a Border Patrol Police arsenal in Bangkok's Bang Khen district. Investigations led to the arrest of several suspects, including police personnel, who facilitated the sale. [The Nation]

The Karen army, primarily the armed wing of the Karen National Union (KNU), has long been involved in fighting for autonomy for the Karen people, the second-largest ethnic minority in Myanmar. Operating near the Thai-Myanmar border, the KNU has maintained a complex relationship with Thailand. While some factions of the Karen army have relied on Thailand for refuge and resources, their activities have sometimes caused tensions, particularly regarding cross-border crime and smuggling. [Geopolitical Monitor]

Thailand: Authorities seize two massive drug hauls on train and cotton textile, and arrest drug boss

(hrs) Thai authorities have intercepted two significant drug shipments and arrested a suspected drug boss in a major crackdown on trafficking networks.

More than 100 kilograms of crystal methamphetamine, worth an estimated THB 200 million (USD 5.8 million), were seized aboard a freight train traveling from Bangkok to Songkhla. Declared as curry paste and riceberry rice, the illicit cargo raised suspicions when the sender abruptly requested a change of destination. [The Nation 1]

In a separate operation, authorities uncovered 1.65 tons of crystal methamphetamine concealed in rolls of cotton fabric during a joint investigation by the Office of Narcotics Control Board (ONCB), customs, navy, and air force officials. Linked to an Indian trafficking gang, the drugs were intended for export to countries such as Australia, South Korea, and Japan. Five Thai suspects working for the gang were arrested, and authorities are investigating whether previous shipments also contained narcotics. [The Nation 2]

Meanwhile, In Chiang Rai's Chiang Khong district, ONCB officials apprehended alleged drug kingpin Pongsak Ruenphet while he attempted to flee via the 4th Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge. Accused of running a network smuggling drugs from northern Thailand to

other regions, Pongsak's assets worth THB 20 million (USD 588,000) have been frozen. His arrest is tied to a 2021 case involving a suspect found with 600,000 methamphetamine pills and 41 kilograms of crystal meth. [The Nation 2]

Thailand: Customs seize hazardous electronic waste smuggled from Japan and Hong Kong

(bk) Thai Customs officials confiscated 256 tons of electronic waste smuggled from Japan and Hong Kong via Laem Chabang Port. The shipments, falsely declared as scrap metal, were flagged for inspection in early January, revealing unusable electronic appliance parts classified as hazardous materials.

The importation of such waste, regulated under Thai law and the Basel Convention, requires proper authorization. This crackdown is part of Thailand's efforts to combat hazardous material imports, including the recent ban on plastic scrap imports effective January 1, 2025.

In the first quarter of fiscal year 2025, Customs officials seized nearly 257 tons of hazardous waste and 323 tons of plastic waste. [The Nation]

Timor-Leste: Prime Minister launches seismic study for oil and gas exploration

(lm) Timor-Leste's Prime Minister Kay Rala Xanana Gusmao officially inaugurated a seismic survey project for oil and gas exploration in the Pualaca Block on January 11. The launch marks a significant step in assessing the energy potential of the region, which spans 1,575 square kilometers across the municipalities of Manatuto, Manufahi, and Viqueque. The initiative is spearheaded by TIMOR GAP in collaboration with the National Petroleum Authority (ANP).

Minister of Petroleum and Mineral Resources Francisco da Costa Monteiro emphasized the project's importance in confirming the region's energy potential. The seismic study represents a critical step in the nation's broader efforts to develop its petroleum resources and strengthen its energy sector. [Government of Timor-Leste]

Vietnam: Government shuts multiple state-run TV channels amid cost-cutting plan

(he) Vietnam has ceased broadcasting at least 16 state-controlled television channels, including Voice of Vietnam's (VOV) VTC Digital Television, as part of an extensive government reform plan to reduce bureaucracy and cut costs. The closures, effective January 15, impact 13 VTC channels, Nhan Dan TV, and VOV TV, with National Assembly TV already discontinued earlier on January 1. Under this initiative, Vietnam Television (VTV) will become the sole national broadcaster, consolidating media operations in the country.

The reforms, guided by the Politburo's Resolution 18, aim to streamline the political system, eliminate redundancy, and achieve a 20 percent reduction in the public workforce. These changes will reduce the number of government ministries from 30 to 22 and include workforce cuts across the civil service, police, military, and state-owned enterprises. Minister Pham Thi Thanh Tra described the initiative as transformative, emphasizing its goal of shifting operational mindsets and fostering a more efficient government.

VTC, previously the second most-watched station in Vietnam, was established in 2004 and merged with VOV in 2015. While it served as a vehicle for state propaganda, it also addressed critical social issues, including women's rights and education. Critics have called the abrupt shutdown "destructive," citing the waste of expensive broadcasting equipment and insufficient consideration for the livelihoods of over 1,000 employees affected by the closures. [Channel News Asia] [Bangkok Post] [Radio Free Asia]

Vietnam: Party leader chairs inaugural meeting of science, technology, digital transformation committee

(lm) Vietnam's President and ruling Party General Secretary To Lam recently chaired the first meeting of the Central Steering Committee for the Development of Science, Technology, Innovation, and Digital Transformation in Hanoi.

The committee's work is guided by the Politburo's Resolution No. 57-NQ/TW, issued on December 22, 2024, which focuses on fostering breakthroughs in science, technology, and national digital

transformation. The resolution aims to remove institutional barriers, promote innovation, and advance Vietnam's technological capabilities to meet global standards.

Lam emphasized the importance of implementing tasks with urgency and precision, assigning clear responsibilities with measurable indicators and timelines. He highlighted the necessity of listening to expert opinions and grassroots feedback to address critical challenges and identify priorities effectively.

The Party leader underscored the importance of establishing a national advisory council comprising leading scientists, reputable experts, business representatives, and managers to ensure practical and balanced guidance. He also stressed the development of an index to monitor and evaluate the implementation of Resolution No. 57, which is expected to be operational by the second quarter of 2025.

The Prime Minister was tasked with directing reforms to financial mechanisms for science and technology, simplifying administrative procedures, and granting more autonomy in using funds for research and development. Lam also called for the creation of specific plans to develop a high-quality workforce, including measures to attract highly skilled expatriates and foreign experts to contribute to Vietnam's scientific progress.

He directed the Minister of Public Security to coordinate efforts to establish a comprehensive ecosystem for Project 06, which focuses on leveraging residents' data for digital transformation and developing a National Data Center. The Minister of Information and Communications was instructed to oversee the nationwide rollout of the 5G broadband network, while the Minister of Science and Technology was tasked with formulating a strategic program for technology and industrial development.

The Minister of Finance was assigned to allocate state budget resources to support critical scientific and technological missions, and the Minister of Planning and Investment was instructed to draft a public-private partnership policy to enhance innovation and digital transformation initiatives. [Viet Nam News]

Vietnam: National Assembly deputy removed for party violations

(hn) The National Assembly Standing Committee removed Duong Van An, a deputy from Vinh Phuc Province, from his position on January 15, following his resignation request. The decision was based on constitutional and legal provisions, recommendations from the National Assembly's Committee for Deputy Affairs, and opinions from authorized agencies.

An faced disciplinary measures from the Politburo and the Party Central Committee's Secretariat after an investigation revealed violations during his tenure as secretary of the Binh Thuan Province Party Committee (October 2020–March 2024). These violations included breaching party regulations and state laws, particularly in combating corruption and wastefulness.

The Politburo issued a warning to An, emphasizing the serious consequences of his misconduct. [Viet Nam News] [Vietnam Plus]

Vietnam: Court convicts 10 in corruption case

(he) A Hanoi court sentenced 10 individuals for their involvement in corruption tied to the Dai Ninh Ecotourism, Commercial, and Residential Area project in Lam Dong Province. The charges included bribery, giving bribes, and abuse of power, with sentences ranging from two years to nine years. Former CEO of Sai Gon Dai Ninh Company, Nguyen Cao Tri, received a total of nine years for bribery and embezzlement.

The case originated from violations in the project launched in 2010 with an investment of nearly USD 1 billion. The Lam Dong Province People's Committee had granted the company an investment certificate for the 50-year project covering 3,595 hectares. However, an inspection conducted between 2013 and 2018 revealed extensive violations. Sai Gon Dai Ninh Company failed to fulfill financial obligations, neglected land-use fees, caused environmental damage, and permitted illegal land encroachments. The Government Inspectorate recommended canceling the project and reclaiming the land.

Instead, Nguyen Cao Tri exploited the situation by bribing officials with approximately USD 273,000 to manipulate decisions. His actions resulted in an unlawful project extension, preventing land reclamation and causing significant state losses. Despite the extension, violations such as illegal land use and deforestation continued unabated. [Vietnam News]

Vietnam: Five years after land dispute, victims allege ongoing harassment and injustice

(lm) Five years after a violent police raid on Dong Tam commune, south of Hanoi, which resulted in the death of a land-rights activist Le Dinh Kinh and the arrest of numerous villagers, survivors and their families claim they continue to face harassment and unresolved grievances. The January 9, 2020, raid involved approximately 3,000 riot police and stemmed from a protracted dispute over land ownership.

Police allege that during the raid, three officers were killed by villagers led by Kinh's sons, Le Dinh Cong and Le Dinh Chuc, who were later sentenced to death. Kinh's widow, Du Thi Thanh, has detailed the police's brutal treatment of her family, including beatings and poor detention conditions for her imprisoned sons. Thanh also reports challenges in securing her late husband's death certificate and retrieving confiscated documents, including the land ownership "red book," which has left her in a precarious legal and financial position.

The Dong Tam raid followed years of tension, including a 2017 incident when villagers captured police officers during another land dispute. Critics argue the 2020 operation was a retaliatory act meant to reassert state authority. Legal advocates and rights groups have condemned the raid and its aftermath, labeling it a gross abuse of power and a lasting stain on Vietnam's human rights record. [Radio Free Asia]

Vietnam: Social media user penalized for criticizing new traffic rules

(lm) Vietnam has reprimanded a Hanoi resident for criticizing the country's recently enacted traffic regulations on social media. The stricter rules, introduced under Decree 168 at the start of the year, impose steep fines for infractions like running red lights, riding motorbikes on sidewalks, and using phones while driving.

The case reflects Vietnam's broader crackdown on online dissent, with authorities citing concerns over content perceived as provocative or destabilizing. Vietnam's laws, including Article 117 and Article 331 of the criminal code, are often invoked to address online dissent, framing it as "propaganda against the state" or

"abusing democratic freedoms." Critics argue the government's heavy-handed censorship highlights its apprehension about public discontent. [Radio Free Asia]

Vietnam: Legal proceedings begin against man accused of killing four family members

(lm) Legal proceedings have commenced against a 52-year-old man, accused of murdering four family members. According to the police investigation, the defendant admitted to killing his wife, two children, and his 79-year-old bedridden mother, citing a desire to "free his family from poverty." Following the murders, he attempted suicide by taking sleeping pills but failed. [Viet Nam News]

It is important to note that in Vietnam, the term "poverty" carries significant political and social weight, given the government's long-standing focus on poverty eradication as a key marker of its success. While the country has made remarkable progress in reducing poverty rates and achieving middle-income status, isolated cases of extreme hardship can challenge the narrative of socio-economic development and stability. Discussions of poverty in public discourse are often reframed as "economic challenges" to maintain the emphasis on progress and social harmony.

Vietnam: Higher domestic consumption critical for economic growth

(lm) Vietnam's domestic consumption rebounded strongly in 2024, contributing significantly to the country's 7.09 percent economic growth. Total retail sales of goods and consumer services exceeded VND 6.4 quadrillion (USD 251.9 billion), reflecting a 9 percent year-on-year increase, meeting government targets. Government measures such as a VAT reduction from 10 to 8 percent on essential goods, increased base salaries from July 2024, and efforts to address sectoral bottlenecks played a pivotal role in stimulating demand.

While consumer spending has yet to return to pre-pandemic double-digit growth rates, a shift in consumption patterns has emerged, with essentials like food, clothing, and household items comprising 77 percent of retail sales, up from 75.3 percent in 2019. Spending on non-essential services, including tourism

and entertainment, has decreased, reflecting cautious consumer behavior amid ongoing economic challenges.

Tourism also played a vital role in driving demand, with Vietnam welcoming over 17.5 million foreign visitors in 2024, marking a 39.5 percent increase from 2023. Additionally, e-commerce experienced significant growth, surpassing USD 25 billion in 2024, up 20 percent year-on-year, and now accounts for 9 percent of total retail sales.

Economic experts emphasize that domestic consumption, which contributes nearly two-thirds of GDP, remains a critical driver for sustainable growth. To maintain momentum, the Association of Vietnam Retailers highlights the importance of sustaining e-commerce growth at 20 percent annually over the next five years, aligning with the ambitious goal of achieving double-digit GDP growth. [Viet Nam News]

Vietnam: Over 158,500 workers sent abroad in 2024

(lm) In 2024, Vietnam sent over 158,500 workers, including more than 52,800 women, abroad for employment—achieving 126.9 percent of its annual target. Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan remained key destinations, while European markets such as Lithuania and Romania increasingly opened their doors to Vietnamese labor. This surge contributed between USD 3.5 billion and USD 4 billion annually to the national economy.

Although overseas employment programs have recovered significantly post-pandemic, challenges persist. A shrinking domestic labor pool, evolving policies in traditional markets, illegal labor brokerage practices, and contract overstays have strained efforts to meet demand and maintain Vietnam's reputation abroad.

Moving forward, the government aims to stabilize existing markets while expanding into high-income destinations such as Germany, Greece, and Finland. Preparations will include enhancing vocational and language training, cultural awareness programs, and rights protection for workers. Upon their return, these workers will contribute to Vietnam's domestic economy, particularly in industries linked to Japan and South Korea.

Approximately 700,000 Vietnamese workers are currently employed across 40 countries and territories,

with nearly 500,000 having been sent abroad since 2021. [Viet Nam News]

Vietnam: New projects to generate nearly USD 200 million in industrial production for Ba Ria-Vung Tau

(lm) Vietnam's southern province of Ba Ria-Vung Tau expects new industrial projects to contribute approximately VND 5 trillion (USD 197 million) to its industrial production value in 2025.

In 2025, 21 industrial projects are scheduled to become operational. Notable ventures include a USD 540 million carbon fiber factory by South Korea's Hyosung Group, the Cai Mep-Phu My pipeline and Phu My gas distribution station worth nearly USD 60 million by Hai Linh Co. Ltd, and a USD 100 million Pocari factory by Otsuka Nutraceutical Vietnam Co. Ltd.

In 2024, 31 industrial projects commenced operations, boosting production value and introducing new products. The province's industrial production value rose by 12.91 percent in 2024 compared to 2023, exceeding the target of 10.11 percent. The Phu My 3 Specialized Industrial Zone attracted 46 investors with over USD 4 billion in registered capital, drawing multinational corporations from countries such as Japan, South Korea, and the United States.

Ba Ria-Vung Tau plans to implement administrative reforms, aiming to reduce processing times for 800 procedures by 35-40 percent and increase online public services. Investments in transport infrastructure are also being accelerated to enhance connectivity and attract more domestic and foreign investors. [Viet Nam News]

Vietnam: USD 4.5 billion international transshipment port project approved

(he) Vietnam has approved the Can Gio International Transshipment Port project in Ho Chi Minh City, a USD 4.5 billion initiative aimed at strengthening the country's maritime economy. Designed to accommodate large vessels, the port is expected to handle up to 16.9 million TEUs (twenty-foot equivalent units) annually by 2047 and employ between 6,000 and 8,000 workers upon completion.

The project will be developed in two phases, from 2023 to 2030 and from 2030 to 2045, with the involvement of MSC, the world's largest shipping line based in Geneva, Switzerland. MSC currently handles over 23 million TEUs annually, representing 18 percent of global shipping capacity.

The project will operate for 50 years, with restrictions on project transfers in the first five years. Any national defense, security, or foreign ownership concerns will require approval from relevant ministries.

The Can Gio Port is projected to generate between VND 34 trillion and VND 40 trillion annually (approximately USD 1.5 billion to USD 1.7 billion) in state revenue at full capacity. This revenue will come from taxes on cargo handling, storage, corporate income, maritime fees, water surface rentals, and import-export duties. By 2030, the port is expected to handle 4.8 million TEUs, growing to 16.9 million TEUs by 2047. [Tuoi Tre News] [Vietnam News]

Vietnam: Ninh Co Economic Zone approved in Nam Dinh to boost regional development

(hn) Deputy Prime Minister Tran Hong Ha has approved the establishment of the Ninh Co Economic Zone in southern Nam Dinh Province, spanning nearly 14,000 hectares across Nghia Hung and Hai Hau districts. Once completed, Ninh Co will serve as a comprehensive, multi-sector coastal economic zone, becoming a key development driver for Nam Dinh and contributing to the economic growth of the Red River Delta and the Gulf of Tonkin economic belt.

The project will be implemented in three phases: Phase I (2024-2026) will focus on construction planning and key initial infrastructure; Phase II, expected to be completed by 2030, will develop urban, industrial, and service infrastructure; and after 2030, the project will finalize integrated and modern economic and social systems.

Approved as part of Vietnam's coastal economic zone development plan in 2020, Nam Dinh, located 80 km from Hanoi, is set to become a modern economic hub in the Red River Delta by 2050. [Vnxpress, in Vietnamese]

International Relations, Geopolitics and Security in Asia

EU imposes anti-dumping tariffs on Chinese sweetener erythritol

(wy) The European Commission has announced the imposition of anti-dumping duties on China's sweetener erythritol imported into the EU.

In a statement issued on January 16, the EU accused China of causing harm to its domestic industry. The statement highlighted that the EU's erythritol industry suffered "double-digit losses" and ceased production at the end of 2022, resulting in an annual loss of EUR 30 million (approximately USD 31 million). This was attributed to the "unfairly low prices" of erythritol supplied by China.

To safeguard the EU market, anti-dumping duties ranging from 34.4 percent to 233.3 percent will be applied to erythritol imports from China. These duties will be retroactively collected from June 7, 2024, at the same provisional rates imposed on July 19, 2024. The measures will take effect on January 17, 2025, and remain in place for five years. [European Commission] [Reuters]

Japan strengthens engagement with NATO

(adi) Japan has formally established an independent mission to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in Brussels, marking a significant step in its growing collaboration with the military alliance. Osamu

Izawa, Japan's Ambassador to NATO, has been appointed to head the mission, which was previously managed through Japan's embassy in Belgium. The move underscores Japan's intent to deepen ties with NATO amidst evolving security challenges in both East Asia and Europe.

Discussions between Japanese and NATO officials in Tokyo have centered on regional and global stability, with a particular focus on the implications of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the deepening ties between Moscow and Beijing. Notably, on January 16, Japan and NATO held the 18th High-Level Consultations in Tokyo, led by Senior Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs Funakoshi Takehiro and NATO Assistant Secretary General for Political Affairs and Security challenges in East Asian and Europe and reaffirmed both sides' commitment to strengthening their partnership. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan]

While NATO does not integrate its Indo-Pacific partners —such as Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand—into its formal structures, it has significantly enhanced its cooperation with these nations in recent years.

Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba has formerly emphasized the need for a collective security framework in Asia akin to NATO during his campaign for the Liberal Democratic Party's leadership in September 2024. This vision aligns with Japan's broader strategic goals to deter aggression in the region, particularly in the face of heightened Chinese military activities and North Korean threats. [Straits Times]

China, however, has voiced strong criticism of the strengthening ties between NATO and its Indo-Pacific partners. Beijing perceives these collaborations as a potential precursor to a U.S.-led military alliance aimed at countering its influence in the region. [Straits Times]

Japan's proactive approach to building alliances beyond its traditional partners reflects a strategic pivot to address emerging security threats. By engaging closely with NATO, Japan seeks to enhance its defense capabilities and reaffirm its commitment to a rules-based international order. [AP News]

US bombers conduct joint flight with Japan and South Korea to showcase military unity

(adi) The United States conducted its first joint air exercise of the year with Japan and South Korea on January 15, 2025, deploying B-1B bombers alongside Japanese Air Self-Defense Force (JASDF) and South Korean Air Force fighter jets. The mission, described as a "shoulder-to-shoulder" flight, aimed to demonstrate the unity and coordination among the three nations amidst growing regional security threats. [5th Air Force, USA]

The exercise took place over the Sea of Japan and featured precision maneuvers between the B-1B Lancers and fighter aircraft from Japan and South Korea. Officials emphasized that the flight was a response to North Korea's escalating missile programs and China's increasing military activities in the Indo-Pacific region, underscoring the importance of trilateral security cooperation.

This marks the latest in a series of joint military activities aimed at bolstering defense ties among the three countries. In 2024, similar exercises were conducted following a series of North Korean missile launches, which heightened tensions in the region, including a B – 1B long-range bomber in a trilateral drill between Japan, South Korea and the US to showcase their readiness to counter North Korea's nuclear and missile threats. [AP News]

Analysts view these flights as a signal of the growing strategic alignment between Japan, South Korea and the US. However, they also caution that such displays could provoke reactions from North Korea and China, potentially escalating regional tensions. [Stars and Stripes]

Mongolia, FAO to expand green spaces and agroforestry

(fs) The Governor's Office of Darkhan-Uul Province in Mongolia and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) have signed a Memorandum of Understanding to implement a green space expansion project in Darkhan City.

The initiative aims to increase per capita green space to 24 square meters and establish 200 hectares of agroforestry for vegetable and fruit production to boost domestic supply. Aligned with ten Sustainable Development Goals and Mongolia's Vision-2050 – the country's long-term development strategy aimed at guiding the country towards sustainable and inclusive growth by the year 2050 – the collaboration also

supports national initiatives such as One Billion Trees and Food Supply and Safety.

