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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 Malta's Freedom Day, Iran's National Day and Senegal's Independence Day this week.

With best regards,

Henning Glaser

Editor in Chief

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Main Sections

- Constitutional Law and –Politics, Human Rights and National Security in East Asia
- Constitutional Law and –Politics, Human Rights and National Security in South Asia
- Constitutional Law and –Politics, Human Rights and National Security in Southeast Asia
- International Relations, Geopolitics and Security in Asia
- Announcements

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

China: Beijing denies knowledge of corruption probe into CMC Vice Chairman He Weidong

(ld/dql) China's Defense Ministry on March 27 declined to confirm reports that General He Weidong, second-ranked Vice Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), is under investigation for corruption, stating it was "unaware" of the allegations. [Bloomberg]

The statement comes as General He Weidong has been absent from public view for weeks, with speculations of his arrest mounting and U.S. defense officials claiming his removal as part of President Xi Jinping's ongoing political purge within the People's Liberation Army (PLA), according to assessments shared with *The Washington Times*. [Washington Times]

If confirmed, He would be the highest-ranking active military official targeted in a probe since former Vice

Chairman Zhao Ziyang's 1989 ouster during the Tiananmen protests. The CMC, chaired by President Xi Jinping, has seen intensified purges since 2022, including the removal of two defense ministers and Rocket Force commanders. Analysts link the crackdown to Xi's efforts to eliminate potential rivals and enforce loyalty ahead of his 2027 deadline for Taiwan contingency readiness.

Separately, Lieutenant General Tang Yong, Deputy Secretary of the CMC's Discipline Inspection Commission, China's top military disciplinary body, has been removed from the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), China's national political advisory council. State media Xinhua reported Tang's removal on March 26 without citing specific violations, consistent with past cases where officials vanish before formal charges. [Xinhua, in Chinese]

Tang is the highest-ranking disciplinary official in the Chinese Communist Party's military to be taken down in over a decade. He previously served as the executive vice secretary of the CMC's political and legal committee and was involved in overseeing national conscription efforts. Additionally, in early 2023, he was appointed as the deputy political commissar of the People's Armed Police Force and participated in an ideological training program designed for senior officials. [South China Morning Post]

Notably, in the earlier stage of his career, Tang was deputy head of the military court of the southeastern Nanjing Military Region, where He Weidong spent 35 years and held multiple posts, deputy director and director of the reconnaissance department; division chief of staff; and commander of the 92nd Motorized Infantry Brigade of the 31st Group Army, which is widely seen as "family army" of President Xi Jinping.

Tang's sacking is indicative of what analysts view as structural challenges from Xi's loyalty-first approach, which critics argue prioritizes political compliance and personal ties over operational competence. U.S. intelligence assessments suggest that corruption and ideological purges could undermine China's military modernization goals, even as it develops advanced missile systems and naval capabilities. [Bloomberg]

China – Hong Kong: Anti-corruption chief warns against inciting blank, invalid votes in upcoming elections

(lb) Danny Woo, commissioner of Hong Kong's Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC), has warned the public against encouraging others to cast blank or invalid votes in the upcoming Legislative Council elections on December 7, the second legislative vote since the 2021 electoral overhaul. He emphasized that authorities will enforce the law "resolutely" and make arrests where necessary. [Hong Kong Free Press]

The Elections (Corrupt and Illegal Conduct) Ordinance criminalizes the incitement of blank or invalid ballots, as well as calls for voter abstention. Offenders can face up to three years in prison and fines of HKD 200,000 (approximately USD 25,000). During the last Legislative Council elections in 2021, multiple people were arrested and convicted for violating this law, receiving suspended jail sentences. [RTHK News]

These electoral changes also significantly reduced the number of directly elected seats, from half to less than a quarter, ensuring that only candidates deemed "patriots" can run. Critics argue that the reforms have severely limited democratic participation, leaving the legislature opposition-free. [Hong Kong Free Press]

Bland and invalid votes can carry political symbolism reflecting protest and defiance against the electoral system.

China – Hong Kong: National security education to expanded

(lb) Hong Kong will intensify efforts to promote national security education in April, ahead of National Security Education Day on April 15. Secretary for Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Erick Tsang stated that the government aims to instill patriotism at all levels of society. His bureau will coordinate with various departments to expand education on national security, national history, and culture.