Key objectives include enhancing ecosystem services, increasing the quantity and quality of urban green spaces, and promoting climate-resilient local food production. The project emphasizes reducing greenhouse gas emissions, adopting circular economy principles, and improving food distribution. It also seeks to ensure sustainable energy and water use, providing a stable and accessible food supply for city residents. [Montsame]

North Korea threatens to take tougher measures over South Korea-US-Japan joint air drill

(mc) North Korea has condemned the recent joint air drills conducted by South Korea, the United States, and Japan, which involved US B-1B bombers, and warned of intensified self-defense measures in response.

In a statement released on January 17, North Korea's Foreign Ministry criticized the trilateral exercises held over the Korean Peninsula on January 15, accusing the U.S. and its allies of increasing instability in the region.

The drills were conducted in reaction to North Korea's recent launches of hypersonic and short-range ballistic missiles.

In a separate commentary, North Korea also criticized the United States for increasing its defense spending, warning that such actions could further heighten military tensions in the region." [Yonhap Agency News]

U.S. and allies target North Korean IT worker's network and cybercrime operations

(mc) The United States, Japan, and South Korea are intensifying efforts to combat North Korea's illicit revenue generation through networks of IT workers and cyber operations that fund its weapons programs and other destabilizing activities.

The U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) has announced sanctions against two individuals and four entities linked to North Korea's Ministry of National Defense. Among those targeted are shell companies in Laos and China

that employ North Korean IT workers who disguise their identities to secure global freelance contracts. The regime confiscates 90 percent of their salaries, generating hundreds of millions of dollars annually to finance weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and ballistic missile programs. [US Department of the Treasury].

North Korea's cyber activities have escalated, with hacking groups such as the Lazarus Group stealing an estimated USD 1.34 billion in cryptocurrency in 2024 alone. Growing concerns have emerged over North Korean IT workers infiltrating global companies to gain access to intellectual property and sensitive data. Reports indicate that these workers have collectively earned at least USD 88 million through fraudulent employment, with some using extortion tactics, threatening to leak stolen information unless paid in cryptocurrency.

The U.S., Japan, and South Korea have underscored the threat North Korea poses to global financial systems, urging the blockchain industry to strengthen its defenses against cyber campaigns. Companies are encouraged to implement rigorous vetting processes to prevent infiltration by North Korean operatives. [The Record]

The sanctions also target organizations managing IT worker networks, such as Korea Osong Shipping Co., Chonsurim Trading Corporation, and Liaoning China Trade Industry Co., a Chinese technology supplier supporting North Korea's operations. These measures aim to disrupt the regime's revenue streams and promote international financial stability. [US Department of the Treasury] [The Hacker News]

South Korea, U.S. and Japan conduct joint air drills with B-1B bombers following North Korea's missile launch

(mc) South Korea, the United States and Japan held a joint air exercise on January 15, with a US B-1B bomber and South Korean F-15K and Japanese F-2 fighter jets participating. The trilateral drill followed North Korea's recent missile tests, including its alleged launch of a hypersonic intermediate-range ballistic missile on January 6 (see AiR No. 1, January/2025, 1) and short-range ballistic missile tests on January 14 (see AiR No. 2, January/2025, 2).

The exercise, the first trilateral exercise this year, aimed to strengthen the allies' joint ability to deter and

respond to Pyongyang's growing missile and nuclear threats. [Yonhap News Agency]

In a separate exercise, South Korean and US forces conducted the first combined live-fire air exercise of the year on January 15, featuring South Korean F-15K fighter jets and US A-10 attack aircraft. About 20 MK-82 bombs were used in the exercise to enhance close air support capabilities. [NK News]

South Korean military official calls for global cooperation against North Korea-Russia threats

(mc) Lieutenant General Son Jeong-hwan, Chief of Strategic Planning of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), called on the international community to strengthen cooperation against security threats posed by North Korea's military assistance to Russia at the NATO Military Committee Heads of Defense session in Brussels on January 15-16.

Son underlined that North Korea's missile launches and military assistance to Russia, including Moscow's deployment of nearly 11,000 troops to support its war in Ukraine, pose significant threats beyond the Korean Peninsula. He emphasized the importance of coordinated international efforts to address these challenges and maintain a rules-based global order.

The JCS also highlighted concerns about possible Russian technological assistance to North Korea's missile development, referring to Pyongyang's recent hypersonic ballistic missile test.

In meetings with NATO officials and Indo-Pacific partners, including Australia, Japan and New Zealand, Son emphasized South Korea's commitment to regional stability and provided updates on the security situation on the peninsula.

This was South Korea's 10th participation in a NATO session as an Indo-Pacific partner since 2010. [The Korea Herald]

South Korean ambassadorial appointments pending following martial law crisis

(jb) The impeachment proceedings of President Yoon Suk-yeol, which have taken up the majority of the

National Assembly and Cabinet's attention since December 2024, have left open the positions of 13 diplomatic envoys of South Korea, according to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The MOFA reported that four such positions, namely of the ambassadors to Indonesia, Serbia, and Bulgaria, and the consul general of Toronto have remained unappointed for over six months. As ambassadors are required by official protocol to be appointed by the President with the help of an approval letter from Cabinet, Yoon's impeachment has impeded the appointment process.

Further complicating the process was the impeachment of former Acting President Han Duck-soo, who was ideally to appoint the ambassadors by stepping in for the President. As the protocol dictates that ambassadorial appointments can only be formalized by the President, the exact process remains hanging at the moment with Acting President Choi Sang-mok to likely formalize the appointments at the outset of the Lunar New Year. The delay in appointing envoys has stymied diplomatic negotiations between nations, as deputy envoys who have filled in during the interim are not allowed to make the top decisions. [The Korea Times]

UN representatives discuss impartiality and transparency of Bangladesh's ICT

(lm) The International Crimes Tribunal (ICT) of Bangladesh, a domestic war crimes tribunal set up in 2009 to initially prosecute crimes against humanity committed during Bangladesh's 1971 War of Liberation, faces intensified scrutiny as it now also posecutes crimes linked to last year's mass uprising against then-Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. The move has led to challenges to the Tribunal's jurisdiction and concerns about its alignment with international standards.

On January 19, United Nations representatives, including Resident Coordinator Gwyn Lewis and Senior Human Rights Adviser Huma Khan, met with Chief Prosecutor Tajul Islam to discuss the tribunal's impartiality and transparency. The UN officials reaffirmed their support for justice initiatives while emphasizing the need for adherence to human rights standards. Tajul Islam highlighted the tribunal's commitment to due process and sought additional UN assistance in training and technical support. [The Financial Express]

These developments occur as the ICT deliberates on its authority to try cases related to last year's July uprising. Defence lawyers for former National Telecommunication Monitoring Centre (NTMC) chief Ziaul Ahsan, a sacked army major general accused of crimes against humanity during the uprising, argued that the ICT's jurisdiction is constitutionally limited to prosecuting war crimes from 1971. Ahsan, previously tasked with overseeing surveillance operations at the NTMC, is accused of orchestrating enforced disappearances and other violations during the uprising. The defence petition also challenged the tribunal's amendments to include crimes like enforced disappearances and called for Ahsan's acquittal.

The tribunal is also handling cases against law enforcement officials implicated in atrocities during the uprising, including the imprisonment of two former officers. Justice Golam Mortuza Majumdar announced a ruling on the defence petition for January 22, a decision that could impact the tribunal's ability to address abuses beyond its original mandate. [The Daily Star]

Banglades navigates energy sector pressures: Russia optimistic while India demands payments

(lm) The Russian Ambassador to Bangladesh, Alexander Khozin, expressed confidence in resolving loan repayment issues related to the Russia-funded Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant. Speaking after meetings with Foreign Secretary Md Jashim Uddin and Foreign Adviser Md Touhid Hossain, Khozin stated that discussions with the Ministry of Finance are expected to address the matter positively.

The Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant, located in Pabna district, is Bangladesh's first nuclear energy facility, developed with Russian technical and financial support. In April last year, the government of then-Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina formally requested a two-year extension for the commencement of principal repayments on the USD 11.38 billion loan provided by Moscow for the construction of the power plant. Initially, repayments were scheduled to begin on March 15, 2027; however, the government now seeks to defer this start date to March 15, 2029. [The Daily Star 1]

In contrast, Adani Power (Jharkhand) Ltd (APJL), a subsidiary of India’s Adani Group, has demanded the Bangladesh Power Development Board (PDB) clear USD 845 million in overdue payments by June 2025 to

avoid late fees. These debts, accrued since April 2024 under a 25-year Power Purchase Agreement, have led to reduced operations at Adani's coal-fired power plant, which is now supplying only 400-700 MW out of its 1,496 MW capacity. Adani's offer to waive surcharges for the first half of 2025 hinges on timely payments moving forward. [The Daily Star 2]

Indian Navy commissions three vessels to strengthen maritime capabilities

(ad) India has bolstered its naval capabilities with the commissioning of three frontline vessels: the destroyer INS Surat, the frigate INS Nilgiri, and the submarine INS Vaghsheer. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, speaking at the event in Mumbai on January 15, described the simultaneous commissioning as a testament to India's growing maritime ambitions and its commitment to becoming a global leader in defense manufacturing and maritime security.

The vessels, built in India with high levels of indigenization, reflect New Delhi's focus on domestic defense production as part of its broader strategy to reduce reliance on foreign arms suppliers. In 2024, India spent a record USD 15 billion on domestic defense manufacturing, marking a 17 percent increase from the previous year. These efforts align with the country's goal of becoming a USD 5 trillion economy.

The commissioning of these vessels comes as India seeks to balance China's rapidly growing naval presence in the Asia-Pacific region. The Indian Navy has added 33 warships over the past decade and has ambitious plans to expand its fleet further, with 62 warships and a submarine currently under construction. This expansion aims to counter regional rival China, which has inducted 148 vessels – more than double the additions of New Delhi – over the same period. [Al Jazeera] [India TV] [The Hindu] [Times of India]

In related notable developments, India's Defense Minister Rajnath Singh recently echoed the prime minister's sentiments, linking maritime security directly to India's economic prosperity and emphasizing the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean, Gulf of Aden, and Red Sea. Singh highlighted the vital role of civilian workers, calling them "soldiers without uniforms," and underscored the need for a collaborative national approach to security.

Singh reiterated India's vision of becoming a developed nation by 2047, emphasizing a 'Whole of the

Government' and 'Whole of the People' approach to national security. He expressed confidence that such unified efforts could not only bolster India's strategic position in the region but also drive its economic and holistic development. [The Statesman]

India's Commerce Minister visits Brussels, Muscat for trade talks with EU and Oman

(lm/rsv) India's Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal is conducting high-level discussions in Brussels and Muscat to strengthen India's trade and investment ties with the European Union (EU) and Oman. These engagements are pivotal to advancing India's economic priorities amid global geopolitical shifts.

In Brussels, Goyal met with Maros Sefcovic, the European Union Commissioner for Trade and Economic Security, to review the progress of the India-EU Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and discuss the Trade and Technology Council (TTC). The FTA aims to eliminate trade barriers, open service and public procurement markets, and protect geographical indications, fostering mutual benefits. Goyal emphasized the importance of a fair, balanced, and equitable agreement, aligning with India's strategy to deepen trade relations with the EU, its second-largest trading partner.

With bilateral trade surpassing USD 180 billion in 2023–2024 and the EU contributing over USD 117 billion in Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), the partnership is a cornerstone of India's global trade ambitions. Goyal's visit also prepares for the upcoming EU-India summit and reinforces a strategic roadmap for 2025 focused on trade, technology, and economic cooperation.

In addition to the FTA discussions, Goyal is engaging with prominent figures, including WTO Director-General Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala and Belgian Foreign Minister Bernard Quintin, as well as Belgian industry leaders and the Indian diaspora. [Malaysia Sun]

In Muscat, Goyal will participate in the 11th session of the India-Oman Joint Commission Meeting from January 27, focusing on the proposed Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA). This agreement is expected to reduce tariffs on Indian exports, which currently face duties of up to 100 percent in Oman, and boost trade in sectors such as petroleum products, urea, electronics, and machinery. [DD News] [The Hindu]

Bilateral trade between India and Oman reached USD 8.94 billion in 2023–2024. The CEPA will enable Oman to access India's vast market of 1.4 billion consumers while supporting India's push to expand its footprint in the Gulf. Oman, with a per capita income of USD 25,060 compared to India's USD 2,370, offers significant opportunities for high-value goods and services. [Business Standard]

Pakistan criticizes slow resettlement of Afghans awaiting relocation to the West

(lm/afk) Pakistan has expressed frustration over delays in resettling thousands of Afghan nationals approved for relocation to Western countries, particularly the United States. These Afghans, many of whom worked alongside American troops, diplomats, and contractors during the Afghanistan war, remain in legal limbo in Pakistan amid mounting security concerns.

The U.S. Congress introduced Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) programs to facilitate the resettlement of these individuals, but bureaucratic inefficiencies have left over 44,000 Afghans, destined for countries like the United States, Canada, and Germany, stranded in Pakistan since the Taliban's takeover in 2021. Despite early momentum, the resettlement process has significantly slowed following the evacuation of over 120,000 Afghans during the U.S.-led NATO withdrawal.

Pakistan has been a host to over four million Afghan refugees for over four decades. In October 2023, the country launched a deportation drive targeting undocumented migrants, including an estimated 1.7 million Afghans. The campaign, initiated amid economic and security concerns, has resulted in the repatriation of over 815,000 individuals. Islamabad insists that deportations target only undocumented individuals and denies allegations of forcibly repatriating Afghans with pending resettlement applications. [Arab News]

Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar recently chaired a meeting to review the Afghan relocation process. Pakistan reiterated its calls for expedited approvals for resettlement programs and urged the international community to fulfill its commitments. Islamabad criticized global inaction and highlighted that humanitarian aid to Afghanistan remains critically underfunded, with only 37.5 percent of required funds secured last year. [DAWN] [Business Recorder]

World Bank approves 10-year loan valued at USD 20 billion for Pakistan

(sn) The World Bank has committed to a decade-long, USD 20 billion lending partnership with Pakistan under its recently announced Country Partnership Framework (CPF), aimed at addressing the nation's pressing developmental challenges.

The framework, which outlines a total commitment of USD 40 billion for Pakistan, will channel an additional USD 20 billion through the International Finance Corporation (IFC) to support private sector development. The World Bank's long-term focus includes tackling debt in Pakistan's energy sector, improving resilience to climate change, addressing child malnutrition, and reforming the education system. [Arab News] [Financial Times]

In response to the news, PM Shehbaz Sharif posted a statement on 'X': "We look forward to strengthening our partnership as we align our efforts for creating lasting opportunities for our people." Sharif also commented on Pakistan's plans to increase private investments in line with the Country Partnership Framework (CPF), hinting at an emphasized investment focus on sustainable industries, including clean energy, water, and agricultural sectors. [Asia Business Outlook] [X]

The World Bank's decision follows the approval of the International Monetary Fund's (IMF) loan of roughly USD 7 billion on September 25, 2024. The IMF's loan was spurred by a similar goal of achieving economic stability in Pakistan and was backed by Pakistan's commitment to the nine-month 2023-24 Stand-by Arrangement (SBA).

Pakistan has been working to strengthen its economy since the near financial default that occurred in 2023, after suffering several significant shocks, including inflation that reached a peak of 38 per cent, supply disruptions with Russia and Ukraine, and the unfortunate floods that occurred in 2022. Pakistan has since stabilized its financial sector, with inflation responding to necessary fiscal interventions and recovering foreign exchange markets. [International Monetary Fund]

The World Bank has committed USD 48.3 billion in financial assistance to Pakistan since the organization's inception in 1950. The company currently has a USD 17 billion stake in over 106 Pakistani projects. [World Bank Group]

Pakistan’s exports to Europe surge to USD 3.8 billion

(lm) Pakistan's exports to Europe reached USD 3.8 billion during the first five months of the current fiscal year, reflecting an 8.62 percent increase compared to the same period last year. This growth is attributed to the performance of key sectors including textiles, leather, garments, sports goods, and surgical instruments.

The European Union (EU), Pakistan’s second-largest trading partner, accounts for over 14 percent of the country’s total trade and absorbs 28 percent of its total exports, predominantly in textiles and clothing. Pakistan benefits from the Generalized Scheme of Preferences (GSP)+, a trade arrangement offered by the EU to developing economies in exchange for adherence to international conventions on human rights, governance, and environmental protection. Although the existing GSP framework expired in December 2023, the EU Parliament has extended its provisions for four more years.

The surge in exports was supported by the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC), a hybrid civil-military body established in June 2023 to enhance business opportunities in sectors such as agriculture, mining, IT, and defense. The SIFC aims to attract foreign investment, particularly from Gulf countries, as Pakistan grapples with economic challenges, including low foreign exchange reserves and currency depreciation.

Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb emphasized the importance of transitioning to an export-led economy for sustainable growth, underscoring recent trade and investment initiatives with Gulf nations, Central Asia, and Russia. [Arab News]

Pakistan becomes first country to implement global digital foreign investment initiative

(lm) Pakistan has become the first country to implement the World Economic Forum (WEF) and Digital Cooperation Organization’s (DCO) Digital Foreign Direct Investment Initiative, aimed at enhancing cross-border digital investments in emerging markets. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif affirmed his commitment to fostering a digital investment ecosystem and driving Pakistan’s digital transformation.

The initiative, launched in 2022, focuses on four pillars: digital infrastructure, adoption, new digital activities, and services exports. The WEF's recent report outlined 55 policy recommendations tailored to Pakistan's socioeconomic conditions and regulatory framework to address gaps in its digital ecosystem and attract digital foreign direct investment (FDI). Stakeholders actively engaged in workshops and consultations to refine these recommendations.

Prime Minister Sharif praised the initiative's progress, emphasizing its role in expanding revenues, increasing the workforce, and boosting digital exports. As part of its digital strategy, Pakistan plans to establish a National Digital Commission to streamline governance, improve tax efficiency, and foster inter-ministerial coordination.

Pakistan is a member of the DCO, a multilateral organization comprising 16 countries, collectively representing a market of 800 million people with a combined GDP of USD 3.5 trillion. [Arab News]

Pakistan raises concern over US-Israeli airstrikes in Yemen and Houthi attacks in Red Sea

(afk) Pakistan's Ambassador to the United Nations, Munir Akram, voiced concerns over recent US and Israeli airstrikes in Yemen and Houthi-led attacks in the Red Sea during a UN Security Council briefing on January 15. Akram emphasized the broader context of escalating Middle Eastern instability and called for a diplomatic resolution to the Yemeni conflict.

The United States and Israel have conducted airstrikes in Yemen in response to Houthi missile and drone attacks targeting Israel and commercial vessels in the Red Sea. The Houthis have framed their actions as solidarity with the Palestinian resistance against Israeli operations in Gaza and Lebanon. These developments, according to UN officials, signify the growing internationalization of Yemen's conflict.

Ambassador Akram expressed Pakistan's concern over the humanitarian toll of these airstrikes, particularly Israeli attacks on civilian infrastructure in Yemen, such as Sana'a International Airport, Red Sea ports, and power stations. He highlighted the resulting civilian casualties and worsening humanitarian conditions in the region.

Simultaneously, Akram condemned Houthi attacks on maritime vessels in the Red Sea, citing their

implications for global trade, regional stability, and environmental security. He urged all parties to engage in meaningful dialogue, referencing progress achieved during December 2023 peace talks, which included agreements on a nationwide ceasefire, economic initiatives, and public sector salary payments.

UN Special Envoy for Yemen Hans Grundberg echoed Pakistan's concerns, urging immediate de-escalation and sustained efforts toward peace for Yemen's nearly 40 million residents.

Ambassador Akram reaffirmed Pakistan's stance that the Yemeni conflict must be resolved through Yemeni-led political processes and dialogue, urging all involved to prioritize peaceful solutions. Pakistan called for the preservation of recent peace gains to foster sustainable stability in Yemen. [Arab News] [Associate Press of Pakistan] [Minute Mirror]

Pakistan Air Force participates in Saudi-led multinational exercise

(lm) A Pakistan Air Force (PAF) contingent, including JF-17 Thunder Block-III fighter jets and supporting crew, has arrived in Saudi Arabia for the multinational aerial combat exercise "Spears of Victory-2025." Hosted annually by Saudi Arabia, the exercise features participation from nine nations, including Bahrain, France, Greece, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, the United States, and the host nation. [Arab News]

New US administration to view Pakistan through "China-India' lens as Islamabad pledges stronger ties

(lm) As Donald Trump begins his second term as United States President, Pakistani foreign affairs experts anticipate that the new administration will continue to view Pakistan primarily through a "China-India lens," focusing on security cooperation, particularly in counterterrorism and Afghanistan.

Relations between Islamabad and Washington have historically been marked by complexities, strained further during the tenure of former Prime Minister Imran Khan, who accused the US of orchestrating his ouster and welcomed the Taliban's 2021 takeover of Afghanistan.

Analysts highlight the need for Islamabad to carefully position itself within the evolving US policy framework. Dr. Zafar Nawaz Jaspal, a professor at Quaid-e-Azam University, stressed the importance of convincing Washington of Pakistan's role in addressing non-traditional security challenges and regional stability, while avoiding alignment in the US-China rivalry. He warned that internal political divides in Pakistan, including the incarceration of Khan, could be exploited by external powers for regional influence.

Trump's nominee for special envoy, Richard Grenell, criticized Pakistan's handling of Khan's incarceration and urged the outgoing Biden administration to push for his release, a sentiment dismissed by Islamabad.

Former Pakistani ambassadors to the US, Senator Sherry Rehman and Masood Khan, emphasized the opportunity for Pakistan to reset its relationship with the US. They urged Islamabad to present a clear agenda focused on expanding bilateral relations beyond security to encompass economic and commercial cooperation. Rehman called for a broader engagement framework to secure better trade terms and to address regional challenges, such as South Asia's arms race.