The Working Group on Patriotic Education, established last year, will implement short-, medium-, and long-term strategies to further deepen engagement, with schools, media, and public institutions to play a key role in disseminating information on national security laws and responsibilities. Similar efforts in the past have included classroom lessons, exhibitions, and promotional campaigns highlighting the importance of state security. [RTHK News].

Meanwhile, Secretary for Security Chris Tang Ping-keung urged the public to remain vigilant against "soft

resistance" tactics that could undermine national security, warning of persisting threats, including foreign smear campaigns, overseas fugitives, domestic terrorism, next to "soft resistance."

Tang also criticized former officials and commentators, including Hans Yeung Wing-yu, Chung Kim-wah, and Stephen Shiu Yeuk-yuen, for allegedly inciting anti-government sentiment. He warned that external forces continue to smear Hong Kong, while fugitives advocate for sanctions and independence abroad. [The Standard]

Tang's statements come as the British government has released its latest six-monthly report on Hong Kong, covering 1 July 2024 to 31 December 2024. In the report, submitted to Parliament, Foreign Minister David Lammy expressed concerns over Hong Kong's national security infrastructure that "continues to impinge on the rights and freedoms of individuals in Hong Kong and overseas." [Government, UK]

China: Public input on proposed cybersecurity law changes sought

(lb) China's Cyberspace Administration has released draft revisions to the country's Cybersecurity Law inviting public feedback. The proposed changes aim to align the law with other related legislation, strengthen the legal liability system, and enhance protections for individuals and organizations online. The revisions are also intended to bolster national security and public interests by addressing emerging cyber threats. [Cyberspace Administration of China, in Chinese]

One key update involves stricter legal responsibilities for companies involved in network operations, information security, and data protection. The draft adds penalties for selling or providing critical network equipment and cybersecurity products that have not been tested or certified for security compliance. Companies that fail to meet these standards could face regulatory actions, including fines and restrictions on their business operations.

The proposal also clarifies penalties for critical information infrastructure operators using network products or services that have not undergone security reviews or have failed such reviews. These operators play a vital role in sectors like finance, energy, and telecommunications, making their compliance with cybersecurity regulations a national priority. The revisions reflect China's broader push to tighten oversight of key digital infrastructure.

The public consultation process allows individuals and organizations to provide feedback before the revisions are finalized. This move follows previous efforts by the government to reinforce cybersecurity frameworks, including the Data Security Law and Personal Information Protection Law, both enacted in recent years. [Xinhua]

China: CEEC expands role in global energy transition

(lb) China Energy Engineering Corp Ltd (CEEC) is increasing its involvement in renewable energy and infrastructure development, focusing on green hydrogen and artificial intelligence (AI) integration. Chairman Song Hailiang announced at the Boao Forum for Asia that CEEC is advancing energy storage and hydrogen solutions to support industrial decarbonization. The state-owned company is also strengthening its global presence with major investments in renewable energy projects. [Globe News Wire]

A key milestone is set for September, when the world's largest integrated green hydrogen-ammonia-methanol project in Songyuan, Jilin province, will begin operations. The project aims to create a sustainable energy system that produces essential chemicals and fuels with minimal environmental impact. CEEC's domestic capacity for green hydrogen and ammonia-based aviation fuel now exceeds 1.35 million metric tons, while its overseas production has reached 2.6 million metric tons.

The company is also pushing for deeper AI integration into energy systems, emphasizing the rising electricity demands of data centers and 5G networks. In 2025, China's data centers and 5G base stations are expected to consume 250 billion kilowatt-hours of electricity—nearly triple the annual output of the Three Gorges Dam.

As part of its international strategy, CEEC is expanding renewable energy projects in Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) markets. The company operates in over 140 countries and regions, with overseas renewable energy contracts now making up nearly half of its total agreements. CEEC aims to shift from simply "going global" to building long-term partnerships and sustainable infrastructure projects worldwide. [Global Times]

CEEC has signed energy investment agreements worth more than USD 15 billion (CNY 110 billion) in China and

USD 11 billion abroad, with projects in Egypt, Morocco, and Central Asia. [Manila Times]

China: President Xi Jinping meets global CEOs amid looming U.S. tariffs

(lb) On March 28, Chinese President Xi Jinping convened a meeting in Beijing with over 40 chief executives from multinational corporations. This initiative aimed to bolster confidence in China's economic landscape and address concerns over potential escalations in trade tensions with the United States.