Masood Khan advocated for "new energy" in fostering economic ties with the US, emphasizing shared strategic interests in South Asia. He noted that "Trump 2.0" might prioritize clearer and more forthright policies compared to his earlier presidency, presenting opportunities for recalibrating bilateral relations. Foreign affairs expert Dr. Salma Malik underlined the potential impact of US policies targeting China on Pakistan, urging a measured and strategic approach to developments. [Arab News]

The Biden administration had characterized Pakistan as a strong partner but not a formal ally, highlighting the nuanced nature of the bilateral relationship. The White House recently acknowledged Pakistan's role in counterterrorism efforts, particularly along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, while clarifying that the relationship was not defined by treaty obligations. [DAWN] [Geo News] [Firstpost]

In response, Islamabad reaffirmed its commitment to strengthening ties with the US across multiple domains, including economy, trade, people-to-people connections, and security. [Arab News]

Pakistan Navy hands over command of multinational task force to New Zealand

(lm) Pakistan's Navy has handed over the command of the Combined Task Force (CTF) 150, a multinational naval task force under the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), to New Zealand.

During its six-month tenure as the task force leader, Pakistan's Navy conducted extensive maritime security operations outside the Arabian Gulf, targeting non-state threats. The operations resulted in the interception of approximately 10 tons of narcotics, valued at over USD 50 million. The Pakistan Navy also collaborated with regional allies, securing participation from the Kenya Navy and Royal Navy of Oman in CTF 150 operations.

CTF 150, established in February 2002, is one of five operational task forces under the CMF, which is the world's largest multinational naval alliance. Its primary objective is to enhance maritime security and counter non-state threats in international waters. [Arab News]

Brunei Law Society strengthens regional legal ties with Singapore and Malaysia

(ga) The Law Society of Brunei Darussalam, the country's professional association representing legal practitioners, has formalized its partnership with the Law Society of Singapore through a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed on January 13 during the Presidents' Roundtable at Singapore's Opening of the Legal Year ceremony. This agreement strengthens collaboration between the two legal communities, focusing on professional development, joint initiatives, and information exchange.

The Presidents' Roundtable gathered over 40 bar leaders and international delegates to discuss key topics, including artificial intelligence in legal practice, intellectual property, court decisions, and global compliance challenges such as anti-money laundering. The discussions underscored the significance of regional and international cooperation in addressing contemporary legal issues.

The Brunei Law Society also participated in Malaysia's Opening of the Legal Year on January 8 at the Putrajaya International Convention Centre, reflecting its commitment to fostering regional ties. On January 7, the Malaysian Bar hosted a Bar Leaders' Roundtable Discussion in Putrajaya on the theme "Building a Just Economy," emphasizing harmonized legal expertise, human rights, and the rule of law. [Borneo Bulletin]

Indonesia attends ASEAN Foreign Ministers Retreat

(gk) Indonesia's Foreign Minister Sugiono attended the ASEAN Foreign Ministers Retreat (AMM Retreat) in Malaysia. He expressed Indonesia's full support to the ASEAN Community Vision 2045, which will be ratified in Malaysia's chairmanship of ASEAN.

Explaining that the Vision 2045 in in line with the priorities of President Prabowo Subianto, Minister Sugiono highlighted that to realize ASEAN as a strong, dynamic and resilient region in the next 20 years, Vision 2045 needs to be implemented. Strengthening institutional capacity and resources must be ASEAN's priority for achieving Vision 2045.

On global affairs, he welcomed the ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hamas and urged for its smooth and comprehensive implementation. He expressed full support to the Two-State solution as a solution for lasting peace in Palestine. Regarding Myanmar, he encouraged ASEAN to intensify its efforts and supported the implementation of the Five Point-Consensus.

Talking about the regional dynamics, he encouraged the strengthening of ASEAN mechanisms and institutions, such as the ASEAN Regional Forum, East Asia Forum, the ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation (AIPR). He also highlighted the importance of regional principles and norms, including the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation and the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific to ensure regional stability. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The Republic of Indonesia]

Indonesia reaffirms support for ASEAN's digital future through the Bangkok Digital Declaration

(gk) Speaking at the 5th ASEAN Digital Minister's Meeting in Bangkok, Thailand, Indonesia's Communication and Digital Affairs Minister Meutya Hafid has reaffirmed Indonesia's support to ASEAN's digital future by endorsing the Bangkok Digital Declaration.

The Declaration highlights the ASEAN member nations' commitment to create a secure, innovative and inclusive digital environment across the region. It includes a number of strategic steps, such as strengthening regional cooperation to combat online

fraud, developing trusted artificial intelligence (AI) governance, and expanding quality Internet access throughout the region. Minister Hafid also added that this initiative aligns with the ASEAN Digital Masterplan 2025 and strengthens ASEAN's role as a global digital economy hub. [Bernama] [Antara]

Indonesia welcomes WTO ruling EU curbs on Indonesian palm oil-based biofuel

(gk) Indonesia has expressed approval of a recent World Trade Organization (WTO) ruling that determined the European Union (EU) unfairly discriminated against Indonesian palm oil-based biofuel through its biofuel regulations. Coordinating Minister for Economic Affairs Airlangga Hartarto issued a statement describing Indonesia's win at the WTO because of a long push for justice against discriminatory practices.

Indonesia brought the case to the WTO dispute body in 2019 after the EU decided that palm oil-based diesel would not be considered a biofuel due to its link to deforestation and its use in transport fuel would be phased out between 2023 and 2030. WTO panel report points out that the EU failed to properly evaluate the data used to determine biofuels derived from high indirect land use changes (high ILUC) risk. Shortcomings were also observed in the preparation and application of criteria and procedures for low ILUC-risk certification in the European bloc's climate policy. In addition, France's tax incentives for biofuel usage in transportation systems was found to be discriminatory to palm oil-based biofuel.

The WTO rule will be adopted by the Dispute Settlement Body within the next 60 days, unless there is an appeal against the report. After the adoption, the report will become binding between Indonesia and the EU. This ruling will also affect the EU's anti-deforestation regulation or EUDR, which requires exporters to prove that their palm oil is free from deforestation before entering the EU market. The EUDR implementation has already been postponed. [Antara]

Indonesia to receive USD 92.6 million from Asian Development Bank for green energy development

(lp) The Asian Development Bank has agreed to provide USD 92.6 million to Indonesian energy company PT Supreme Energy Muara Laboh (SEML) for the advancement of its geothermal energy resources. This investment will facilitate the expansion of Muara Laboh geothermal facilities and the establishment of new geothermal power plants with a capacity of 83 megawatts, achieved through sophisticated construction, operation, and maintenance.

As of now, Indonesia possesses the world's biggest geothermal energy reserves, totaling 23.1 gigawatts; yet its government has yet to fully utilize this potential. Since 2013, ADB has been assisting Indonesian private sectors in financing the projects and operations of four geothermal energy facilities in Indonesia, including Muara Laboh Phase 1, Rantau Dedap, and the Sarulla geothermal power plant project. [Voi.id]

ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Retreat discusses Myanmar issue

(hw/anl) Foreign ministers from ASEAN member countries met in Kuala Lumpur for the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Retreat to discuss – among others – issues pertinent to Myanmar crisis.

ASEAN members warned Myanmar that seeking a peaceful end to the current conflict, not the election, should be priority, while demanding all stakeholders to cease hostility and to permit unrestricted humanitarian access.

Malaysia also declared the appointment of Othaman Hashim as special envoy for Myanmar, who will travel to Myanmar shortly to persuade all parties in Myanmar's conflict to ASEAN's five-point consensus. Since ASEAN had forbidden Myanmar's military officials from attending the meeting, a senior diplomat attended on behalf of the junta. [Bangkok Post]

Philippines optimistic about strong US ties under second Trump administration

(alm/elr/lm) Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. expressed optimism about maintaining "strong and dynamic" ties with the United States under incoming President Donald Trump, emphasizing cooperation in economics, defense, and security. During a call with outgoing U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris, both leaders reaffirmed their commitment to a free and

open Indo-Pacific, critical amid China's expansive claims in the South China Sea. Harris underscored the enduring nature of U.S.-Philippines defense commitments, highlighting trilateral cooperation with Japan as a key pillar of regional security. [South China Morning Post]

In a separate engagement, Marcos on January 13 joined outgoing U.S. President Joe Biden and Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba in a trilateral virtual meeting. The leaders condemned China's "dangerous and unlawful behavior" in the South China Sea and pledged to strengthen cooperation in economic, maritime, and technological areas. This aligns with recent joint maritime drills conducted between the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command near Palawan, underscoring the ongoing commitment to regional security. [Reuters] [Rappler 1]

Despite strengthening ties with the U.S. and Japan, the Philippines continues to grapple with its challenging relationship with China. On January 16, the Philippines and China held the 10th Bilateral Consultation Mechanism (BCM) meeting in Xiamen to address disputes in the South China Sea. Philippine Foreign Affairs Undersecretary Theresa Lazaro emphasized the importance of dialogue and cooperation, expressing optimism about finding pragmatic solutions. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China]

However, the discussions were marked by contention. China accused the Philippines of maritime infringements, while the Philippines protested Beijing's continued aggression and disregard for the 2016 international arbitral ruling, which invalidated China's sweeping territorial claims.

Tensions escalated further when the Philippines lodged formal protests on January 13 and January 16 against the presence of China's "monster" coast guard ship, CCG 5901, and other naval assets near the Scarborough Shoal and within the Philippines' Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Manila described these actions as violations of international law, referencing the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. [Benar News] [The Straits Times] [ABC News]

Amid these disputes, Philippine Foreign Secretary Enrique Manalo called for progress in negotiations on the South China Sea Code of Conduct during an ASEAN meeting in Malaysia. He underscored the urgency of addressing contentious issues, including the code's scope, legal binding nature, and implications for third-party countries. Manalo stressed that an effective

framework is critical to managing disputes and preventing further escalation of tensions. [Rappler 2]

Afghan nationals resettled in US after visa processing in the Philippines

Nearly 200 Afghan nationals have been relocated to the United States after completing their Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) processing in the Philippines. These individuals, many of whom supported US operations in Afghanistan, faced ongoing threats following the Taliban's return to power in 2021. The program was part of a cooperative arrangement between the Philippines and the US to assist Afghans eligible for SIVs who were left behind during the NATO and US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021.

The Afghans arrived in Manila on January 6 and stayed temporarily in an undisclosed location, with all costs covered by the US. The arrangement allowed a maximum 59-day stay per person, though the group departed for the US via commercial flights between January 15 and 17 after successfully completing visa processing. Over 60 percent of the group consisted of minors.

The decision to host this visa processing center was facilitated through discussions between US President Joe Biden and Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., reflecting the Philippines' efforts to strengthen ties with the US, Japan, and Australia amid regional security concerns. These initiatives align with strategies to counter growing challenges from China's assertiveness in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait. [ABC News] [Rappler]

Singapore urges fellow ASEAN members to strengthen integration amid global challenges

At the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Retreat in Langkawi, Malaysia, on January 19, Singapore Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan called for intensified regional integration to bolster ASEAN's competitiveness against geopolitical and economic shifts. Highlighting the impact of rising protectionism and geopolitical tensions, he emphasized the need for ASEAN to focus on economic integration, connectivity, and reliable long-term policies to position itself as a competitive trading partner and investment destination.

Dr. Balakrishnan stressed ASEAN's role in fostering multilateral agreements, citing the ongoing ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement and the proposed ASEAN Power Grid as pivotal initiatives. These projects aim to enhance regional trade, connectivity, and the transition to sustainable energy. The ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement and free trade agreements with China, South Korea, and India were also discussed for potential upgrades.

The retreat addressed heightened geopolitical risks, including the US-China rivalry, the South China Sea disputes, and the crisis in Myanmar. ASEAN reaffirmed its Five-Point Consensus, urging an end to violence in Myanmar. Dr. Balakrishnan noted ASEAN's convening power in uniting major economic partners through platforms like the East Asia Summit. [The Straits Times]

Uyghurs detained in Thailand go on hunger strike as deportation to China looms

(lm/msz) Dozens of Uyghur men detained in Thailand for over a decade have initiated a hunger strike, fearing deportation to China, where they risk imprisonment and torture. The detainees, part of a wave of Uyghurs fleeing persecution in China's Xinjiang region in 2014, refused to sign "voluntary return" forms issued by Thai authorities on January 10. [BBC] [The New York Times]

Conditions in the Bangkok Immigration Detention Center (IDC), where the men are held, have been described as "hell on earth" by rights groups, with overcrowding, insufficient food, and limited healthcare. Five Uyghurs have died in custody, and detainees remain isolated with minimal legal or humanitarian access. Many suffer from chronic illnesses exacerbated by poor living conditions. [Human Rights Watch]

Against this backdrop, Thai Defense Minister Phumtham Wechayachai dismissed reports that deportations were imminent, stating on January 17 that the Thai government has no immediate plans to repatriate the detainees to China. His statement followed a National Security Council (NSC) meeting, where officials reviewed legal frameworks to ensure compliance with both Thai law and international obligations. Phumtham acknowledged past deportations, notably the 2015 transfer of 109 Uyghurs to China, which drew global condemnation and tarnished Thailand's international image. [The Nation]

However, human rights groups and detainees' families remain deeply concerned, citing China's history of harsh treatment of deported Uyghurs. China has reportedly pressured Thailand for deportation, while the Thai government balances its obligations as a new UN Human Rights Council member with its economic and diplomatic ties to Beijing.

Adding to the pressure on the Thai government, U.S. Secretary of State nominee Marco Rubio pledged at his confirmation hearing to lobby Bangkok against deportation. Rubio highlighted Thailand's strong historical ties with the US as an opportunity to advocate for the Uyghurs' safety and expose China's persecution of Uyghurs in Xinjiang, where up to 1.8 million people have been detained in internment camps since 2017. [Bangkok Post]

Regional efforts to combat online scams and cross-border crime intensify

(msz/hrs/bk) At the ASEAN Digital Ministers' Meeting in Bangkok, Thailand and Myanmar pledged joint efforts to combat transnational call center gangs operating along their shared border. The meeting also resulted in the Bangkok Digital Declaration, a framework for ASEAN members to collaborate on cybersecurity, data exchange, and tackling online crimes. Thailand signed cybersecurity and e-government agreements with Cambodia and the Philippines, emphasizing a unified regional approach. [Bangkok Post 1]

In addition, Thailand has fortified border controls with Myanmar to address a surge in cross-border crime, including employment scams. Recent incidents, such as the arrest of 32 Indonesians fleeing employment scams in Myawaddy, highlight the urgency of the issue. Security measures at key border areas like the Three Pagodas Pass have been intensified, with authorities installing CCTV cameras and re-fencing to curb illegal crossings. [Bangkok Post 2] [The Nation]

High-profile cases, including the recent rescue of a prominent Chinese actor trafficked into Myanmar's scam operations, have drawn international attention. These incidents have created reputational challenges for Thailand, particularly in tourism. Against this backdrop, Thai officials are now collaborating with Hong Kong and other international partners to rescue victims and dismantle scam networks. Hong Kong's task force recently met Thai police to strengthen cooperation and trace financial flows tied to scam operations. [Bangkok Post 3]

Domestically, Thailand's Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra recently revealed being targeted by scammers using AI voice cloning to impersonate a foreign leader. The incident underscored the urgency of combating such threats. Deputy Prime Minister and Digital Economy Minister Prasert Jantararuangthong has been tasked with strengthening the Anti Online Scam Operation Centre (AOC), appointing the Prime Minister as its chairperson to oversee operations. [Bangkok Post 4] [Bangkok Post 5]

The issue extends to institutional fraud, with scams exploiting major brands like Charoen Pokphand (CP) Group and the Bangkok Post in fraudulent investment schemes. These entities have filed legal complaints and urged public vigilance. [Bangkok Post 6]

ASEAN, Canada hold 11th round of free trade talks, aim for completion by late 2025

(hrs) The 11th round of ASEAN-Canada Free Trade Agreement (ACAFTA) negotiations took place in Bangkok from January 15-17. The discussions, involving seven working groups, focused on advancing key sectors such as sanitary and phytosanitary measures, technical barriers to trade, regulatory practices, services, investment, intellectual property, and legal frameworks. Both parties aim to finalize the agreement by late 2025.

Thailand's Deputy Minister of Commerce, Suchat Chomklin, expressed strong support for the FTA, noting its significance as Thailand's first free-trade agreement with a North American country. He highlighted the agreement's potential to boost business confidence and enhance trade and investment opportunities between ASEAN and Canada.

Chotima Iemsawasdikul, director general of Thailand's Department of Trade Negotiations, noted the emphasis on resolving delays in tariff-reduction modalities, service trade and investment frameworks, and rules of origin requirements. ASEAN is also preparing a draft proposal on sustainable trade and development for Canada's consideration. Canada has proposed specific rules of origin for 5,612 items, which ASEAN members are reviewing. [The Nation]

ASEAN Secretary-General holds meeting with Thai Deputy Prime Minister

(hrs) ASEAN Secretary-General Dr. Kao Kim Hourn recently met with Thailand's Deputy Prime Minister Prasert Jantararuangtong, who also serves as the Minister of Digital Economy and Society and Chair of the ASEAN Digital Ministers' Meeting (ADGMIN).

Dr. Kao praised Thailand's leadership in hosting key ASEAN meetings and advancing regional digital transformation initiatives. He highlighted Thailand's pivotal role in driving negotiations for the ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA) and supporting the Working Group on Anti-Online Scams (WG-AS). These initiatives aim to combat online fraud, bolster consumer trust, and promote a secure and inclusive digital economy across ASEAN Member States. [ASEAN]

Malaysia, Brunei, Thailand top three in ASEAN for obesity among children

(lm) Childhood obesity rates in ASEAN reveal a troubling trend, with Malaysia and Brunei leading in prevalence, followed by Thailand, which holds the third-highest rate. According to recent data, 13.4 percent of children aged 6–14 and 13.2 percent of teenagers aged 15–18 in Thailand are either obese or on the brink of obesity, with younger children under five years old facing a 9.13 percent prevalence rate. These figures echo similar challenges across ASEAN, as urbanization, dietary shifts, and sedentary lifestyles impact children regionally.

A shared issue across ASEAN is poor dietary habits, such as excessive consumption of salty snacks. In Thailand, 84.1 percent of children aged 6–14 consume these snacks daily, mirroring broader regional patterns of unhealthy eating. The World Obesity Federation has predicted that by 2030, half of the global child population will be obese, underlining the need for regional collaboration to address these escalating concerns. [Bangkok Post]

Royal Thai Army briefs 25 foreign military attaches

(lm) The Royal Thai Army (RTA) held a quarterly briefing with 25 foreign military attachés in Thailand, emphasizing international collaboration to address security challenges and disaster relief. Lt Gen Kamchai Wongsri, director-general of the Army Intelligence Department, outlined the army's operations, focusing

on disaster relief, cross-border anti-narcotics efforts, and insights from global conflicts, including the Ukraine-Russia and Israel-Hamas wars.

The RTA has adopted the DOTMLPF Plus framework—a U.S. military framework used to assess and improve operational capabilities by focusing on Doctrine, Organization, Training, Materiel, Leadership and Education, Personnel, and Facilities. The "Plus" incorporates additional elements like partnerships, interagency collaboration, and technology, tailored to modern defense needs.

The briefing highlighted collaborative anti-drug efforts with neighboring nations and comprehensive strategies addressing prevention, suppression, and rehabilitation. Disaster relief operations, including the globally recognized Tham Luang cave rescue involving over 22 nations, and recent flood assistance in Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai, were showcased as examples of the RTA's capability. [Bangkok Post]

Timor-Leste's full ASEAN membership receives strong backing from Malaysia

(lm) Timor-Leste is making significant progress toward becoming the 11th member of ASEAN, with strong backing from Malaysia as the 2025 ASEAN Chair. During the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Retreat in Langkawi, Malaysia, Foreign Minister Bendito dos Santos Freitas expressed optimism about the country's readiness and commitment to join the regional bloc, calling this year a "decisive and historic moment" for Timor-Leste.

Timor-Leste, a former Portuguese colony that gained independence in 2002, formally applied for ASEAN membership in 2011. Since then, it has participated in various ASEAN events and meetings as an observer. Malaysia's Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and other leaders have reiterated that ASEAN's future must include Timor-Leste to realize its economic and geopolitical potential.

Speaking against this backdrop, despite acknowledging existing challenges in human resources and infrastructure, Freitas emphasized the nation's advancements in digitalization and governance, positioning it as better prepared than some earlier ASEAN members at the time of their entry. He highlighted Timor-Leste's active engagement as an ASEAN observer since its in-principle admission in 2022 and expressed hope for full membership during Malaysia's chairmanship. [Free Malaysia Today]

In turn, Malaysia's Foreign Minister, Mohamad Hasan, reaffirmed ASEAN's commitment to facilitating Timor-Leste's accession. The ASEAN Secretariat plans to establish a Timor-Leste Unit to provide capacity-building assistance and ensure smoother integration. ASEAN member states also pledged ongoing technical support to help Timor-Leste fulfill the requirements outlined in its membership roadmap, adopted at the 2023 ASEAN Summit in Indonesia. [New Straits Times] [The Edge Malaysia]

During a bilateral meeting, Sơn and Malaysian Foreign Minister Mohamad Bin Haji agreed to accelerate the implementation of existing agreements and finalize an action plan for the next phase of their Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. They also committed to holding the 8th Việt Nam-Malaysia Joint Committee meeting to address key areas like energy transition and digital transformation, with Malaysia recognizing Việt Nam as a critical partner.

Separately, Sơn met with Singaporean Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan, where both officials expressed satisfaction with the Việt Nam-Singapore Strategic Partnership's progress in areas like economic connectivity, education, and digital transformation. They discussed plans to implement outcomes from high-level visits, focusing on green economy and digital economy initiatives.

The two sides committed to enhancing collaboration in security, defense, and human resources development, while also supporting Malaysia's ASEAN Chairmanship in 2025. Discussions included advancing regional power grid connectivity and reinforcing ASEAN solidarity for sustainable development. [Vietnam News]

China-Bangladesh talks to focus on Brahmaputra dam and Teesta project

(lm) Bangladesh and China are set to hold critical bilateral talks in Beijing on January 21, with water-resource cooperation and hydropower projects on the Brahmaputra and Teesta Rivers taking center stage. Bangladesh's Foreign Adviser Md. Touhid Hossain will lead discussions with his Chinese counterpart to address Bangladesh's concerns over the ecological and economic impacts of China's planned mega-dam on the Brahmaputra River in Tibet, known locally as the Yarlung Zangbo.

The proposed dam, expected to generate 60 gigawatts of electricity, has raised concerns in downstream

countries, including India and Bangladesh, about potential disruptions in water flow, particularly during dry seasons. The dam, part of China's USD 137 billion hydropower plan, is projected to be the largest in the world. Environmental experts warn that reduced water availability could significantly affect Bangladesh, where over 60 percent of the population relies on the Brahmaputra basin for livelihood and agriculture.

The stalled Teesta River project may also feature in discussions. While the project was initially advanced with China's support, Bangladesh's decision to involve India in 2024 complicated progress. China has expressed willingness to partner with other countries, including India, to develop the Teesta multipurpose project, which is critical for northern Bangladesh's agrarian economy.

Chinese Ambassador Yao Wen informed the Foreign Adviser that China is ready to finalize an implementation plan for hydrological data sharing with Bangladesh, aimed at improving flood and disaster management. Additionally, China is considering lowering interest rates on loans extended to Bangladesh and reiterated its support for the repatriation of Rohingya refugees to Myanmar.

China has assured Bangladesh and India that the Brahmaputra dam will adhere to principles of ecological conservation and not negatively impact downstream nations. However, as China is not a party to the UN Convention on Transboundary Watercourses, Bangladesh is seeking robust assurances and collaborative mechanisms to mitigate risks. Experts have proposed trilateral cooperation between China, India, and Bangladesh to share benefits and address ecological concerns. [The Financial Express]

Bangladesh, India farmers clash near border

(lm) Farmers from India and Bangladesh clashed on January 18 near the Sukhdebpur border outpost, which lies along the shared boundary in Malda district in India's West Bengal state. The dispute began when Indian farmers alleged that Bangladeshi farmers were stealing crops, leading to arguments. The situation escalated as farmers from both sides gathered in large numbers, resulting in stone-pelting and verbal exchanges. [The Hindu]

The Sukhdebpur border outpost is located near the internationally recognized boundary separating the

two countries, where agricultural activities on both sides often bring communities in close proximity. This area recently witnessed disagreements between the Border Security Force (BSF) of India and the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) over fencing operations [see AiR No. 2, January/2025, 2].

Bangladesh's President seeks increased Japanese investment in emerging sectors

(vk) Bangladesh's President Mohammed Shahabuddin has called for greater Japanese investment in Bangladesh's tourism, ICT, medical, and other emerging sectors, as new Japanese Ambassador Shinichi Saida presented his credentials. Emphasizing Japan's status as Bangladesh's largest bilateral development partner, the President highlighted the elevation of their relationship to a "Strategic Partnership" and expressed hope for stronger bilateral ties.

President Shahabuddin noted that Japan has contributed over USD 23 billion in grants and loans to Bangladesh and praised its ongoing assistance, particularly under the BIG-B initiative, which has been instrumental in Bangladesh's development. He stressed the need for an early conclusion of the bilateral Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) to reduce trade barriers and facilitate increased investment from Japan.

Japan is currently one of Bangladesh's top five export destinations, with bilateral trade amounting to approximately USD 4 billion and over 350 Japanese companies operating in the country. The President also thanked Japan for its humanitarian assistance to Rohingya refugees and urged continued support for a sustainable and dignified solution for their return to Myanmar. [Bss News]

United States pledges support for Bangladesh's democratic transition

(lm) The United States has reaffirmed its support for Bangladesh's democratic transition and reform initiatives while also assessing critical infrastructure to enhance bilateral relations.

During a series of high-level meetings, US Chargé d'Affaires Tracey Ann Jacobson emphasized Washington's commitment to strengthening ties in

trade, investment, human rights, labor reforms, counter-terrorism, and resolving the Rohingya crisis. She expressed optimism about Bangladesh's macroeconomic stability and praised ongoing efforts to build political consensus around the "July proclamation," an initiative aimed at fostering unity among political parties in the wake of the ouster of ex-Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in August last year.

In response, Bangladesh's interim leader Muhammad Yunus highlighted the interim government's dedication to conducting free and fair elections and outlined plans for the proclamation, which he hopes will be finalized by February to establish a "July Charter" as a political framework for the future.

However, Jacobson raised concerns over the arrests of journalists and violence against minorities, to which Yunus reaffirmed the government's commitment to justice and transparency. Foreign Adviser Touhid Hossain assured Jacobson of full cooperation and expressed the interim government's determination to strengthen democratic institutions. [The Daily Star 1] [The Daily Star 2]

Meanwhile, a US Coast Guard delegation is visiting Chattogram Port – a key gateway for Bangladesh's trade – to evaluate its security and operations under the International Port Security (IPS) program. The team, which arrived in Dhaka on January 18, aims to ensure the port's compliance with the International Ship and Port Facility Security (ISPS) Code. [The Daily Star 3]

UK Minister Tulip Siddiq resigns amid allegations of links to Bangladesh corruption probe

(lm) UK Labour MP and former treasury and anti-corruption minister Tulip Siddiq has resigned following allegations linking her to corruption scandals involving her aunt, Sheikh Hasina, the ousted Prime Minister of Bangladesh.

Siddiq's resignation came amid media scrutiny over her family's alleged involvement in embezzling USD 5 billion connected to infrastructure projects, including the Russia-funded Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant. Questions also arose regarding London properties reportedly gifted to Siddiq's family by associates of Hasina's administration. Although a UK ethics board investigation found no direct evidence of impropriety, concerns over Siddiq's family ties prompted her to step

down, citing the controversy as a distraction from government work. [Al Jazeera]

This development comes at a time when Bangladesh's Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) has expanded its investigations into Hasina's family, including her daughter Saima Wazed Putul, a WHO regional director. The ACC is preparing to provide evidence to the foreign ministry, potentially prompting official communications with the WHO. Putul faces allegations of fraud linked to a land acquisition in Dhaka, further intensifying scrutiny of the Hasina family. [The Daily Star]

Interim leader Muhammad Yunus has called for the return of embezzled public funds, emphasizing accountability and justice. Yunus, who assumed power following Hasina's ouster during the August 2024 uprising, has pledged to work with international partners to recover stolen assets. [The Hindu]

Controversial UK parliamentary report on Bangladesh withdrawn amid bias allegations

(lm) A report by the UK's all-party parliamentary group (APPG) on the Commonwealth, critiquing the interim government of Muhammad Yunus in Bangladesh, has been withdrawn following accusations of inaccuracies and bias in favor of the ousted Sheikh Hasina administration.

The report, *The Ongoing Situation in Bangladesh*, released in November 2024, criticized Yunus's government for allegedly weaponizing the law against political opponents and empowering hardline Islamists. It relied heavily on data from the Rights & Risk Analysis Group, a New Delhi-based think tank. However, experts and critics, including Labour MP Rupa Huq, highlighted significant errors, such as underreporting deaths during the student-led rebellion that overthrew Hasina in August 2024.

The report suggested that most deaths occurred after Hasina fled, contradicting findings from the UN human rights commissioner, which attributed the majority of casualties to security forces and the student wing of the Awami League during the crackdown. The APPG also claimed Yunus's government charged 194,000 individuals with crimes, a figure experts clarified refers to names listed in police reports, not formal charges.

Facing backlash, the APPG stated the report was an internal document under review and would not be

distributed further. Critics labeled the report as biased and poorly analyzed.

The APPG has since decided to focus solely on the Commonwealth as an institution, ceasing country-specific reports. [The Guardian]

Russia underscores to commitment to stronger ties with Bangladesh

(vk) Russian Ambassador to Bangladesh Alexander Khozin reaffirmed Russia's commitment to strengthening bilateral relations with Bangladesh during meetings with Foreign Adviser Md Touhid Hossain and Foreign Secretary Md Jashim Uddin in Dhaka. Highlighting key areas of mutual interest, the ambassador emphasized collaboration in various sectors, including energy, agriculture, food security, shipbuilding, and employment opportunities for Bangladeshi workers in Russia.

Khozin expressed his admiration for Bangladesh and underscored the significance of the Russia-funded Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant, describing it as a landmark project in bilateral cooperation. He also shared his optimism about fostering closer ties, drawing on his prior experience in South Asia, including postings in India, Nepal, and Pakistan. [Bss News]

Bangladesh's interim leader Yunus engages with Australian envoy

(lm) Bangladesh's interim leader, Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus, held a farewell meeting with Nardia Simpson, the acting Australian High Commissioner to Bangladesh. During the meeting, Simpson reiterated Australia's continued support for the interim government and its reform agenda. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh's interim leader calls on Argentina to turn football connections into trade partnerships

(vk) Bangladesh's interim leader, Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus, has called for leveraging the strong emotional connection between Bangladesh and Argentina, rooted in their shared passion for football,

to deepen bilateral cooperation in trade and investment. During a meeting with Argentine Ambassador to Dhaka Marcelo Cesa, Yunus highlighted opportunities for joint ventures in cotton-related trade, energy cooperation, and expanding imports from Bangladesh.

Ambassador Cesa acknowledged the untapped potential in bilateral ties and suggested initiatives in pharmaceuticals, textiles, microcredit, LNG, and rice disease research. He also emphasized balancing the current trade volume, which favors Argentina at nearly USD 700 million annually, by increasing imports from Bangladesh, which currently exports around USD 22 million in garments to Argentina. Additionally, the ambassador proposed opening a Bangladeshi embassy in Buenos Aires to further enhance collaboration.

The meeting also highlighted Argentina's ongoing efforts to introduce microfinance, inspired by Bangladesh's success, and Argentina's appreciation for Bangladesh's commitment to human rights, particularly its recent signing of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearances (ICPPED). [Bss News]

Brunei and Indonesia strengthen tourism collaboration

(ga) Brunei's Minister of Primary Resources and Tourism Abdul Manaf Metussin led a delegation to Indonesia to strengthen tourism ties and explore collaborative opportunities. The networking session, organized by Brunei's Ministry of Primary Resources and Tourism (MPRT) in partnership with the Embassy of Brunei in Jakarta and the Association of the Indonesian Tour and Travel Agencies (ASITA), highlighted Indonesia's importance as a key target market.

A memorandum of understanding (MoU) was signed between Brunei's Tourism Development Department and ASITA to enhance inbound travel, promote joint tourism initiatives, and boost cooperation between the two nations. The delegation also conducted courtesy meetings, including one with Indonesia's newly appointed Minister of Tourism Widiyanti Putri Wardhana to discuss bilateral tourism collaboration. [Borneo Bulletin]

Brunei and Malaysia parliaments discuss advancing ties

(ga) The Legislative Council of Brunei and a delegation from the Malaysian Parliament held an official meeting on January 17 in Bandar Seri Begawan.

Discussions focused on strengthening diplomatic relations, enhancing cooperation between the two Parliaments, and exploring strategic partnerships across various sectors. Both sides expressed their commitment to fostering closer ties for mutual progress and well-being. [Borneo Bulletin]

Brunei and Saudi Arabia sign 2025 Haj management agreement

(ga) Brunei Darussalam and Saudi Arabia have signed the Haj Management Agreement for the 2025 season during a ceremony held in Saudi Arabia. The agreement, signed by Brunei's Minister of Religious Affairs Badaruddin Othman and Saudi Arabia's Minister of Haj and Umrah Taufig Fauzan Ar Rabi'ah, outlines key aspects of haj management, with further discussions planned at the senior official level.

Prior to the signing, a bilateral meeting took place in Jeddah to discuss preparations for Brunei's pilgrims. Saudi Arabia highlighted its efforts to enhance haj operations through an online system designed to improve efficiency and organization.

Brunei's Minister of Religious Affairs expressed appreciation for Saudi Arabia's services during last year's haj season and expressed hope for continued excellence in 2025. The visit, which included the signing and bilateral meeting, coincided with the 4th Edition of the Haj Conference and Exhibition, held in Jeddah from January 13 to 16. [Borneo Bulletin]

Philippines and Cambodia strengthen cooperation on transnational crimes and digital governance

(mfr) Cambodia and the Philippines have solidified their cooperation on two significant fronts: combating transnational crimes and advancing digital government initiatives. On January 15, Cambodian Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn and Philippine Foreign Secretary Enrique A. Manalo discussed enhancing collaboration in the fight against human trafficking and cyber fraud. During

their phone call, Manalo expressed appreciation for Cambodia's assistance in resolving a surrogate pregnancy case, where 13 Filipino women, previously convicted under Cambodian law, received Royal pardons and were repatriated to the Philippines in December. Both ministers highlighted the importance of strengthening bilateral relations and discussed preparations for Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet's official visit to the Philippines in February. [The Phnom Penh Post 1]

Beyond security cooperation, the two nations are advancing digital transformation. On January 20, a joint press conference in Siem Reap officially announced their partnership to enhance digital governance. This collaboration focuses on Cambodia's document verification platform, verify.gov.kh, and the Philippines' eGov SuperApp. Cambodia's platform uses blockchain technology to ensure secure document verification, while the eGov SuperApp integrates various government services into one streamlined system. Technical teams from both countries have been working to adapt these platforms to meet their specific needs and improve public service delivery.

Both countries aim to improve their digital governance capabilities through these efforts, benefiting citizens and enhancing regional cooperation. Joint training for technical teams from both countries has already been conducted to ensure the successful transfer of technology and implementation of these platforms. [The Phnom Penh Post 2]

Cambodia and Germany partner on sustainable waste management initiatives

(mfr) Cambodia and Germany have launched the "Green Grow Initiative for a Circular Economy for Sustainable Solid Waste Management in Cambodia," in a joint effort to improve waste management in the country. The project agreement, signed on January 20 by the Ministry of Environment and GIZ Cambodia, focuses on enhancing solid waste management systems using a circular economy approach to reduce environmental pollution and better manage waste disposal. [Khmer Times]

China Coast Guard accused of illegally paroling Philippine Exclusive Economic Zone

(wy) Manila has accused Beijing of allowing a Chinese coast guard ship to operate within the Philippine Exclusive Economic Zone in the South China Sea. Beijing denied the allegation and reiterated its sovereignty over the disputed territory.

According to Philippine officials, on January 14, a large Chinese coast guard vessel patrolled Scarborough Shoal, a contested area claimed by both China and the Philippines (see AiR No. 1, January/2025, 1), and moved toward the northwestern coast of the Philippines, coming within 77 nautical miles (143 kilometers) of its shoreline. [ABS-CBN]

Philippine authorities described the actions of the Chinese coast guard as "unacceptable" and demanded the immediate withdrawal of the vessel. Manila also warned Beijing of potential new international legal actions in response to the incident. [ABC News]

In contrast, Beijing reaffirmed its longstanding claims of sovereignty, rights, and interests in the area, asserting that the patrols conducted by the China Coast Guard (CCG) were lawful and consistent with international norms. China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs urged the Philippines to cease what it described as "infringement activities, provocations, and false accusations" concerning the South China Sea. The Chinese naval and air forces also conducted their first patrol of the year on January 18 and 19, with the aim of maintaining "peace and stability in the South China Sea region," according to the People's Liberation Army Southern Theatre Command. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China] [South China Morning Post]

Since 2012, China has maintained its claim of sovereignty over the South China Sea, referring to Scarborough Shoal as Huangyan Dao. Despite a 2016 arbitration ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague that invalidated China's claims in the region, Beijing has rejected the decision and continues to assert control over the maritime feature. To date, China is widely regarded as having established control over the area.

China and Vietnam reaffirm strong relationship following call

(dh) Chinese President Xi Jinping, in a phone conversation with Vietnamese Communist Party leader To Lam on January 15, stressed the importance of developing stable industrial supply chains between China and Vietnam while deepening collaboration on socialist principles. Xi called for strengthening party

relations, exchanging socialist theories, and promoting shared development amid global challenges. To reaffirmed that Hanoi prioritizes its relationship with Beijing as part of its foreign policy. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China, in Chinese]

Despite territorial disputes in the South China Sea and U.S. efforts to strengthen ties with Vietnam, both nations have emphasized mutual political trust and party-to-party collaboration.

Recent efforts include launching a strategic consultation mechanism between their foreign ministries, covering diplomacy, defense, and public security. This culminated in Beijing talks between Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Vietnamese Deputy Minister Nguyen Minh Vu, where Wang highlighted the importance of deepening strategic trust and expanding cooperation.

China-Vietnam relations have also been reinforced by high-level visits. To Lam made China his first foreign destination as public security minister, describing ties with Beijing as a priority. Subsequently, Chinese military leader General Zhang Youxia visited Vietnam, followed by Chinese Premier Li Qiang, who signed ten agreements on economic cooperation in agriculture, railways, and financial systems. These developments underscore both nations' focus on fostering close ties and collaborative development. [South China Morning Post]

China and Japan intensify efforts to improve ties

(dh) China and Japan last week held high-level meetings and exchanges signaling efforts to improve their bilateral relationship.

Talks with Japanese ruling coalition delegation

Wang Huning, chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) and fourth-ranking member of the Chinese Communist Party's Politburo Standing Committee, and Foreign Minister Wang Yi last week met with a Japanese delegation consisting of members of the Japanese ruling coalition parties, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and Komeito. The delegation was led by Secretary-General Hiroshi Moriyama and his Komeito counterpart Makoto Nishida.

The meeting was the Japan-China Ruling Party Exchange Council meeting in Beijing on January 14, the

first such meeting between the groups since October 2018, following interruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and deteriorating ties between China and Japan.

The discussions focused on fostering dialogue, strengthening cooperation, and building mutual trust to create a more stable and constructive partnership. Both sides emphasized the importance of adhering to prior agreements and pursuing peaceful coexistence. Topics of discussion included practical issues such as Japan's planned release of treated Fukushima water and seafood exports to China. Officials agreed to address these matters through dialogue and consultation. [CPPCC] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China, in Chinese]

Wang noted that China-Japan ties are at a significant crossroads and stressed the need for a strong foundation and mutual understanding. He highlighted the importance of viewing the two nations as cooperative partners rather than threats and called on Japan to uphold its commitments to reflect on history, particularly as 2025 marks the 80th anniversary of the end of the War of Resistance Against Japanese Aggression.

In a separate meeting Liu Jianchao, head of the Chinese Communist Party's International Department (see AiR No. 2, January/2025, 2), Moriyama expressed hope that the meeting would mark a new phase in exchanges between the ruling parties but also raised concerns over China's delay in lifting the ban on Japanese seafood imports. The ban was imposed after the release of treated radioactive water from the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant in 2023. Nishida additionally called on China to work towards resolving issues surrounding the disputed Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea. [Asahi Shimbun]

These talks follow recent high-level engagements, including Japanese Foreign Minister Takeshi Iwaya's trip to Beijing, where he invited Wang to visit Japan (see AiR No. 53, December/2024, 5).

Although relations remain complex, these exchanges suggest both sides are seeking ways to stabilize and develop their partnership amidst regional and global challenges. [South China Morning Post]

PLA delegation visits Japan

Meanwhile, China sent a military delegation to Japan for a week-long visit aimed at enhancing mutual understanding and strengthening defense exchanges. Yoshimasa Hayashi, Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary,

emphasized that communication at the commanders' level would help foster constructive and stable relations between the two countries. [Japan Times]

Analysts suggest the timing of the visit may signal an effort by Chinese leader Xi Jinping to improve ties with Japan amid the power shift in the US and the potential for tariff hikes under incoming President Donald Trump. Both nations, with highly interdependent economies, may seek to manage the economic impact of US policies. Experts also note that while the military delegation is the focus, economic and strategic considerations are likely at play. China may be attempting to stabilize relations with Japan and possibly drive a wedge between Japan and the US.

The key issue for Japan will be whether China alters its behavior regarding the disputed islands near Japan, such as the Senkaku Islands. The presence of Chinese military and Coast Guard forces near these territories has raised concerns in the region. [Breaking Defense]

Chinese President Xi Jinping speaks to Donald Trump ahead of inauguration

(wy) Chinese President Xi Jinping spoke with U.S. President-elect Donald Trump by phone, marking their first direct communication since 2021. [The Guardian 1]

In a post on the social media platform *Truth*, Trump shared that he had conducted a phone conversation with Xi on January 17. He described the exchange as "very good one for both China and the U.S.A." The discussion covered topics such as trade imbalances, the fentanyl crisis (see AiR No. 52, December/2024, 4), and TikTok (see AiR No. 1, January/2025, 1). Trump expressed that these issues could be resolved through collaboration between the two nations. He also highlighted plans for the U.S. and China to work together to "make the world more peaceful and safe." [Truth]

However, the account provided by China's state-run Xinhua News Agency offered a different detail on the conversation. According to Xinhua, Trump and Xi exchanged views on key international and regional issues, including the Ukraine crisis and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Xi reportedly emphasized China's stance on Taiwan, urging Trump and the U.S. to approach the matter cautiously. Despite these firm positions, Xi expressed a desire to foster improved relations between the two countries, aiming for a "win-

win situation" that benefits both nations and the world. [Radio Free Asia, in Chinese] [Xinhua News, in Chinese]

Chinese Vice President Han Zheng attends the inauguration ceremony of President Donald Trump

(wy) Chinese Vice President Han Zheng visited the United States to attend the inauguration of President Donald Trump as a special representative of President Xi Jinping. While Xi was invited by Trump to the event, Beijing opted to send Han in his place. Despite Xi's absence, he and Trump held a phone conversation during Han's visit (see article above). [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China]

During his stay in Washington, D.C., Han met with U.S. Vice President J.D. Vance, representatives of the U.S. business community, and Elon Musk, CEO of Tesla.