Prominent attendees included leaders from AstraZeneca, FedEx, Saudi Aramco, Standard Chartered, and Toyota. During the 90-minute session, President Xi emphasized the necessity of maintaining stable global industry and supply chains, highlighting their critical role in the healthy development of the world economy. He reassured that China was a safe and stable place for foreign companies and investments, adding that China would ensure fair opportunities for foreign businesses to participate in government procurement bids. [CNBC]

The gathering also served as a platform for foreign executives to express their perspectives. Sean Stein, president of the U.S.-China Business Council, noted that President Xi acknowledged various challenges facing companies and industries and pledged that the government would take action.

This meeting occurred against the backdrop of a significant 27.1 percent decline in foreign direct investment (FDI) into China in 2024, marking the most substantial drop since the 2008 global financial crisis. The downturn in FDI reflects growing apprehensions among foreign enterprises regarding China's regulatory environment and the potential impacts of renewed trade disputes. [Reuters]

Xi's engagement with business leaders also follows signals from the Trump administration that new tariffs on Chinese goods are under consideration. The White House has been reviewing existing trade measures as part of a broader strategy to counter China's industrial policies. Any new tariffs could further strain bilateral economic relations, particularly as China continues to advocate for a more open and cooperative trade environment. [CNN]

China: Investments in chipmaking to drop in 2025

(lb) China's spending on semiconductor manufacturing equipment in 2025 is projected to drop by 24 percent to 2024. According to industry group SEMI, China will invest USD 38 billion in chip production, down from USD 50 billion in 2024. This follows a surge in investment over the past two years, as the Chinese government pushed to expand domestic semiconductor capacity and reduce reliance on imported chips. These efforts intensified in response to U.S. trade restrictions that limit China's access to advanced chip technology and manufacturing equipment.

Despite the drop, China remains the world's largest investor in chipmaking. Global spending on semiconductor manufacturing equipment is expected to grow by two percent in 2025, reaching USD 110 billion industry is expected to accelerate further in 2026, with an 18 percent rise in investment. ASML, the world's leading chip equipment manufacturer, forecasts sales between USD 34 billion and USD 40 billion (EUR 32 billion–38 billion) in 2025, underscoring confidence in the sector. Other major equipment firms, including Applied Materials, KLA, and Tokyo Electron, are also benefiting from increased global semiconductor investments. [Reuters]

China's continued leadership in semiconductor investment highlights broader shifts in global competition. Even with a reduction in spending, China's commitment to domestic chip production keeps it ahead of South Korea and Taiwan. South Korea is projected to invest USD 21.5 billion led by SK Hynix and Samsung Electronics expanding memory chip production. Taiwan follows closely with USD 21 billion driven by TSMC's role in manufacturing AI chips for companies like Nvidia. In contrast, the Americas and Japan are expected to invest USD 14 billion (JPY 2 trillion) each, while Europe lags behind with USD 9 billion (EUR 8.3 billion).

Despite its investment decline, China's semiconductor sector continues to expand. Domestic firms such as Naura, AMEC, and Huawei affiliate SiCarrier are increasing their production capabilities, strengthening China's ability to compete in chip manufacturing. These developments highlight the intensifying global race for semiconductor dominance, as governments and companies seek to secure supply chains and technological leadership in an industry critical to economic and security interests. [Finimize]

China: State firms ordered to suspend deals with Li Ka-shing over Panama ports sale

(ld/lb) Chinese authorities have instructed state-owned enterprises to pause new agreements with companies tied to Hong Kong billionaire Li Ka-shing and his family. The directive follows Li's CK Hutchison Holdings' agreement to sell a majority stake in its global ports business—including assets near the Panama Canal—to a BlackRock-led consortium for over USD 19 billion (see AiR No. 11, March/2025, 3). Existing partnerships remain unaffected.

Under the order, state-owned enterprises must pause new agreements until regulators complete assessments, though analysts note minimal immediate financial risk for Li's conglomerate, CK Hutchison Holdings. Only 12 percent of the firm's revenue derives from mainland China and Hong Kong, with the majority stemming from Europe, North America, and Australia. Horizons Ventures, Li's investment arm, focuses over 80 percent of its portfolio on Western markets.