In his meeting with Vance, emphasized China's desire to build a stable, healthy, and sustainable bilateral relationship with the U.S. He also highlighted the importance of mutual respect, peaceful coexistence, and win-win cooperation, particularly in economic and trade relations.

Vance, in turn, expressed that dialogue and collaboration could help the two nations "jointly promote global peace and stability." Vance also reiterated the U.S.'s commitment to fostering an "enduring and fruitful" relationship with China. According to Trump's transition team, the two leaders also discussed the fentanyl crisis during their meeting. [Associated Press News]

While meeting with Elon Musk and other business leaders, Han called for active steps to share the benefits of China's development. The U.S. business community expressed optimism about China's economic prospects and the opportunities for strengthened trade cooperation. Musk and other leaders pledged to support greater collaboration and dialogue between the two countries. [Xinhua Net]

Beijing's decision to send Han as Xi's representative is seen as a gesture to ease tensions and demonstrate China's willingness to engage in dialogue and negotiations. The phone call between Xi and Trump, coupled with Trump's expressed interest in visiting China, suggests a potential thaw in U.S.-China relations.

However, uncertainties remain, particularly given the presence of China hawks in Trump's Cabinet (see AiR No. 50, December/2024, 2), such as Secretary Marco Rubio, who has previously described China as America's "biggest threat." [CNN] [Taipei Times] [The Guardian]

US President Donald Trump delays ban on TikTok

(dql/wy/lb) In one of is first acts after assuming office of January 20, U.S. President Donald Trump signed an executive order to delay the enforcement of the ban of Chinese owned short-video app TikTok by 75 days. The ban was originally set to take effect on January 19.

Trump's order instructs the attorney general to pause enforcement to allow the administration time to determine an appropriate course of action regarding TikTok. Additionally, it directs the Justice Department to inform companies such as Apple, Google, and Oracle that no statutory violations occurred during this period, absolving them of liability for related activities. [Reuters]

Trump's move came after the US Supreme Court upheld a law requiring TikTok's parent company, ByteDance, to sell the platform's US operations by January 19 to avoid a ban. TikTok's challenge to the law, claiming it violated free speech rights for its 170 million US users, was unanimously rejected in the Court's January 17 ruling. The decision affirms a lower court ruling, emphasizing Congress's authority to act on security concerns. [Supreme Court, USA] [The New York Times]

Passed in April 2024 (see AiR No. 18, April/2024, 5), the law addresses national security concerns over TikTok's data practices and links to the Chinese government. Despite assurances from TikTok that it does not share data with Beijing, bipartisan support led to the ban. ByteDance has refused to sell it and plans to shut down TikTok's US operations if no reprieve is granted.

In a related development, TikTok restored its service to U.S. users after a temporary shutdown in response to the scheduled ban. The platform confirmed the resumption of its operations in the U.S., with former President Donald Trump revealing his communication with TikTok during which he announced an executive order would be issued to "extend the period before the law's prohibitions take effect," along with additional measures to safeguard U.S. national security. [9News] [Truth]

Meanwhile, the Chinese government is reportedly considering allowing U.S. billionaire Elon Musk to acquire TikTok's U.S. operations in an effort to prevent the app from being banned in the country. This proposal is one of several contingency plans under discussion as the U.S. Supreme Court deliberates on legislation requiring ByteDance, TikTok's China-based parent company, to divest its U.S. operations by January 19. Should the court uphold the law, internet service providers would face penalties for supporting TikTok's activities in the U.S.

Sources familiar with the matter suggest that the proposal would see Musk take control of TikTok's U.S. business while continuing to oversee his social media platform, X. However, the plan is described as being in its early stages, with no indication that ByteDance or Musk are directly involved in the discussions.

TikTok dismissed the report, calling the proposal "pure fiction." Similarly, X has not issued a public response to these claims. [BBC]

"TikTok Refugees" surges into Chinese social media RedNote in U.S

(wy) A group of self-proclaimed "TikTok Refugees" has flocked to RedNote, a social media app primarily used by Chinese-speaking users, following the U.S. Supreme Court's January 17 decision to uphold the ban of TikTok (see article above).

In response, a significant influx of English-speaking users has joined RedNote as an alternative to TikTok. Sensor Tower, a data analytics firm, reported a more than 200 percent year-over-year surge in American downloads of RedNote this week, following a 194 percent increase last week. [Sensor Tower]

However, the arrival of American users has raised concerns about the potential erosion of the Chinese government's strict information controls. Topics rarely discussed in China, such as labor strikes, LGBTQ+ rights, and feminism, have started appearing on the platform, sparking fears about political stability and the possible breakdown of the "Great Firewall" designed to block unfiltered information from abroad.

At the same time, Chinese state media welcomed the protest organized by those "TikTok Refugees" against the ban, arguing that "openness, communication, and mutual learning are the unchanging themes of mankind and the heartfelt desires of people from all countries." [ABC News] [BBC, in Chinese] [Newsweek]

China's Commerce Ministry launches investigation into U.S. government subsidies for its semiconductor sector

(wy) China's Commerce Ministry has announced an investigation into U.S. government subsidies for its semiconductor sector.

The probe, announced on January 16, targets subsidies implemented by the Biden administration, which Beijing claims harm the interests of Chinese mature-node chipmakers. These chips, designed for less complex tasks, are distinct from cutting-edge chips used in artificial intelligence and other advanced technologies. According to the Commerce Ministry, U.S. subsidies give mature-node chipmakers an "unfair competitive advantage," particularly when combined with their low-cost production, undermining the legitimate rights of China's domestic industry. [Ministry of Commerce, China, in Chinese]

Following the announcement, the China Semiconductor Industry Association, comprising executives from the country's largest chip companies, issued a statement supporting the investigation. The association accused the Biden administration of violating "the basic laws of the market economy."

Over the past three years, Washington has tightened export controls on AI chips to China, restricting access to advanced technology and curbing military advancements (see AiR No. 2, January/2025, 2). In response, China has implemented or considered stricter controls on the export of critical materials, such as gallium, germanium, antimony, and graphite, essential for technological innovation (see AiR No. 1, January/2025, 1). U.S. tech giant Nvidia has also faced scrutiny from Chinese authorities (see AiR No. 50, December/2024, 2). Both nations continue to vie for dominance in this strategic sector. [Reuters]

Chinese hackers access over 3,000 documents from U.S. officials

(wy) The U.S. Treasury Department, alongside law enforcement officials, informed lawmakers that Chinese hackers accessed over 3,000 unclassified agency files and 419 Treasury computers in a cybersecurity breach last year.

In December 2024, the Treasury Department disclosed that the hackers had exploited a vulnerability in a third-party cybersecurity service provider to obtain a critical key used to secure unclassified documents (see AiR No. 1, January/2025, 1). The ongoing investigation has since revealed that files belonging to top officials, including Secretary Janet Yellen, Deputy Secretary Wally Adeyemo, and Acting Under Secretary Brad Smith, were also compromised.

Additionally, the breach targeted sensitive entities such as the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States and the Office of Foreign Assets Control. Treasury officials noted a concerning shift in hacking strategies, with attackers increasingly focusing on vulnerabilities in third-party vendors rather than directly targeting the department itself. [Politico]

UK Foreign Secretary and Home Secretary intervene in approval of Chinese mega-embassy establishment

(wy) UK Foreign Secretary David Lammy and Home Secretary Yvette Cooper have submitted a joint letter to the Planning Inspectorate, supporting China's planning application for a new embassy in London. The letter, reported by the *Financial Times*, also outlined specific conditions for the proposed site. [Financial Times]

Lammy and Cooper stressed the "importance of countries having functioning diplomatic premises in each other's capitals." They noted that the Metropolitan Police had withdrawn its previous objections, which were based on concerns about the potential impact of protests near the Chinese embassy on the safety of residents and tourists. However, China has been asked to agree to a "small element of the design" being changed and to relinquish diplomatic accreditation for seven other premises scattered across London.

In response, the Chinese embassy in London stated that its resubmitted planning application had "taken into full consideration the UK's planning policy and guidance as well as the views of all relevant parties." They described the proposal as "a high-quality development scheme" and emphasized that the UK, as a host country, has an international obligation to facilitate the establishment of diplomatic missions.

China's efforts to build a new embassy date back to 2022. The proposed site covers approximately 20,000 square meters, significantly larger than its current 830-

square-meter embassy in Marylebone. However, initial planning permission was blocked by a local council. Last summer, Chinese President Xi Jinping raised the issue directly with UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer after China resubmitted its application. Despite this, the Tower Hamlets local authority rejected the proposal again, citing concerns about its impact on local residents and security.

The intervention by the Foreign Secretary and Home Secretary has now reopened the case, increasing the likelihood of approval. This move is widely seen as a follow-up to Chancellor of the Exchequer Rachel Reeves' recent visit to China, which aimed to strengthen economic ties between the two nations (see AiR No. 2, January/2025, 2) and as a reflection of the Labour Party's evolving stance toward China which appears less confrontational than that of the previous government. [Voice of America, in Chinese]

China imposes trade duties on Japanese industrial plastics

(adi) China announced the imposition of provisional anti-dumping duties ranging from 3.8 percent to 74.9 percent on imports of industrial plastics from Japan, the United States, the European Union, and Taiwan. The measure targets polyacetal copolymers, a key material used in automotive parts, electronics, and medical equipment. Duties for Japanese manufacturers have been set at 43.7 percent a significant figure that reflects escalating trade tensions.

Japan, a significant exporter of polyacetal copolymers, faces a challenging trade environment as these duties take effect on January 24. The duties are expected to impact industries reliant on this material, including automotive and electronics manufacturing, which form key pillars of Japan's economy.

The new duties, announced on January 16, follow a nine-month anti-dumping investigation launched by China in May 2024. The investigation coincided with increasing trade barriers in other regions, including U.S. tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles and an EU probe into Chinese steel imports. These developments highlight a broader pattern of intensifying economic friction between major global powers.

The total value of the affected imports of polyacetal copolymers into China is estimated at CNY 3 billion (USD 409 million), according to Chinese customs data. The trade measure further complicates Japan's

economic outlook, as it navigates inflationary pressures and ongoing geopolitical challenges.

The imposition of duties underscores the geopolitical undercurrents driving economic policies in the region. China's decision to levy higher duties on U.S. and Japanese manufacturers compared to other nations highlights its strategic calculus in managing trade relations amidst broader regional and global tensions.

In response, Japanese officials have expressed concern over the impact of these measures on the country's export-driven economy. The development also coincides with Japan's efforts to strengthen alliances with partners like the United States and the European Union, emphasizing its commitment to free and fair trade. [Reuters]

India's high tariff gap with US signals potential trade tensions under Trump administration

(lm) India faces potential trade challenges with the United States as the average tariff gap between the two countries stands at 11.9 percent across over 3,000 products, significantly higher than gaps with other major trading nations such as China (3.5 percent), Vietnam (8 percent), and Mexico (6.8 percent). This disparity may draw scrutiny under the administration of US President Donald Trump, who has pledged retaliatory tariffs targeting countries with significant tariff imbalances.

India's exports to the US face high tariffs on several products, including alcoholic beverages, coffee, tea, vegetable oil, cars, and motorcycles. For example, while India imposes a 30 percent tariff on tobacco imports from the US, the US levies a 60.3 percent tariff on similar imports from India. Additionally, US tariffs surpass India's on 25 items, while countries like China, Vietnam, and Indonesia exhibit a higher count of products with a negative tariff gap.

Despite the tariff imbalance, India's trade surplus with the US in 2023 was only USD 43 billion, considerably lower than the surpluses of China, Mexico, and Vietnam, which exceeded USD 100 billion each. A Moneycontrol analysis suggests that even if the US gains full market access for items subject to India's highest tariffs, the resulting export boost would be limited to USD 5 billion.

Tariffs on vehicles remain a contentious issue, with Tesla's entry into India stalled over import duty

disputes. In his prior term, Trump had raised concerns about India's high tariffs on Harley Davidson motorcycles, signaling potential friction in automotive trade. [MoneyControl]

More than 120 Indians joined Russian army in Ukraine

(rsv) Indian authorities have confirmed that 126 Indians have joined the Russian army to fight in Moscow's war of aggression in Ukraine. Of these, 96 have returned to India, while 12 have been killed, and 16 remain missing, with their whereabouts categorized as "unknown" by Russian authorities.

New Delhi has reiterated its demands for the release and repatriation of all Indian nationals serving in the Russian military, citing concerns about individuals being lured with promises of high salaries and pathways to Russian citizenship. Families of those missing or serving in the conflict have petitioned both the Indian and Russian governments for assistance.

This marks a troubling increase in casualties and recruits, despite ongoing diplomatic efforts, including discussions between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Russian President Vladimir Putin, to resolve the issue. [The Hindu]

On the diplomatic front, India is set to host the annual India-Russia summit later this year, with President Putin's visit confirmed but dates pending. This would mark his first visit to India since the Ukraine war began in February 2022. Since then, New Delhi has consistently advocated for peace and diplomacy in resolving the war.

The leaders have maintained close ties, meeting twice in 2024, including during the 22nd Russia-India summit in Moscow, where Prime Minister Modi received Russia's highest national honor, "The Order of St. Andrew the Apostle," for his contributions to bilateral relations. These engagements, including the BRICS Summit in Kazan, underscore the strong partnership between the two nations. [First India]

32 Indonesian nationals caught fleeing from Myanmar into Thailand

(gk) Thirty-two Indonesian migrants, comprising 30 men and two women, were apprehended while

attempting to cross illegally from Myanmar into Thailand through the Mae Sot district's border area.

The detained individuals stated that they had left their jobs in Myanmar and were seeking to return home to Indonesia. Border patrols along the Myanmar border have been intensified due to concerns over employment scams. Many victims are lured into Myanmar with promises of illegal jobs, including work with call center gangs. [Bangkok Post]

Indonesian, U.S. complete debt transfer process for coral reef conservation and protection

(gk) The Indonesian Ministry of Marine Affairs and Fisheries has announced that the governments of Indonesia and the United States have completed the debt transfer process worth USD 35 million, aimed at coral reef conservation and protection activities.

The funds will focus on protecting and conserving coral reef ecosystems in the Bird's Head Seascape and the Sunda Banda Sea, which were chosen due to their high biodiversity value, and for being part of the world's coral triangle area. Priority will be given to marine ecosystems to maintain ecological integrity of coral reefs, habitat connectivity zones, conservation locations and endangered/threatened/protected marine species. Implementation would be through community involvement to realize sustainability

The debt transfer agreement has been made through two international non-profit conservation organizations, namely The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and Conservancy International (CI), which have partnered with Indonesia's Yayasan Konservasi Alam Nusantara (YKAN) and Yayasan Konservasi Cakrawala Indonesia.

The funds from the debt transfer will be managed in a trust fund account, led by the Supervisory Committee under the Ministry of Marine Affairs and Fisheries, consisting of the Finance Ministry and several other non-profit organizations. [Antara]

Indonesia strengthens collaboration on migrant workers with EU and Royal United Services Institute (RUSI)

(lp) The National Counterterrorism Agency, the Ministry for the Protection of Migrant Workers, the European Union and RUSI of the United Kingdom have reaffirmed their commitment to deepen cooperation to enhance the capabilities of instructors at training centers aimed at safeguarding migrant workers from the risks of violent extremism.

During the EU-Indonesia Training Activity in Jakarta on January 15, the National Counterterrorism Agency reported that as of January 9, 2025, 118 Indonesian migrant workers were expelled or detained due to accusations of being involved in terrorist activities. [Antara News]

Indonesia welcomes Israel-Hamas ceasefire agreement

(gk) The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia has issued a statement welcoming the ceasefire agreement reached between the Palestinian resistance group Hamas, and Israel.

The ministry highlighted the importance of ensuring full access to humanitarian aid distribution for the people of Gaza and added that the United Nations Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) must be allowed to continue to fulfill its mandate to assist the Palestinians and refugees across all locations. The ministry underscored that the two-state solution is the only way to bring an end to the decades-long, multigenerational conflict. [Antara 1] [The Jakarta Post]

Meanwhile, the National Alms Agency of Indonesia (Baznas) has partnered with Egyptian humanitarian institutions, Bait Zakat Wa As-Shadaqat and Sunnah Al-Hayyah, to deliver 41 container trucks loaded with 45 thousand boxes of humanitarian aid packages to Palestine.

Baznas will also be helping in reconstructing various public facilities such as hospitals and schools, for which it will be collaborating with international organizations such as the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), the Jordan Hashemite Charity Organization (JHCO), and King Hussein Cancer Foundation (KHCF). [Antara 2]

Indonesia evacuates 17 migrant workers from Syria

(gk) The Indonesian Embassy in Beirut, Lebanon has facilitated the evacuation of 17 Indonesian migrant workers from Syria and Lebanon. These individuals were evacuated via Rafic Hariri Airport in Beirut. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The Republic of Indonesia]

Indonesia and Saudi Arabia agree on quota of pilgrims for 2025 Hajj Operations

(gk) The Government of Indonesia and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia have officially signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for the Hajj season of 2025.

As part of this agreement, the Indonesia's Hajj pilgrim quota has been set at 221,000 pilgrims. Additionally, Indonesia has been allocated a quota of 2210 Hajj officers, 1 per cent of total number of pilgrims. The MoU also outlines various security regulations, including a ban on political propaganda, the use of disruptive photographic equipment, and specific movement protocols during the peak days of Hajj at Arafat, Muzdalifah, and Mina. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs of The Republic of Indonesia]

Indonesia exports steel products valued USD 1.5 million to New Zealand

(lp) On January 15, Trade Minister Budi Santoso dispatched the cargoes of 1,200 metric tons of beam steel product, valued at USD 1.5 million, to New Zealand. This steel beam is low-emission and manufactured by PT Gunung Raja Paksi. [Ministry of Trade of the Republic of Indonesia, in Indonesian]

During the send-off ceremony in Bekasi city, he stressed that this export was a part of realization of the ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement (AANZFTA). As a result of this deal, Indonesia can send its steel products with the duty-free. New Zealand is a promising market for Indonesian steel products due to its substantial construction of bridges and airports.

The Indonesian government aims for a total export value of USD 294.45 billion this year, representing a 7.1 percent increase from last year's total export value. Minister Budi stated that the Indonesian government would assist micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in achieving that objective through

governmental initiatives such as business matching, trade missions, and international fairs.

Furthermore, he encouraged MSMEs to draw inspiration from PT Gunung Raja Paksi to improve the quality of steel products for competitiveness in global markets. [Antara News]

Japan voices concerns during visit by Chinese military delegation

(adi) Japan expressed serious concerns over China's regional military activities during a rare visit by a high-ranking Chinese military delegation to Tokyo last week. The visit, which included talks between Japanese Defense Minister Gen Nakatani and Lt. Gen. He Lei of the People's Liberation Army, marked a rare instance of direct military dialogue amid tensions in the region.

During the meeting, Japanese officials raised issues regarding China's increasing military presence in the East and South China Seas, including concerns over frequent incursions near the disputed Senkaku Islands. They also addressed China's military buildup and its close ties with Russia, emphasizing the destabilizing impact of such activities on regional and global security.

He defended China's military policies as necessary for safeguarding its sovereignty and interests. He emphasized that Beijing remains committed to peaceful development but would not compromise on its core national interests. The Chinese delegation called for mutual respect and dialogue to manage tensions effectively.

The rare interaction reflects Japan's broader efforts to maintain open communication channels with China while reinforcing its alliances with regional and global partners, such as the United States and NATO. Analysts note that while such talks are crucial for risk management, the deep-rooted strategic differences between Tokyo and Beijing are likely to persist. [Japan Times]

Japanese, UK defense chiefs deepen collaboration on joint fighter program

(adi) Japan's Defense Minister Gen Nakatani and UK Secretary of State for Defense John Healey met on January 16 to discuss advancing bilateral defense ties, emphasizing their collaboration on the Global Combat

Air Program (GCAP). This trilateral project, which includes Italy, aims to develop a sixth-generation fighter aircraft, underscoring shared strategic priorities between the two nations. [Ministry of Defense, Japan]

The ministers reaffirmed their commitment to the fighter program, emphasizing the need to expedite the establishment of a joint venture in 2025. The initiative aims to transition to full development and design phases later this year, marking significant progress in enhancing their joint defense capabilities.

Coinciding with these discussions, British troops recently began joint military exercises in Kyushu, Japan. Exercise Vigilant Isles is an annual joint military training even between the British Army and the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force (JGSDF), aimed at enhancing interoperability between the two forces. The 2025 exercise, involving personnel from the UK's 16 Air Assault Brigade and the British Army's global response force, makrks the third iteration of this bilateral drill conducted on Japanese soil. This marks the only bilateral drills involving Japan and a European nation on Japanese territory, reflecting deepening military cooperation between Tokyo and London. [Forces News]

The growing Japan-UK cooperation comes amidst heightened geopolitical tensions in Asia, with Japan actively expanding its partnerships beyond traditional regional alliances. By enhancing ties with the UK, Japan seeks to bolster its defense posture and contribute to a rules-based international order. [Japan Times]

Japan may terminate funding for Russian education centers

(adi) Russia is considering terminating funding for education centers in Russia, a move reflective of the deteriorating diplomatic ties between the two nations. In a January 15 order, Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin halted the implementation of memorandums signed in 2000 and 2003 with Japan stipulating the activities and other issues regarding "Japan Centers."

These centers – education centers, which were established in Russia between 1994 and 2001 and provide Japanese language and cultural programs in cities like Moscow and Vladivostok, have been part of Japan's soft power diplomacy in Russia, promoting cultural exchange and fostering people-to-people connections.

However, Tokyo's increasing sanctions on Moscow, coupled with growing anti-Japanese sentiment in Russia, have placed these programs under scrutiny. Since the invasion of Ukraine, Japan has joined Western allies in imposing sanctions, including restrictions on trade and freezing Russian assets. In response, Russia has adopted retaliatory measures, further straining bilateral relations. [Kyodo News]

Japan rejected Russia's unilateral decision to terminate the agreements and announced to take appropriate action. [Japan Today]

Laos, US expand partnership to enhance access to justice and legal aid

(tas) The U.S. and Laos have launched Phase 2 of the Cooperation Project on Access to Justice and Legal Aid Support in Laos until July 2026 by signing a new Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on January 14.

The project, funded by USAID and co-funded by The McConnell Foundation, aims to strengthen Laos' legal aid system and enhance the capacity of justice officers. Building on Phase 1, which established 94 legal aid offices and 17 clinics across the country, Phase 2 will focus on improving service quality and institutionalizing legal aid, ensuring more people have access to high-quality legal assistance.

Three model offices will be set up as training hubs, and efforts will continue to support marginalized groups. The initiative has already helped over 6,500 individuals access legal aid and distributed thousands of informational materials nationwide [Vientiane Times].

Malaysia's state of Sarawak partners with Japan to develop textiles for astronauts

(ga) Malaysia's Sarawak is collaborating with a Tokyo-based company to develop textiles for astronaut use, focusing on low-carbon production methods. Premier of Sarawak Abang Johari highlighted the state's commitment to sustainable practices, aligning with its green economy agenda. The partnership focuses on creating low-carbon materials using chemicals derived from liquid gas, potentially leading to astronaut suits branded 'Made in Sarawak'. [Bernama]

Malaysia's PAC and Indonesia's KPK strengthen anti-corruption cooperation

(ga) The Indonesian Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) hosted a bilateral meeting with Malaysia's Public Accounts Committee (PAC) on January 15 in Jakarta. The meeting aimed to strengthen regional and international cooperation through the exchange of information on combating corruption.

KPK Chairman Setyo Budiyanto emphasized KPK's independence and its constitutional mandate to combat corruption effectively and professionally. He outlined KPK's guiding principles of transparency, legal certainty, public interest, accountability, and proportionality, as well as its integrated approach through education, prevention, and enforcement.

PAC Vice Chairperson Teresa Kok Suh Sim stated that the visit was intended to build partnerships focused on information sharing and anti-corruption initiatives. The PAC, responsible for reviewing government financial reports and expenditures, aims to prioritize transparency and public access to information to enhance government accountability. [Indonesian Corruption Eradication Commission] [Antara News]

MACC and FBI strengthen collaboration to combat corruption

(ga) The Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) and the United States Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) have agreed to strengthen cooperation in combating corruption at regional and international levels. The agreement was made during a courtesy visit by FBI Legal Attaché Jagdeep Khangura to MACC Chief Commissioner Azam Baki at the MACC headquarters in Putrajaya on January 14.

The meeting focused on collaboration in intelligence sharing and investigations, particularly in high-profile cases involving Malaysia and the United States. Azam highlighted the success of joint efforts, such as asset recovery from cases related to 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB), and reiterated MACC's commitment to combating corruption and money laundering. [Bernama]

United States AI chip export restrictions not to impact Malaysia

(oc) Malaysian Deputy Minister of Investment, Trade, and Industry Liew Chin Tong has stated that the potential U.S. government restrictions on artificial intelligence (AI) chip exports will not impact existing data centers in Malaysia.

Liew's remarks respond to recent announcements by the Biden Administration regarding restrictions on AI chips for certain countries. Officials have explained that these measures are intended to protect American interests and prevent "malicious actors" from gaining access to AI chips.

During a speech at The CEO Series: Economy and Business Forum 2025 on January 16, Liew emphasized the importance of Malaysia developing domestic supplies for AI chips. To mitigate the impact of these restrictions, he suggested that a stronger domestic supply chain is needed. In his view, this should begin with integrating workplaces and residential areas. Liew noted that industrial spaces are currently separate from where people live, but connecting communities to industries could lead to higher wages, stronger domestic supply links, and economic growth. These factors, he believes, would help offset any potential effects of the U.S. restrictions.

The new U.S. restrictions will undergo a 120-day review period before taking effect. [BBC] [Bernama]

Malaysian prime minister visits UK

(oc) Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim traveled to the United Kingdom for a five-day working visit that began on January 15. [Bernama 1]

During the visit, a range of topics were discussed, leading to several agreements. Both prime ministers explored the possibility of elevating the bilateral relationship to a strategic partnership. Anwar emphasized that, from Malaysia's perspective, the focus of these strengthened ties would be on economics and defense.

Additionally, the first Joint Economic and Trade Committee meeting was held between the two countries. This meeting aimed to expand trade and investment between Malaysia and the UK. [Bernama 2] [Bernama 3]

Furthermore, Ibrahim pledged significant investment in the UK through a housing development project that will include 6,500 new homes and a 15-acre park. The project, located on the former Filton Airfield on the

Bristol and South Gloucestershire border, will be undertaken by the Malaysian-owned YTL Group at an estimated cost of USD 2.4 billion. [BBC]

Malaysia and European Union resume free trade negotiations

(oc) Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen have announced the resumption of Malaysia-European Union Free Trade Agreement (MEUFTA) negotiations. After Ibrahim visited Brussels from January 19 to 20, he released a statement confirming renewed negotiations.

This comes 12 years after talks were stalled a disagreement related to the Southeast Asian country's palm oil industry. [Free Malaysia Today] [Reuters]

Malaysian and Belgium Prime Minister's hold bilateral meeting

(oc) On January 20 Belgium PM Alexander De Croo and his Malaysia counterpart Anwar Ibrahim held a bilateral meeting. The meeting occurred in De Croo's office as Ibrahim is on a two-day working visit to the nation. Officials were present on both sides. [New Strait Times]

Malaysia and Saudi Arabia discuss additional 10,000 Hajj quota for 2025

(ga) Malaysia has requested an additional 10,000 Hajj quota from Saudi Arabia for the 2025 season. This request was made by the Minister in the Prime Minister's Department for Religious Affairs Dr. Mohd Na'im Mokhtar, during a courtesy visit to Saudi Arabia's Minister of Hajj and Umrah Dr. Tawfig Fawzan Al-Rabiah in Jeddah. The request was discussed at the annual Symposium and Hajj Exhibition, which took place from January 13 to 16.

Additionally, Malaysia signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Saudi Arabia to enhance cooperation on Hajj management, including Malaysia's official quota of 31,600 pilgrims for 2025. The MoU includes agreements on arrivals and departures through Madinah and Jeddah airports, and Malaysia's commitment to finalizing contracts with various Saudi

parties to improve the management of pilgrims. [Malaysia Gazette] [Utusan Malaysia]

Malaysia's state of Pahang, UAE sign agreement to protect Malayan tigers

(ga) Malaysia's state of Pahang and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have signed a strategic partnership to protect the critically endangered Malayan tigers, with a focus on conservation efforts at the Al-Sultan Abdullah Royal Tiger Reserve in Pahang.

The MYR 99.8 million project, funded by the UAE's Mohamed bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund, aims to address key threats such as poaching and habitat destruction while working on natural habitat restoration and community development. The agreement was formalized during the Abu Dhabi Sustainability Week, with both Pahang's Crown Prince and the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi present. [Bernama]

Maldivian President Muizzu completes historic visit to Estonia

(lm) Maldivian President Dr. Mohamed Muizzu has made history as the first Maldivian President to officially visit Estonia, marking a significant step in fostering diplomatic and developmental cooperation between the two nations.

During his visit, President Muizzu praised Estonia's leadership in digital transformation and innovation, highlighting it as a source of inspiration for the Maldives. He engaged in discussions with Estonian officials to explore partnerships in digital governance, cybersecurity, education, and climate resilience. President Muizzu also outlined his administration's vision for a "Digital Maldives," focusing on accessibility, sustainability, and resilience in public services.

As part of the visit, President Muizzu participated in a roundtable with Estonia's Digital Advisory Council and visited the e-Estonia Briefing Center to learn about the nation's advancements in e-governance, digital IDs, e-taxation, and secure data exchange. Estonia offered to assist the Maldives by sharing expertise, enhancing ICT infrastructure, and redesigning services. A memorandum of understanding (MoU) was signed between Estonia's Ministry of Justice and Digital Affairs and the Maldives' Ministry of Homeland Security and Technology. [the edition 1] [the edition 2]

Discussions with Estonia's Minister of Education and Research, Kristina Kallas, focused on expanding educational opportunities for Maldivian youth. Both nations identified avenues for scholarships, capacity building, and knowledge sharing, with the Maldives aiming to adopt Estonia's innovative approaches to education. [the edition 3]

At an official dinner hosted by Estonian President Dr Alar Karis, President Muizzu expressed hopes for deeper cooperation in various sectors, commending Estonia's achievements in digital innovation and its global example of empowering communities through technology. He also highlighted the shared priorities and unity between the two nations, emphasizing the need for collaboration on digital governance, cyber resilience, and sustainable development. [the edition 4]

Mongolia, China to strengthen collaboration in public health and disease prevention

(fs) A Mongolian delegation, led by State Secretary of the Ministry of Health Ochirbat Dagvadorj, visited the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDCP) from January 7 to 11, accompanied by representatives from Mongolia's health sector and international organizations such as WHO and UNICEF. [Montsame]

During an official meeting with the CDCP Director Shen Hongbing, both parties emphasized the growing cooperation between Mongolia and China in public health, particularly in disease prevention and control.

Dagvadorj highlighted Mongolia's recent advancements in public health, including the enactment of the country's first Law on Public Health Care Services in April 2024, which authorized the establishment of national-level Centers for Disease Control and Public Health.

He also expressed appreciation for the opportunity to learn from the operations and best practices of the CDCP and extended an invitation to Hongbing to visit Mongolia. In response, Shen reaffirmed China's commitment to supporting Mongolia in developing its own Center for Disease Control and Prevention. [Akipress]

Japan to fund renovation of Mongolian hospital in Sukhbaatar province

(fs) The government of Japan, through its Grant Assistance for Grassroots Human Security Projects, will finance the renovation of the general hospital in Sukhbaatar province.

Ambassador of Japan to Mongolia Igawahara Masaru and Governor of Sukhbaatar M. Iderbat signed the project contract on January 9, with Mongolian Minister of Urban Development, Construction, and Housing Batsuuri Jadamba attending the ceremony.

The hospital faces critical infrastructure issues, including leaking ceilings, damaged electrical equipment, and frequent power outages, which compromise medical services and infection control. Igawahara highlighted that the renovation would enhance working conditions for staff and ensure a safe environment for patient care.

The initiative marks the 610th project funded in Mongolia since the program's launch in 1990 and the 15th in Sukhbaatar province, with funding capped at USD 233,748.

Japan's Grant Assistance projects provide support to relatively small projects in Basic Human Needs (BHN) sectors at the grassroots level in developing countries. [Akipress]

Mongolia, Kuwait to sign air relations agreement

(fs) Mongolia and Kuwait signed an Agreement on Air Relations in Kuwait City on January 19, establishing a legal framework for direct flights between the two countries.

The agreement is expected to increase passenger traffic, promote tourism, and enhance trade and economic relations. Additionally, the agreement aims to facilitate the logistics of meat exports from Mongolia to Kuwait, ensuring a more consistent flow of goods. [Montsame]

Mongolia, Turkey to establish strategic partnership

(fs) President of Mongolia Ukhnaagiin Khürelsükh paid a state visit to Turkey from January 15–19 during which both countries elevated their bilateral relations to a strategic partnership. The visit resulted in the signing of 11 cooperation documents across diverse sectors.

Highlights include agreements on health and education, fostering collaboration in medical sciences, teacher and student exchanges, and professional development. Youth and sports initiatives were also prioritized, with joint programs to promote youth involvement in sports, science, and career development.

Environmental cooperation was bolstered through agreements addressing climate change, biodiversity conservation, and forestry, including a sister park relationship between Mongolia's Orkhon Valley Natural Complex and Turkey's Sakarya Meydan Muharebesi National Park.

In mining and transport, agreements aim to enhance collaboration in coal extraction, clean technologies, and railway infrastructure, potentially establishing new freight routes connecting Europe and Mongolia via Turkey. Additional accords covered competition policy, media cooperation between broadcasters, and cultural exchanges.

In a separate development, Mongolia's Minister of Defense Byambatsogt Sandag announced that Turkish defense company Baykar is set to begin constructing a plant near Ulaanbaatar to produce Bayraktar drones. [Montsame] [Akipress]

China holds closed-door meeting on Myanmar

(hw) The Chinese government recently held a closed-door meeting on Myanmar in Kunming, attended by policymakers and experts. During the meeting, experts suggested that the Myanmar junta is weak and incapable of adequately safeguarding Chinese interests in the country. However, participants also agreed that a rebel victory is not imminent and that it is in China's best interest to maintain ties with both the rebels and the junta. [The Economic Times

Last year, China played an active role in promoting peace in Myanmar, intervening in January 2024 to halt the first phase of Operation 1027 and imposing blockades on rebel-controlled areas to end the second phase of the operation. [Voice of America 1, in Burmese] [Voice of America 2, in Burmese]

In August 2024, China's Foreign Minister visited Naypyidaw and met with the junta leader and acting president, Min Aung Hlaing. Shortly afterward, Min Aung Hlaing visited China to attend the 8th Greater Mekong Subregion Economic Cooperation Program (GMS) Summit. [The Irrawaddy] [Radio Free Asia, in Burmese].

Indian Ambassador to Myanmar travels to Sittwe to gauge fate of Indian-funded projects

(hw) Indian Ambassador to Myanmar, Abhay Thakur, visited Sittwe on January 16 and 17 to inspect the Sittwe Port, a key component of the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project funded by the Indian government. During his visit, Thakur met with the Chief Minister of Rakhine State, U Htein Lin, to discuss "local community support programs and future growth in connectivity," according to a statement by the Indian Embassy in Yangon. The project aims to connect Kolkata with the Indian state of Mizoram through a network of land routes and waterways.

However, most of the 290-kilometer project, excluding the Sittwe Port, is currently under the control of the Arakan Army. [Radio Free Asia 1, in Burmese] The visit followed an earlier announcement by Indian Minister of Ports, Shipping, and Waterways, Sarbananda Sonowal, reaffirming India's commitment to continuing its funded projects in Rakhine State. [Radio Free Asia 1, in Burmese] [Radio Free Asia 2, in Burmese]

The Arakan Army has expressed openness to foreign investments that could enhance the region's development and pledged to protect such investments within areas under its control. [Democratic Voice of Burma 1, in Burmese] [Democratic Voice of Burma 2, in Burmese] In March 2024, Arakan Army representatives met with Indian MP K. Vanlalvena to discuss resuming the Kaladan road project. [Democratic Voice of Burma 1, in Burmese] [Democratic Voice of Burma 2, in Burmese] [Myanmar Now]

India, Nepal team up to promote cross-border religious tourism

(rs) Tourism entrepreneurs from Nepal and India have committed to boosting cross-border religious tourism. The initiative, coordinated by the Embassy of India in Nepal, Nepal Tourism Board (NTB), and Uttar Pradesh

Tourism Board, aims to enhance collaboration for mutual benefits.

Nepali entrepreneurs recently participated in a six-day exposure visit to prominent religious sites in India, including Mathura, Agra, Prayagraj, Lucknow, Banaras, and Ayodhya, to explore tourism opportunities. Discussions highlighted the potential of developing joint initiatives like the Ramayana circuit connecting Ayodhya and Janakpur.

Tourism leaders emphasized the need for improved infrastructure, such as better roads in Nepal, to attract more Indian tourists. Promotional events have also been held in Varanasi, with calls for sustained cooperation between the two nations' tourism boards.

With a focus on new destinations, such as Nepal's far-western sacred sites like Badhimalika and Khaptad, entrepreneurs plan to develop innovative strategies. An annual schedule of collaborative programs between the two countries has been announced to ensure continued efforts in promoting religious tourism. The Rising Nepal

Germany pledges USD 108,000 for flood recovery efforts in Nepal

(lm) Germany has committed EUR 100,000 (USD 108,000) to aid recovery efforts in Nepal following the September 2024 floods. The initiative, implemented by the non-governmental organization One Heart Worldwide, focuses on restoring maternal and newborn healthcare services in Sarlahi, Rautahat, and Kavrepalanchowk—districts severely affected by floods, fires, and other recurring disasters.

The initiative is set to conclude by June 2025. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: continues diplomatic efforts to secure release of citizen abducted by Hamas in 2023

(lm) Nepal has ramped up diplomatic initiatives to secure the release of Bipin Joshi, a Nepali youth abducted by Hamas during its October 2023 attack on Israeli territory. Foreign Minister Arzu Rana Deuba has been actively engaging with international interlocutors, including Qatar's State Minister for Foreign Affairs Mohammed bin Abdulaziz Al-Khulaifi, who assured

that Joshi's release remains a priority in ongoing ceasefire negotiations mediated by Qatar.

The October attack resulted in over 1,000 deaths, including 10 Nepalis, prompting Nepal to maintain its diplomatic push for justice and repatriation. [The Kathmandu Post]

Foreign plane makes unannounced visit to North Korea amid Russia war cooperation

(jb) Satellite imagery of Pyongyang International Airport revealed 19 aircraft parked on the airside as opposed to the 18 aircraft owned by North Korea's flag carrier Air Koryo. [NK News 1]

As North Korea ceased foreign commercial aviation operations from Air China in January 2020 following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, no other commercial airlines currently operate in North Korea. [NK News 2]

Satellite imagery on January 12 accounted for all 18 flights in the Air Koryo fleet, which only consist of the Russian-made Antonov An-148/158-100B and Tupolev Tu-204 for commercial flights and the single Ilyushin Il-62M for state business.

The foreign plane has been pegged down as a possible Russian official plane which arrived for matters of state, coincidentally as Russia-North Korea relations have been invigorated following the bilateral mutual defense treaty ratified by both states in November 2024. [Arms Control Association]

Bangladesh, Pakistan further strengthen relations through military and economic engagements

(lm) Relations between Pakistan and Bangladesh, once united as East and West Pakistan until their separation in 1971, have recently seen a marked thaw following the ouster of former Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in August 2024. High-level military and economic engagements have highlighted the warming ties, with both nations emphasizing resilience against external influences and enhanced cooperation.

Bangladesh's Principal Staff Officer of the Armed Forces Division, Lt. Gen. S. M. Kamr-ul-Hassan, recently

visited Pakistan, meeting key military leaders, including Army Chief General Asim Munir and Air Chief Marshal Zaheer Ahmed Baber Sidhu. Discussions focused on enhancing regional security, joint training programs, and technological exchanges to bolster defense collaboration. Both sides underscored the importance of a resilient partnership to promote stability in South Asia and insulate their cooperation from external disruptions. Arab News 1] [Arab News 2] [Arab News 3] [Arab News 4]

Economic ties between the two countries have also gained traction. In Dhaka, Pakistan and Bangladesh signed a landmark agreement to establish the Pakistan-Bangladesh Business Council, a step aimed at boosting trade and economic collaboration. The Federation of Pakistan Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FPCCI) and the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry identified opportunities in textiles, agriculture, and education as key areas of cooperation. The Trade Corporation of Pakistan further expanded its outreach by signing a memorandum of understanding for rice exports to Bangladesh, reflecting the growing trade potential between the two nations. [Arab News 5] [Arab News 6]

In parallel, Pakistani and Bangladeshi envoys in the United Arab Emirates proposed the resumption of direct flights between Islamabad, Karachi, and Dhaka during a meeting in Abu Dhabi. Both envoys emphasized the potential for improved people-to-people contact and the untapped trade opportunities that could benefit their respective economies.

Pakistan's Deputy Prime Minister Ishaq Dar is set to visit Dhaka in February to further consolidate bilateral ties. [Arab News 7]

The warming of relations comes after decades of strained ties rooted in the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, which saw the secession of East Pakistan to form the independent nation of Bangladesh. Sheikh Hasina's tenure was marked by close ties with India and limited engagement with Pakistan. However, her ouster in a student-led uprising in 2024 has opened the door for a recalibration of Bangladesh's foreign policy, with the interim government signaling a willingness to improve ties with Islamabad.

This shift aligns with shared concerns over India's regional dominance, as well as Bangladesh's interest in diversifying its diplomatic and economic partnerships. Pakistan, grappling with its own economic challenges, views this rapprochement as an opportunity to expand its trade network and foster strategic cooperation. [Al Jazeera]

Pakistan's commerce minister visits Cambodia

(lm) Pakistan's Commerce Minister Jam Kamal Khan arrived in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, on January 19 for a three-day official visit focused on enhancing bilateral trade and economic cooperation. This visit marks the inaugural Joint Trade Committee and Ministerial Meeting between the two countries.