China's Foreign Ministry condemned "economic coercion" in response to U.S. President Donald Trump's endorsement of CK Hutchison's USD 19 billion ports sale to a BlackRock-led consortium, which excludes Chinese assets. Despite pro-Beijing media backlash, the deal is expected to proceed, with signing slated for April 2. [Bloomberg]

The sale drew criticism from pro-Beijing media outlets like *Ta Kung Pao*, which accused CK Hutchison of undermining China's national interests by divesting strategic infrastructure. China's Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office amplified these concerns by republishing critical newspaper commentaries, signaling Beijing's disapproval. U.S. President Donald Trump praised the transaction, having previously warned against Chinese influence over the Panama Canal, a critical global trade route handling 5 percent of maritime traffic. [Reuters 1]

Richard Li, younger son of Hong Kong billionaire Li Ka-shing, attended China's premier economic forum in Beijing on March 23, which contrasts with the absence of his father and elder brother Victor, whose CK Hutchison Holdings is under fire from pro-Beijing media for the deal. Analysts note Richard's separate business identity—through his Pacific Century Group, focused on tech and insurance—likely shielded him from backlash over the sale. [South China Morning Post]

Pressure on CK Hutchison grows

In latest developments, Chinese authorities and pro-Beijing media have intensified scrutiny over CK Hutchison's plan to sell its Panama port operations to a BlackRock-led consortium. The Hong Kong-based conglomerate, which had expected to finalize the deal by April 2, has reportedly delayed signing due to rising political tensions. The sale, valued at over USD 19 billion (HKD 148 billion), has drawn criticism from China, which sees the transaction as a potential threat to national security. Meanwhile, CK Hutchison's stock has declined by nearly 13 percent since state media first raised concerns on March 13, erasing roughly USD 3 billion (HKD 24.3 billion) in market value.

China's market regulator announced it would conduct an antitrust review of the deal, citing the need to protect fair competition and the public interest. Additionally, legal experts quoted in Chinese media suggest that Beijing could invoke its national security and data security laws to block the sale, citing potential risks to China's port system data. Pro-Beijing newspaper *Ta Kung Pao* published a full-page article on March 31 featuring statements from Hong Kong politicians and Chinese lawyers urging CK Hutchison to reconsider the transaction. Some editorials have gone further, arguing that the sale could violate Hong Kong's national security law, particularly Article 23.

The deal has geopolitical ramifications, as the two ports in question are located near the Panama Canal, which handles about three percent of global maritime trade. Former U.S. President Donald Trump has praised the agreement, emphasizing Washington's interest in countering Chinese influence in the region. However, the controversy underscores broader tensions between Beijing and Western investors, as China seeks to maintain control over critical infrastructure while foreign entities look to expand their foothold in global trade routes. A now-deleted post from a social media account linked to China's state broadcaster CCTV claimed the sale was akin to "handing a knife to an opponent." [Reuters 2]

China: Manufacturing growth reaches 12-month high amid policy support and trade uncertainty

(lb) China's manufacturing activity expanded in March, reaching its highest level in a year as new orders drove production growth. The official purchasing managers' index (PMI) rose to 50.5, marking the second consecutive month of expansion. This uptick suggests that government stimulus measures and technological advancements are strengthening the sector, even as

trade tensions with the United States continue to escalate. [Reuters]

In addition to a rebound in manufacturing, the non-manufacturing PMI climbed to 50.8, indicating steady growth in services and construction. Warmer weather and increased investment fueled expansion in construction, with the sector's business activity index reaching 53.4—its highest since mid-2024. The services sector also showed signs of recovery, with industries such as transport, telecommunications, and financial services reporting strong performance.