This visit is part of Pakistan's broader efforts to revive its USD 350 billion economy after avoiding a default in June 2023. With a USD 7 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) secured last year, Pakistan has been actively pursuing international trade and investment opportunities to achieve sustainable economic recovery. [Arab News]

China, Pakistan advance economic and industrial collaboration

(afk/lm) All-weather partners Pakistan and China are bolstering their economic and industrial ties under the second phase of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the flagship project of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

A highlight of recent developments is the signing of Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) worth USD 250 million in the medical equipment and surgical tools sectors at a China-Pakistan B2B matching conference in Beijing. The agreements, aim to leverage Pakistan's strategic location, labor force, and tax incentives to attract more Chinese enterprises. [Associated Press of Pakistan] [The Diplomatic Insight]

Meanwhile, under CPEC Phase 2, the Dhabeji Special Economic Zone (SEZ) was launched near Karachi, promising USD 3 billion in investment and over 100,000 jobs. The SEZ, strategically located near ports, is expected to transform Pakistan's industrial landscape by fostering value-added industries and reducing reliance on imports. [Arab News 1]

Another milestone is the operationalization of the Gwadar International Airport, built with USD 246 million in Chinese funding. This facility, capable of handling A-380 aircraft and accommodating four million passengers annually, will enhance trade, tourism, and regional connectivity. [Arab News 2]

Complementing these efforts, Pakistan's Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb emphasized CPEC 2.0's focus on advanced technological transfer, clean energy, and industrialization while announcing plans to launch so-called Panda bonds – yuan-denominated bonds issued by foreign entities in China's domestic market – to raise USD 200 million for economic stabilization. [Arab News 3] [Arab News 4]

Pakistan launches first indigenously developed Electro-Optical satellite with Chinese assistance

(afk) Pakistan has marked a notable milestone in its space exploration journey with the successful launch of its first indigenously developed Electro-Optical satellite, EO-1. The satellite was launched from China's Jiuquan Satellite Launch Centre, with Suparco, Pakistan's Space and Upper Atmosphere Research Commission, leading the effort. The EO-1 satellite uses advanced electro-optical sensors to collect Earth observation data, enhancing capabilities in agriculture, urban planning, environmental monitoring, and disaster management.

The satellite's applications are wide-ranging. It is expected to support precision farming, manage irrigation, monitor urban expansion, track deforestation and glacier recession, and provide timely updates during natural disasters such as floods and earthquakes. Suparco emphasized its role in aiding sustainable development and better resource management, including tracking mineral, oil, and gas reserves.

The launch was carried out using China's Long March-2D carrier rocket, alongside two other satellites, Tianlu-1 and Blue Carbon 1. This collaboration highlights Pakistan's growing partnership with China in space technology. The two countries have worked together on several projects, including the 2024 launch of the PakSat-MM1 communication satellite and participation in China's Chang'e 8 lunar mission set for 2028.

This achievement places Pakistan in a competitive position within the global Earth observation satellite market, valued at USD 5 billion and projected to grow significantly in the coming years. [DAWN] [SpaceNews] [Daily Jang]

Pakistan Army denounces Indian allegations as political postering

(tj/mra) The Pakistan Army has strongly criticized Indian Army Chief General Upendra Dwivedi for his recent statements labeling Pakistan as the "epicenter of terrorism," urging India to refrain from political pandering and duplicity. General Dwivedi's comments, which alleged that Pakistan orchestrates violence in the Indian-administered part of Kashmir and claimed that 60 percent of terrorists killed in the region last year were of Pakistani origin, have been firmly rejected by Pakistan's military and Foreign Office. [Geo News] [DAWN]

Outgoing US President Biden denies clemency for Pakistani serving 86-year sentence

(lm) Outgoing U.S. President Joe Biden has rejected a clemency petition for Dr. Aafia Siddiqui, a U.S.-trained Pakistani neuroscientist serving an 86-year sentence in the United States. Convicted in 2010 of attempting to kill U.S. officials in Afghanistan in 2008, Siddiqui's case has become a rallying point for human rights advocates and a symbol of perceived injustice in Pakistan.

Siddiqui's lawyer had submitted a detailed dossier to Biden, urging clemency, and arguing that her conviction was based on flawed intelligence. The defense asserted she was mistakenly viewed as a nuclear scientist involved in terrorism and that evidence unavailable during her trial could exonerate her. Despite these arguments, Biden denied the petition, dashing hopes of her early release.

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif had also appealed to Biden in October 2024, emphasizing concerns about Siddiqui's declining mental and physical health. Siddiqui's family claims she was abducted in Pakistan in 2003 and handed over to U.S. authorities, a claim denied by Pakistani intelligence agencies. Her trial was seen by many in Pakistan as unjust, further fueling calls for her release. [Arab News 1] [Arab News 2]

Pakistan, Italian navies conduct joint sailing operations in Gulf of Oman

(lm) The Pakistan Navy's training ship Rah Naward participated in joint sailing operations with the Italian

Navy's sail ship Amerigo Vespucci in the Gulf of Oman on January 18. The exercise was part of the Pakistani ship's overseas deployment to Oman, aimed at fostering goodwill and providing hands-on training for cadets from the Pakistan Naval Academy. [Arab News]

Pakistan, United Kingdom commit to enhancing bilateral ties

(lm) Pakistan and the United Kingdom reaffirmed their commitment to deepening bilateral relations to promote mutual economic development during a meeting between UK High Commissioner Jane Marriott and Pakistan's Planning Minister Ahsan Iqbal on January 18 in Islamabad.

Minister Iqbal emphasized Pakistan's efforts to address critical economic challenges, including boosting exports, expanding agricultural trade, and advancing industrial development. He highlighted key focus areas such as IT, services, mining, workforce export, the blue economy, and innovation. He also underscored Pakistan's initiatives to combat educational deprivation through public-private partnerships and provincial cooperation in health, education, and human resource development, supported by increased budgets for higher education. [Arab News]

Pakistan denies plans to take over Wakhan Corridor amid Afghanistan tensions

(lm) Pakistan dismissed speculation about taking over Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor, reaffirming respect for Afghanistan's sovereignty and territorial integrity. The Wakhan Corridor, a strategic strip of land connecting Afghanistan to China, holds potential as a trade route within the frameworks of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

The denial follows escalating tensions between the two nations, fueled by Pakistan's accusations that the Afghan administration harbors militants of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), responsible for cross-border attacks. Afghan officials have denied these allegations. Reports of Pakistani airstrikes in Afghanistan in December, which Afghan officials claim caused civilian casualties, further strained ties. [Arab News]

Iran’s top general meets Pakistani leaders, discusses security and border management

(mra) Iranian Chief of General Staff Maj. Gen. Mohammad Bagheri completed a two-day visit to Pakistan, engaging in high-level talks with Pakistan’s civilian and military leadership on regional security, counter-terrorism, and bilateral defense cooperation. This visit follows Pakistani Army Chief Gen. Asim Munir's 2024 trip to Tehran, which marked a significant step in enhancing defense relations between the two neighbors.

During his meetings with Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari, Defense Minister Khawaja Asif, and Gen. Munir, both sides emphasized the strategic importance of joint efforts to combat terrorism, drug trafficking, and cross-border challenges along their shared 909-kilometer border. Discussions also focused on bolstering trade and economic ties, with President Zardari underscoring the shared responsibility to address terrorism through coordinated measures.

Maj. Gen. Bagheri noted the improving military ties between the two Islamic nations situated at the crossroads of West and South Asia. He highlighted recent achievements, including joint counter-terrorism exercises conducted in 2023, which underscored mutual commitments to enhancing border security and regional stability. [Arab News] [Tehran Times] [Mehr News Agency]

The visit builds on a history of high-level engagements. In 2024, late Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi's visit to Pakistan resulted in agreements across trade, technology, agriculture, and health sectors. Iranian Foreign Minister Seyed Abbas Araghchi’s subsequent discussions in Islamabad further strengthened diplomatic ties.

Maj. Gen. Bagheri’s latest trip also follows heightened tensions in 2024 when both countries exchanged airstrikes over alleged militant hideouts.

Pakistan, Iraq sign MoU to enhance workforce exchange and industrial collaboration

(lm) Iraq and Pakistan have signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) to facilitate workforce exchange

and strengthen industrial ties during the 9th session of the Pakistan-Iraq Joint Ministerial Commission (JMC) in Baghdad. This session marked a significant milestone, being the first such meeting since 2001.

Led by Pakistan's Commerce Minister Jam Kamal Khan, the discussions encompassed various sectors, including industrial cooperation in export processing zones, textiles, pharmaceuticals, agriculture, health, and education. Religious tourism was also highlighted as a key area for collaboration.

The agreement outlines scholarships for Iraqi students and training programs in healthcare, vaccine production, and biotechnology. Both sides emphasized easing visa restrictions to boost trade and cultural exchanges. Minister Khan invited Iraq to participate in the 10th JMC session in Pakistan, aiming to review progress and plan future initiatives. [Arab News]

Pakistan, Saudi Arabia strengthen mining collaboration with focus on Reko Diq project

(lm/afk) Pakistan and Saudi Arabia strengthened economic ties through significant agreements at the Future Minerals Forum (FMF) in Riyadh. Pakistani companies signed multiple memorandums of understanding (MoUs) with Saudi firms, including a potential USD 100 million investment by Saudi Development Fund in Pakistan’s mining infrastructure.

Pakistani companies signed multiple memorandums of understanding (MoUs) with Saudi firms, including a potential USD 100 million investment by the Saudi Development Fund in Pakistan’s mining infrastructure. The forum highlighted collaborative opportunities, particularly in the Reko Diq copper and gold project, where Saudi Arabia's Manara Minerals has expressed interest in acquiring a stake. [Arab News 1] [Arab News 2] [Arab News 3]

Reko Diq, located in Balochistan, is one of the world’s largest untapped copper-gold deposits and a joint venture between Pakistan and Barrick Gold. The project, which is expected to generate USD 74 billion in free cash flow over 37 years, has resolved prior ownership and financial disputes. Production is slated to begin by the end of 2028, with the first phase targeting 200,000 tons of copper annually at an estimated cost of USD 5.5 billion. A second phase, costing USD 3.5 billion, will double production.

The collaboration with Saudi Arabia could enhance the project's prospects. Manara Minerals' interest aligns with ongoing efforts to attract Gulf investments in Pakistan's mining and infrastructure sectors. Executives from Manara visited Pakistan in 2024, and further discussions are expected in the next two quarters. [Arab News 4]

Additionally, Saudi Arabia's King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center (KSrelief) distributed over 2,000 food parcels in Pakistan's flood-hit Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa regions, benefiting over 13,000 people, as part of the ongoing Food Security Support Project. [Arab News 4]

UAE confirms USD 2 billion deposit rollover, aiding Pakistan's financial stability

(lm) The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has confirmed the rollover of USD 2 billion in deposits with Pakistan's central bank, according to the State Bank of Pakistan. This extension of two USD 1 billion deposits, maturing in January 2025, supports Pakistan's foreign exchange reserves and stabilizes its currency amid an ongoing USD 7 billion International Monetary Fund loan program.

The announcement follows Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's recent meeting with UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan. The UAE, Pakistan's third-largest trading partner, has been consistent economically, with USD 10 billion invested over the past two decades and significant remittance contributions from over a million Pakistani expatriates.

Pakistan's foreign exchange reserves currently stand at USD 16.45 billion, with USD 11.73 billion held by the central bank. The rollover is critical ahead of the IMF program's February review, as Pakistan seeks financial support from allies like Saudi Arabia and China to meet external funding conditions. [Arab News]

South Sudanese lawmakers visit Pakistan to strengthen parliamentary and bilateral ties

(lm) A delegation from South Sudan's legislative assembly, led by Deputy Speaker Nathaniel Oyet Pierino, arrived in Islamabad on January 20 for a three-

day visit to enhance parliamentary diplomacy and bilateral cooperation.

Invited by Pakistan's Speaker of the National Assembly, Sardar Ayaz Sadiq, the delegation aims to deepen ties between the two nations across various sectors. The visit includes meetings with prominent political figures such as Deputy Speaker Syed Ghulam Mustafa Shah and Deputy Chairman of the Senate Syedaal Khan.

The visit occurs against the backdrop of ongoing conflict in Sudan, where a 20-month civil war has killed over 24,000 people and displaced 14 million, with many seeking refuge in neighboring countries, including South Sudan. Pakistan has consistently advocated for international efforts to cease hostilities in Sudan and called for restraint from the warring parties. [Arab News]

Delegation of India's Telangana state forges skill development partnership with Singapore

(lm) Telangana Chief Minister A. Revanth Reddy, leading a delegation to Singapore, engaged in comprehensive discussions with Singapore Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan on enhancing collaboration across various sectors, including infrastructure development, sustainable energy, water management, IT, and skill development.

A key highlight of the visit was the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Telangana's Young India Skills University (YISU) and Singapore's Institute of Technical Education (ITE). The agreement focuses on advancing skill training, leveraging ITE's expertise in providing technical education and workforce-oriented programs. [The Hindu]

Singapore, Vietnam foreign ministers reaffirm strategic partnership

(lm) Vietnamese Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Bui Thanh Son met with Singaporean Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan on January 19 during the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Retreat in Malaysia. Both officials praised the continued progress of the Vietnam-Singapore Strategic Partnership, emphasizing advancements in economic connectivity, education, finance, and digital transformation.

The ministers agreed on the need to ensure meaningful outcomes for upcoming high-level visits and highlighted their countries' commitments to initiatives such as the green economy-digital economy partnership and the economic connectivity agreement.

They also pledged collaboration in security, defense, and human resource development, while supporting each other's international candidacies. Additionally, the ministers emphasized their dedication to supporting Malaysia's ASEAN chairmanship in 2025 and strengthening regional solidarity and sustainability, with a focus on advancing ASEAN's power grid connectivity. [Vietnam Plus]

Singapore, United States Army hold staff talks

(lm) The 13th Singapore Army-U.S. Army Staff Talks, held from January 8-9, reinforced the longstanding partnership between the two nations. This annual dialogue emphasizes advancing defense cooperation and ensuring regional stability in the Indo-Pacific.

Key discussions focused on enhancing interoperability across human, technical, and procedural domains, which U.S. Army Pacific Deputy Commanding General Lt. Gen. Joel B. Vowell highlighted as essential for mission success. Transparent and proactive engagements fostered mutual trust, aligned shared objectives, and solidified a framework for future collaboration. [U.S. Indo-Pacific Command]

Singapore, Saudi Arabia launch Strategic Partnership Council

(lm) On January 15, Singapore's Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan and Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister Prince Faisal Bin Farhan Al Saud signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to establish the Saudi-Singapore Strategic Partnership Council. This marks the first Strategic Partnership between Singapore and a Middle Eastern nation and Saudi Arabia's first in Southeast Asia.

The council will be co-chaired by Singapore's Prime Minister Lawrence Wong and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman. It aims to enhance bilateral cooperation in politics, economics, defense, security, and cultural exchange, while fostering people-to-people ties.

Saudi Arabia is a significant economic partner for Singapore, with bilateral trade reaching SGD 10.6 billion in 2023. Saudi investments in Singapore include a SGD 220 million factory by the Saudi Basic Industries Corporation. Foreign direct investment from Saudi Arabia totaled SGD 4.1 billion by the end of 2022. Singapore companies are also encouraged to explore opportunities under Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 initiative. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore] [The Straits Times]

Japanese Supreme Court rejects South Korean families' request to remove names from Yasukuni shrine

(jb) Twenty-seven South Korean plaintiffs who petitioned the Japanese Supreme Court in 2013 to have their family members' names removed from the Yasukuni Shrine received a final rejection of their request on January 17.

The shrine, built to honor those who died in Japan's wars during the 19th and 20th centuries, added the names of 21,181 Koreans and 27,863 Taiwanese conscripted soldiers to its Book of Souls in 1959. The families of those enshrined were not officially informed by either the Japanese government or the shrine's managing society until the 1990s, prompting South Koreans to file multiple lawsuits against the shrine, citing a lack of consent.

The shrine also commemorates 1,006 war criminals from Imperial Japan convicted in 1948, including 11 Class A and Class B war criminals tried at the Tokyo Trials (officially the International Military Tribunal for the Far East) held after World War II.

The Japanese Supreme Court has consistently ruled that the statute of limitations for disputing the enshrinement expired 20 years after the event, in 1979. This legal principle formed the basis for rejecting the 27 plaintiffs' request this year. [Korea JoongAng Daily]

Sri Lanka's President concludes much-anticipated visit to China

(axc/sl) Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Dissanayake's state visit to China from January 14-17 has furthered Sri Lanka's efforts to balance

relationships with regional powers India and China. [Bloomberg] [Reuters]

A key highlight of the Beijing visit was the signing of a USD 3.7 billion agreement with Sinopec, China's state-owned petroleum giant, to build a refinery in Hambantota with a capacity of 200,000 barrels per day. This investment is the largest foreign direct investment in Sri Lanka's history and is expected to significantly boost foreign reserves through export-oriented operations. The project also aligns with Sri Lanka's broader commitment to closer cooperation under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), leveraging the nation's strategic location in global maritime trade. [France24]

In addition to the landmark refinery deal, 14 other agreements were concluded. These included grants, economic cooperation measures, agricultural export market access, and support for tourism and digital transformation. China also renewed a bilateral currency swap agreement originally signed in 2021, extending its terms for an additional three years. This agreement allows for the exchange of CNY 10 billion (approximately USD 1.4 billion) and is viewed as a reflection of mutual trust between the two governments, providing crucial financial stability as Sri Lanka grapples with ongoing debt challenges. [Central Bank of Sri Lanka] [Daily Mirror]

President Xi Jinping reaffirmed China's support for Sri Lanka in multilateral forums and pledged assistance in addressing its debt obligations, positioning China as a key partner in Sri Lanka's economic recovery. President Dissanayake expressed Sri Lanka's commitment to furthering BRI collaboration and deepening bilateral ties. [China Daily]

This visit follows Dissanayake's December 2024 trip to India, where he assured Prime Minister Narendra Modi that Sri Lanka would safeguard Indian interests. India had provided substantial financial and material aid during Sri Lanka's economic crisis, aiming to counterbalance China's influence. [Associated Press]

India provides grant to Sri Lanka for purchase of police vehicles

(sl) The Indian High Commission in Colombo has announced the provision of vehicles for the Sri Lankan police under a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on the "Supply of Single Cabs for Police Stations in Sri Lanka." The initiative is supported by grant assistance from the Government of India, amounting to LKR 300

million (approximately USD 930,000). The MoU was signed on January 15 by the High Commissioner of India to Sri Lanka, Santosh Jha, and the Secretary of the Ministry of Public Security and Parliamentary Affairs, D.V.R.B. Seneviratne.

The project aims to supply at least 80 single-seat cabs, along with spare parts and accessories, for police stations in Sri Lanka's Northern Province.

The High Commission emphasized that India's cooperation initiatives are citizen-centered and aligned with the Sri Lankan government's priorities, positively impacting daily life across all 25 districts, with a particular focus on key sectors such as housing, healthcare, education, fisheries, transportation, renewable energy, livelihoods, and agriculture. [The Hindu]

Sri Lanka, Saudia Arabia sign Hajj pilgrimage agreement

(sl) Sri Lanka's Minister of Buddhasasana, Religious and Cultural Affairs, Dr. Sunil Senevi, and Saudi Arabia's Deputy Minister of Hajj and Umrah, Dr. Abdulfattah Bin Sulaiman Mashat, signed a Hajj pilgrimage agreement on January 11. This agreement formalizes the arrangements for Sri Lankan pilgrims to participate in the annual Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Employment and Tourism]

The agreement places Sri Lanka among several nations that have recently signed or renewed similar agreements with Saudi Arabia. A key feature of these agreements is securing a national pilgrim quota, as outlined in the 1987 Resolution of the Organization of Islamic Conference. The resolution establishes a quota of 1,000 pilgrims per one million population, ensuring fair distribution and efficient management of pilgrims, particularly given the spatial constraints in key sites like Mina. [Ministry of Hajj – Kingdom of Saudi Arabia] [The Indian Express]

Sri Lanka's President Dissanayake to visit UAE for talks

(lm) Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Dissanayake has announced that his next official visit will be to the United Arab Emirates (UAE), following an official invitation from the Gulf nation. The visit will focus on

exploring avenues for enhanced bilateral cooperation, particularly in energy procurement.

The President highlighted the government's intent to negotiate a favorable government-to-government agreement for importing fuel, aiming to secure benefits for Sri Lanka amidst ongoing economic challenges. [Daily Mirror]

Taiwan, Japan reach agreement on fishing rules in disputed waters

(dql) Taiwan and Japan have agreed on fishing regulations for disputed waters during the 11th annual Taiwan-Japan Fisheries Agreement meeting held in Tokyo on January 14. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Taiwan, in Chinese]

Both sides agreed that Taiwanese fishing vessels would not operate east of the 124th meridian east line, which passes through Okinawa's Yaeyama District, approximately 260 kilometers west of Taipei. The area around this line is part of the broader territorial disputes between Taipei and Tokyo. Specifically, it relates to overlapping claims over the Diaoyutai Islands (known as the Senkaku Islands in Japan), which are uninhabited islands located in the East China Sea. These islands and their surrounding waters are claimed by Taiwan, Japan, and also by China.

"Administrative sanctions" would be imposed on fishing vessels repeatedly crossing this line. Both also agreed that Taiwan's Fisheries Agency would help fishers establish self-regulation measures to prevent this from happening.

The Taiwanese delegation, led by Taiwan-Japan Relations Association Secretary-General Fan Chen-kuo, included representatives from the Foreign Ministry, Fisheries Agency, Coast Guard, and regional fishing associations.

The Taiwan-Japan Fisheries Agreement, signed in 2013 to address overlapping territorial claims over the Diaoyutai Islands, serves as the framework for these annual discussions, alternating between Taipei and Tokyo. [Taipei Times]

Bill on tax exemption for Taiwanese companies and workers passes U.S. House of Representatives

(dql) The US House of Representatives passed the United States-Taiwan Expedited Double-Tax Relief Act on January 15, offering tax relief to Taiwanese companies and workers. The bill passed with a 431-1 vote and will be sent to the Senate for approval before being signed by the president.

The bill addresses double taxation between Taiwan and the US with two key provisions. First, it exempts eligible Taiwanese residents providing services in the US from income tax. Additionally, it reduces the withholding tax rate for Taiwan residents with US-sourced income, such as interest, dividends, or royalties. Second, it authorizes the US president to negotiate a double-taxation agreement with Taiwan. [Taiwan News]

Taiwan foreign minister visits Palau

(dql) Taiwanese Foreign Minister Lin Chia-lung has described his four-day visit to Taiwan's Pacific ally, Palau, as productive. Lin led a delegation to attend President Surangel Whipps Jr.'s inauguration on January 16. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Taiwan, in Chinese]

In his meeting with Whipps, Lin reaffirmed Taiwan's commitment to supporting Palau's development and economic plans. Lin highlighted the visit as a demonstration of Taiwan's comprehensive diplomacy and expressed confidence that the bilateral relationship would continue to strengthen.

Whipps, for his part, expressed gratitude for Taiwan's assistance and emphasized the importance of continued collaboration. [Taiwan News]

Thailand extradites Chinese fugitive in USD 15 million fraud case

(lm) Thailand has extradited Yan Tianxi, a Chinese national accused of orchestrating a loan scam defrauding Chinese citizens of over 112 million yuan (USD 15.3 million). Yan was handed over to Shanghai economic police at Suvarnabhumi airport on January 16 to face trial in China, following coordination under the 1993 extradition treaty between the two nations.

The case stems from allegations that Yan colluded with others to operate a fraudulent loan application scheme. After Chinese authorities issued an arrest warrant in 2024, Thai police apprehended Yan in

September, just three days after the warrant was issued. He was subsequently detained by order of the Criminal Court on October 28, pending the extradition process. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand seeks in digital collaboration with Malaysia

(hrs) Thailand has expressed interest in collaborating with Malaysia on digital governance, aiming to improve the quality of life for its citizens and strengthen regional digital infrastructure. Deputy Prime Minister and Digital Economy and Society Minister Prasert Jantararuangtong highlighted Malaysia's achievements in government digitalization, cloud technology, smart city projects, and the startup ecosystem as areas of potential cooperation.

Speaking during a bilateral meeting with Malaysia's Minister of Communications and Digital, Gobind Singh Deo, on the sidelines of the 5th ASEAN Digital Ministers' Meeting (ADGMIN) in Bangkok on January 16, Prasert emphasized the importance of knowledge exchange and technological collaboration within ASEAN.

Prasert stressed that bolstering cybersecurity, safeguarding personal data, and enhancing digital skills are critical priorities for Thailand, as they are essential for building investor confidence and promoting sustainable economic growth. He added that partnerships with ASEAN members and dialogue partners, including China, Japan, South Korea, the United States, and India, could accelerate regional innovation and economic competitiveness. [The Nation]

Thailand, United States renew agreement on nuclear energy cooperation

(acs) Thailand and the United States have signed a new "123 Agreement" to enhance cooperation on the peaceful use of nuclear energy. U.S. Ambassador Robert Godec and Thailand's Minister of Higher Education, Science, Research, and Innovation Supamas Isaraghakdi formalized the agreement in Bangkok. This framework replaces a 1974 agreement that expired in 2014, and it allows for the transfer of nuclear material, equipment, and information for civil nuclear energy production and research.

The renewed agreement aims to support clean energy generation, ensuring energy security and strengthening diplomatic and economic ties between the two nations. Thailand's Electricity Generating Authority plans to adopt small modular nuclear reactors (SMRs) as part of its effort to stabilize energy supply and achieve zero-carbon emissions goals. The International Atomic Energy Agency has affirmed Thailand's readiness for the safe handling of nuclear materials.

In addition to the US collaboration, Thailand is working with China on the installation of a miniature neutron source reactor at Suranaree University of Technology to facilitate safe nuclear research in urban areas. These initiatives are part of Thailand's broader push to modernize its energy infrastructure while reducing emissions. [UPI]

Thai transport minister, Italian ambassador discuss railway collaboration

(hrs) Thai Transport Minister Suriya Juangroongruangkit announced progress in Thailand's partnership with Italy to modernize its railway network. Key agreements include collaborations with Blue Engineering to enhance domestic train manufacturing, MERMEC Group for rail development, and Nplus S.r.l for safety technology.

Italian luxury brand Arsenale proposed a partnership with the State Railway of Thailand to upgrade train services to luxury standards, aligning with Thailand's tourism goals. The Rail Transport Act, implemented this year, is expected to attract private investment in railway projects. Suriya emphasized the benefits of continued Thai-Italian collaboration for future transport development. [The Nation]

Israel expands agricultural job quota for Thai workers

(msz/hrs) Israel has announced an increase of 13,000 agricultural jobs for Thai workers in 2025. During discussions in Jerusalem, Israeli Agriculture Minister Avi Dichter confirmed the expansion to a visiting Thai delegation led by Labour Minister Phiphat Ratchakitprakarn. The delegation visited farms employing Thai workers and explored advanced agricultural methods, including hydroponics and agrivoltaics.

Thai workers in Israel's agriculture sector earn approximately THB 60,000 (USD 1,740) per month, excluding overtime, and remit substantial portions of their income home. To improve job placement and retention, Thailand and Israel agreed to match workers' skills with appropriate roles, supported by Israel's Population and Immigration Authority.

The discussions also addressed critical humanitarian concerns. Minister Phiphat pressed for the release of six Thai nationals held hostage by Hamas and called for fair compensation for the family of a Thai worker killed in a missile attack in October 2024. [Bangkok Post]

Domestically, Thailand's main opposition People's Party has criticized the government for its handling of the hostage situation in Gaza. The party issued a statement urging Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra to intensify diplomatic efforts to secure the release of all six Thai hostages. The party highlighted that no Thai nationals were included in the list of 33 hostages set to be released under the Israel-Hamas ceasefire agreement. It also pointed to the recent detention of four Thai fishermen in Myanmar as evidence of the government's failure to prioritize the welfare of Thai nationals abroad. [Asia News Network]

Thailand, Saudi Arabia sign joint program to enhance cooperation

(acs) Thailand and Saudi Arabia convened the Saudi-Thai Coordination Council (STCC) on January 16 in Bangkok, marking the first economic meeting between the two nations since normalizing relations in 2022. The meeting, co-chaired by Thailand's Foreign Minister Maris Sangiampongsa and his Saudi counterpart Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud, outlined a framework for cooperation encompassing 70 initiatives across economic, cultural, and strategic areas.

The discussions focused on enhancing trade and collaboration in manufacturing and agriculture, with economic benefits projected to exceed USD 3.5 billion. Both sides emphasized the removal of trade barriers to facilitate smoother exchanges and proposed the creation of a shared economic zone. Cultural initiatives were also a key topic, including plans to introduce Arabic language programs in Thai universities through the King Salman Global Academy. [Arab News] [Bangkok Post] [Saudi General Authority of Foreign Trade]

Relations between the two countries soured following the infamous "Blue Diamond Affair" in 1989, when a Thai worker in Saudi Arabia stole jewelry, including a rare blue diamond, from a Saudi royal palace. The case escalated into a diplomatic crisis involving unresolved allegations of corruption, missing jewels, and the mysterious murders of Saudi diplomats and a businessman in Bangkok. These incidents led Saudi Arabia to downgrade diplomatic ties and restrict labor recruitment from Thailand.

Vietnam’s ruling Party leader welcomes Cambodian People's Party delegation

(lm) Vietnamese Party General Secretary and President To Lam received a high-ranking delegation from Cambodia's ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP) led by Ouch Borith, a senior CPP official and First Vice President of the Cambodian Senate, in Hanoi.

The relationship between Vietnam and Cambodia has been shaped by significant historical events. Vietnam played a decisive role in helping Cambodia overthrow the Khmer Rouge regime in 1979, an act led by the CPP and supported by Vietnamese forces. This collaboration marked the beginning of a close political and strategic alliance, with both countries working together on development and regional security. The CPV and CPP have maintained regular exchanges and strengthened cooperation across political, economic, and cultural domains.

Speaking against this backdrop, To Lam commended Cambodia’s achievements under the leadership of King Sihamoni and the CPP. He expressed gratitude for Cambodia’s support for Vietnam in past struggles for national liberation and in its ongoing nation-building efforts. He emphasized Vietnam’s commitment to strengthening relations with Cambodia and Laos, highlighting the importance of collaboration for peace, stability, and development in the region.

Both leaders proposed expanding cooperation in areas such as political stability, security, bilateral trade, and economic connectivity. They also stressed the importance of fostering exchanges between high-ranking leaders and enhancing coordination on shared goals.

Additionally, Le Hoai Trung, head of the CPV Central Committee's Commission for External Relations, held discussions with the CPP delegation to evaluate current relations and explore strategies for further

strengthening ties between the two parties and nations. [Viet Nam News]

Japan provides Vietnam advanced equipment to address war-left chemical consequences

(he) The Japanese government has handed over state-of-the-art dioxin and environmental analysis equipment to Vietnam's Chemical Corps to assist in remediating the toxic legacy of the Vietnam War (1955–1975). The equipment, valued at over USD 2.8 million, including more than USD 2.7 million in non-refundable aid from Japan, comprises 25 advanced systems for dioxin analysis.

During the war, the United States military deployed massive quantities of herbicides, including Agent Orange, which contained the highly toxic compound dioxin. These chemicals caused extensive environmental damage and severe health issues for millions of Vietnamese people, including birth defects and cancers, and continue to contaminate the environment decades later.

This initiative is part of Vietnam's national plan for post-war toxic chemical remediation (2021–2030). [Vietnam News] [Vietnam Plus]

Vietnam, Russia sign agreement to expand nuclear energy cooperation

(hn/he) Vietnam and Russia have taken significant steps to deepen their comprehensive strategic partnership during Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin's two-day visit to Vietnam, his first trip abroad in 2025. This visit marked the first meeting between Mishustin and Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh and underscored the enduring Vietnam-Russia relationship, established in 1950 and elevated to a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2012. [tuoi tre news 1] [tuoi tre news 2] [EuroNews]

A key highlight of the visit was the signing of multiple agreements to enhance nuclear energy collaboration, including the development of Vietnam's nuclear power industry and the establishment of a Nuclear Science and Technology Research Center in Dong Nai province. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov emphasized the potential for nuclear cooperation, noting its significance as a high-tech endeavor involving scientific

development and human resource training. [Viet Nam News 1]

This renewed focus on nuclear energy aligns with Vietnam's plans to revive the Ninh Thuan nuclear power project, originally approved in 2009 but suspended in 2016 due to financial and safety concerns. Revived to address the country's growing energy demands and 2050 net-zero emissions commitments, the project aims to achieve operational status by 2030, coinciding with the 100th anniversary of the Communist Party.

Vietnamese Prime Minister Chinh recently chaired the inaugural meeting of the steering committee for the Ninh Thuan project. The committee laid out a five-year roadmap with annual evaluations to ensure adherence to stringent quality, safety, and efficiency standards. Workforce development has been prioritized, with plans to train 400 specialists and recruit additional talent. [Vietnam Plus]

Rosatom, Russia's state nuclear agency, pledged comprehensive support for Vietnam's nuclear initiatives, including the Ninh Thuan project and other peaceful nuclear energy applications. [Viet Nam News 2]

Beyond nuclear energy, the visit facilitated agreements in trade, investment, education, technology, and cultural exchange. The two sides highlighted the Vietnam-Eurasian Economic Union Free Trade Agreement as a key tool for boosting bilateral trade. Russia also committed to providing Vietnam with a marine research vessel for joint studies and offered scholarships to Vietnamese students to study in Russia. [tuoi tre news 2]

Tourism, transportation, and language education were additional areas of focus, with both nations exploring ways to enhance people-to-people connections. [tuoi tre news 3]

Observers note that Vietnam's selection of Russia as a partner for its nuclear power initiatives aligns with Russia's interests in countering commercial opportunities for the U.S. and its allies, such as South Korea and Japan. Despite this, the move is unlikely to strain Vietnam-U.S. relations, given the strategic importance of Vietnam as a reliable supplier of semiconductor chips and other critical materials to the U.S. [Thayer Consultancy]

Announcements

Upcoming Online Events

22 January 2025 @ 10:00 – 11:30 p.m. (GMT+11), Gulf Research Center, Australia

Highly Skilled Migration to Saudi Arabia: Labour Reforms and the Global Competition for Talents

This event looks at labor and migration reforms in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, aspiring to be global talent hubs. Under Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia has focused on diversifying the economy, fostering innovation, and increasing employment, particularly for women, through policies like Nitaqat and investment in TVET. In a bid to become the most attractive destination for skilled workers, its main competitor, the UAE, has recently come up with new initiatives like Golden and Green Visas. The webinar discusses these reforms' impacts on the workforce profiles, skills demand, and migration policies, hence serving with comparative insights. For more information, see [Gulf Research Center].

23 January 2025 @ 1:15 – 3:00 p.m. (GMT+1), University of Gothenburg, Sweden

Book Circle: "Social Movements: A Theoretical Approach"

This seminar will give the opportunity to participants to discuss the book “Social Movements: A Theoretical Approach” in partnership with the CSM-RESTIST research group. For more information and to contact

the organizer to participate online, see [University of Gothenburg]

21 January 2025 @ 10:30 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. (GMT+9), Institute for Global Environmental Strategies, Japan

A Review on Progress made for Smart, Zero Carbon and Climate-Resilient Cities in Malaysia and Japan

This event highlights the Malaysia-Japan "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership," focusing on sustainable development and decarbonization efforts. It showcases the collaboration between Kuala Lumpur, Tokyo, and Saitama as a model for international cooperation among local governments to achieve smart, zero-carbon, and climate-resilient cities. The partnership emphasizes technology transfer, capacity building, and knowledge sharing in areas like energy efficiency and low-carbon infrastructure. The event is expected to reflect on the progress, share strategies for sustainable buildings, and inspire similar initiatives within and beyond ASEAN. For more information, see [IGES].

23 January 2025 @ 10:00 a.m. – 12:30 p.m. (GMT+9), Institute for Global Environmental Strategies, Japan

Seminar on City-to-City Collaboration for Zero Carbon Society 2025

This seminar will focus on accelerating urban decarbonization in order to meet the Paris Agreement's 1.5-degree target. Organized by IGES and Japan's Ministry of the Environment, it highlights the "City-to-City Collaboration Program for Zero Carbon Society (C3P)," which has fostered knowledge sharing and technical cooperation among cities since 2013. Held in Osaka ahead of Expo 2025, the event gathers experts, local governments, and stakeholders to drive global and local decarbonization efforts. Participants will explore methodologies for galvanizing large-scale efforts toward a zero-carbon future. For online participation this event is "first-come, first-served" for the first 1000 people. For more information and to register, visit [IGES].

22 January 2025 @ 5:00 – 6:00 p.m. (GMT-5), AEI, USA

Saving Georgian Democracy: A Conversation with President Salome Zourabichvili

This forum discusses Georgia's democratic ambition in the aftermath of the contested 2024 parliamentary election, now personified by President Salome Zourabichvili in opposition at the vanguard of the people's quest for a Western-oriented future. The discussion assesses the outlook for the opposition movement in the context of U.S. policy shifts and the EU's political challenges. It looks at why these matters for Americans and how they can support the cause. Join President Zourabichvili and AEI experts for a discussion of Georgia's trajectory and its consequences for US foreign policy and democratic values. For more information and to RSVP, see [AEI].

22 January 2025@ 8:00 a.m. (GMT-8), Pacific Council

The Future of U.S.-Middle East Policy with Dr. Jerrold D. Green

This webinar is off the record, featuring Dr. Jerrold D. Green as he provides a critical analysis of the U.S.'s policy toward the Middle East under the current administration. Discussing a set of geopolitical realignments and emerging challenges, Dr. Green will discuss the forces remaking the region and the implications for global security, economics, and diplomacy. He will draw from his vast experience to provide critical insights and engage in a live Q&A session. Join to stay informed on evolving dynamics in this pivotal region. For more information, see [Pacific Council].

24 January 2025 @ 10:00 – 11:00 a.m. (GMT-6), The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, USA

A Conversation with Greek Defense Minister Nikos Dendias

This panel will discuss Greece's strategic role at the crossroads between Europe and the Middle East amid a number of crucial geopolitical crises-from the support for Ukraine to the turmoil in the Middle East, to the relationship with Turkey, unity within Europe, and regional stability. With an increased expansion of defense capabilities and enhanced relations with

NATO, this panel will look into how Greece can play a constructive role in bringing about a robust, independent European defense. Join Defense Minister Nikos Dendias and Endy Zemenides for a look at Greece's evolving global influence. For more information, see [The Chicago Council on Global Affairs].

Recent Book Releases

Grace Blakeley, ***Vulture Capitalism: Corporate Crimes, Backdoor Bailouts, and the Death of Freedom***, Bloomsbury Publishing, 384 pages, published January 13, 2025. For a review, see [LSE].

J. McKenzie Alexander', ***The Open Society as an Enemy: A Critique of How Free Societies Turned Against Themselves,*** LSE Press, 372 pages, published November 27, 2024. For a review, see [LSE].

Erik Olin Wright, ***Class, Crisis and the State***, Verso, 272 pages, published January 14, 2025. For a review, see [Penguin Random House].

Willard Sterne Randall, ***The Founders' Fortunes How Money Shaped the Birth of America***, Dutton, 344 pages, published January 14, 2025. For a review, see [Penguin Random House].

Eva Dou, ***House of Huawei: The Secret History of China's Most Powerful Company***, Portfolio, 448 pages, published January 14, 2025. For a review, see [Penguin Random House].

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, 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].

Jobs and Positions

The **Asian Development Bank**, is looking for a ***National Anti-Corruption Policy Expert - Individual Consultant***. The deadline for application submission is January 27, 2025. For more information, see [ADB].

The **Asian Development Bank**, is looking for a ***Accelerating Climate Transitions through Green Finance in Southeast Asia - Fisheries Policy and Governance Specialist - Individual Consultant***. The deadline for application submission is January 23, 2025. For more information, see [ADB].

The **Asian Development Bank**, is looking for a ***Legal Expert - Individual Consultant***. The deadline for application submission is January 23, 2025. For more information, see [ADB].

The **UN DESA**, is looking for a ***Governance and Public Administration Officer***. The deadline for application submission is February 1, 2025. For more information, see [UNDESA].

The **United Nations Secretariat**, is looking for a ***Political Affairs Officer***. The deadline for application submission is January 31, 2025. For more information, see [UN].

The **ECLAC**, is looking for a ***Economic Affairs Assistant***. The deadline for application submission is February 16, 2025. For more information, see [ECLAC].

The **Danish Refugee Council**, is looking for a ***Protection officer - Legal***. The deadline for application submission is January 31, 2025. For more information, see [DRC].

The **Danish Refugee Council - Kyiv**, is looking for a ***Legal Team Leader (Legal Analysis Coordination and Supervision)***. The deadline for application submission is February 5, 2025. For more information, see [DRC].

The **United Nations Development Programme - Macedonia**, is looking for a ***Individual Consultant - Sustainable Tourism Customer Relationship***. The deadline for application submission is February 7, 2025. For more information, see [UNDP].

The **Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights - Kyiv**, is looking for

a ***Associate Human Rights Officer***. The deadline for application submission is February 7, 2025. For more information, see [OHCHR].

The **University of Sussex**, is looking for a ***Research Fellow (Law, Politics, Sociology)***. The deadline for application submission is February 5, 2025. For more information, see [University of Sussex].

The **Chinese University of Hong Kong**, is looking for a ***Professor/Associate Professor/Assistant Professor in Faculty of Law***. The deadline for application submission is February 9, 2025. For more information, see [The Chinese University of Hong Kong].

The **Durham University - hybrid**, is looking for a ***Postdoctoral Research Associate in the Department of Sociology***. The deadline for application submission is February 4, 2025. For more information, see [Durham University].

The **University of Oxford**, is looking for a ***Stipendiary Lecturer in Law***. The deadline for application submission is February 7, 2025. For more information, see [University of Oxford].

The University of Edinburgh, is looking for a ***Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the school of Law***. The deadline for application submission is February 28, 2025. For more information, see [The University of Edinburgh].

Team:

Adelaide Im (adi), Ainesh Dey (ad), Aisha Noor (an), Alexandre Cayrouse (axc), Alperen Cennetkuşu (acs), Anlin Martin (alm), Aung Naing Lin (anl), Aye Moe Pwint Phyu, Busawan Kachonnarongvanish (bk), Daniel Rhys Harding (dh), Duc Quang Ly (dql), Felix Serna Calvo (fs), Geo Dzakwan Arshali (ga), Gowthami Kunchihithlu (gk), Helene Ng Hui En (he), Henning Glaser (hg), Herosha Shanmugam (hrs), Hoa Khanh Ngo (hn), Htet Hlaing Win (hw), Ji Fang (jf), Jyotsna Badrinarayanan (jb), Lizhi Dong (ld), Lucas Meier (lm), Lunyka Adelina Pertiwi (lp), Melih Çolak (mc), Mohammad Rizwan Ali (mra), Muhammad Farhan Yaumil Ramadhan (mfr), Myat Sandar Zaw (msz), Nicholas Fenech (nf), Oliver Cubbin (oc), Rishi Shrivastava (rs), Robishan Subba (rs), Sofiia Lysko (sl), Steven Naaman (sn), Sudiksha Ajit Lachman (sal), Thandar Aung Soe (tas), Tomwit Jarnson (tj), Venus Phuangkom, Volkan Kayhan (vk), Wong Sin Yuen (wy)

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