Policymakers have intensified efforts to sustain economic momentum through fiscal stimulus, monetary easing, and policies aimed at boosting domestic demand. High-tech industries, including aerospace, shipbuilding, and electronics, saw substantial gains, with the high-tech manufacturing PMI rising to 52.3. The equipment manufacturing index reached 52.0, reflecting a surge in new orders that suggests long-term investment in advanced industries is paying off. [Global Times]

Despite these positive signals, challenges remain. Large firms reported more difficulties in March than in February, and smaller enterprises continued to struggle, with their PMI figures still below the 50-mark. Additionally, U.S. tariffs on Chinese imports, currently at a cumulative 20 percent since January, are expected to rise further. Analysts warn that while current policy support has buoyed production, the broader economic outlook remains uncertain due to external pressures and weaknesses in China's property sector (see article below). [Reuters]

China: Real estate giant Country Garden reports 37 percent revenue plunge

(ld) Country Garden Holdings, once China's largest property developer, saw its annual revenue plummet 37 percent year-on-year to CNY 253 billion (USD 35 billion) in 2024, marking its steepest decline since the sector's crisis began in 2021 with the collapse of Evergrande. The Guangdong-based firm, which defaulted on a USD bond in 2023, narrowed its net loss to CNY 32.8 billion (USD 4.5 billion) from a record CNY 178 billion (USD 24.5 billion) in 2023, driven by asset writedowns and stalled projects.

The results underscore the prolonged slump in China's real estate sector, which historically contributed up to 30 percent of GDP. Homebuyers continue to shun private developers amid fears of incomplete projects,

with pre-sold apartments—a dominant sales model—now viewed as high-risk due to liquidity crises. Country Garden attributed the decline to a "falling sales rate" and "negative public opinion," as state-owned developers increasingly dominate land purchases in major cities.

Country Garden faces a critical Hong Kong court hearing in May over a winding-up petition after missing a February deadline to restructure nearly USD 150 billion in offshore debt. The firm emphasized that its mainland operations remain separate from offshore restructuring proceedings, though experts note minimal cash is flowing to international creditors. Chinese developers collectively hold approximately USD 12 trillion in liabilities, with offshore bondholders recovering less than 5 percent of defaults since 2021. [Financial Times]

Residential property sales by value dipped 0.4 percent in early 2025 after a 17.6 percent drop in 2024, according to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS). Fitch Ratings forecasts a 10 percent decline in new home sales by floor area this year, citing demographic shifts and high inventory. Beijing's efforts to stabilize the market, including selective easing of home-buying rules, have yet to restore confidence, with state-backed firms now controlling over 60 percent of new land acquisitions in top-tier cities. [NBS] [Fitch Ratings]

The measures come as China's booming cross-border e-commerce sector, led by platforms like Shein and Temu, faces increasing challenges, including changes in US trade policies and stricter data localization requirements.

A key concern is the potential elimination of the US de minimis exemption, which currently allows duty-free entry for packages under USD 800. Last month, US President Donald Trump had signed an executive order removing the exemption for Chinese goods, only for it to be temporarily reinstated. The exemption has played a significant role in the success of Chinese e-commerce platforms. [Reuters]

Additional challenges include stricter data localization laws in over 40 countries, rising costs for compliance, cybersecurity risks, and growing pressure to track e-commerce carbon footprints.

Meanwhile, foreign businesses, including those in Cambodia, have raised concerns about competition from Chinese e-commerce imports.

Despite these obstacles, cross-border e-commerce continues to grow rapidly, particularly among

consumers under 35. China's advanced customs infrastructure and AI-driven logistics systems are helping sustain the industry. PayPal China CEO Hannah Qiu noted that Chinese products are evolving from basic to high-end, seeking to reinforce the sector's resilience despite geopolitical uncertainties. [South China Morning Post]

China: Whistleblower channel set up to report Taiwan independence supporters

(dql) China has launched a new tip-off channel urging the public to report alleged supporters of Taiwan independence. The initiative targets individuals and groups accused of suppressing pro-unification voices or obstructing cross-strait ties, criticizing Taiwan's ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) for persecuting opposition figures and called pro-independence politicians and influencers "accomplices" of the DPP.

Authorities pledged to handle reports appropriately while protecting whistle-blowers' identities but did not specify potential penalties.

The move follows Taiwan's expulsion of three pro-Beijing Chinese influencers, which sparked debates over freedom of speech. While Taiwanese authorities cited national security concerns, opposition lawmakers accused the DPP of suppressing dissent. [AP News]

Tensions have escalated since Taiwanese leader William Lai Ching-te took office in May and labeled Beijing a "foreign hostile force." Lai has proposed reinstating military courts for espionage cases and tightening scrutiny of Chinese travel to Taiwan, citing increasing Chinese infiltration and espionage within the armed forces. (see AiR No. 11, March/2025, 3). Beijing condemned Lai as a "destroyer of cross-strait peace" and reaffirmed its commitment to reunification, citing the 2005 Anti-Secession Law, which allows "non-peaceful means" if Taiwan formally declares independence.

Beijing has previously sanctioned pro-independence figures, including barring Taiwanese businessman Robert Tsao and DPP lawmaker Puma Shen from China, Hong Kong, and Macau. Meanwhile, concerns are growing in Taiwan over Beijing's influence abroad, prompting Taipei to consider travel warnings for countries with close ties to China, such as Cambodia and Laos. [South China Morning Post]

China: Submersible achieves record-breaking dive frequency

(lb) China's manned deep-sea submersible Jiaolong has set a new record for dive frequency following a major technical upgrade. During a mission from February 27 to March 25, Jiaolong completed 14 dives in ten days, including four instances of two dives in a single day. These tests verified the reliability of newly upgraded domestic components and enhanced the submersible's overall operational capacity, laying the groundwork for future intensive deployments. [Xinhua]

The upgrades focused on increasing Jiaolong's efficiency and self-reliance. The trials tested new direct-drive low-noise direct-current thrusters, an improved deep-sea hydraulic buoyancy control system, and an expanded emergency hydraulic system. Three full-cycle tests demonstrated increased energy efficiency, marking progress in reducing dependence on imported technology. [China Daily]

Japan: Minority ruling coalition secures FY 2025 state budget with opposition support

(dql) Japan's parliament enacted on March 31 the fiscal 2025 state budget, following an unprecedented upper house revision that reversed a planned increase in medical costs. The move marked a significant victory for Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba's minority government, just hours before the current fiscal year ended. Notably, for the first time under Japan's current Constitution, a budget was revised by the House of Councillors and then approved by the House of Representatives. [The Japanese News]

The budget totals a record JPY 115.2 trillion (USD 770 billion), with about one-third allocated to social security and a record JPY 8.7 trillion (USD 58 billion) earmarked for defense amid rising regional security concerns.

Despite losing its lower house majority in general election in October (see AiR No. 44, October/2024, 5), the ruling Liberal Democratic Party-Komeito coalition secured passage of the budget with support from the minor opposition Japan Innovation Party. To secure the support, the ruling parties had accepted amendments, including expanded high school tuition subsidies and a higher income threshold for tax payments, to gain opposition backing. The reversal on medical cost hikes followed opposition pressure, particularly from the

Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan, the largest opposition party.

Ishiba emphasized his commitment to stabilizing livelihoods amid inflation, leveraging wage growth to ease economic pressures. However, his administration continues to face declining public support, exacerbated by revelations that he distributed gift vouchers to rookie LDP lawmakers, fueling scrutiny over political funding practices (see AiR No. 12, March/2025, 4).

Even with the budget's passage, Ishiba remains under pressure, particularly over corporate donations and the LDP's underreported political funds. Opposition parties are divided on whether to strengthen regulations or impose a complete ban. [Kyodo News]

Japan: Court sentences former ruling party lawmaker for salary fraud

(dql) Former ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) lawmaker Megumi Hirose was sentenced to two and a half years in prison, suspended for five years, for defrauding the government of JPY 3.5 million (USD 23,000) by falsely claiming salary expenses for a non-working secretary.

Hirose, who was elected to the upper house in 2022 as a LDP candidate, resigned in August 2024 after prosecutors searched her home and office. [Kyodo News]

Japan: Alarming record high number of child suicide

(dql) In 2024, suicides among Japanese elementary, junior high, and high school students reached a record high of 529, despite the country's overall suicide rate dropping to its second-lowest level since data collection began in 1978. The total number of suicides fell to 20,320, a decrease of 1,517 from the previous year, according to figures released by the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare on March 28.

For the first time, no suicides were linked to the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disaster. Between 2011 and 2023, Japan recorded 252 disaster-related suicides, primarily in Iwate, Miyagi, and Fukushima prefectures. Fukushima had the highest number of cases (119), followed by Miyagi (64)

and Iwate (59). The numbers steadily declined after peaking in 2011.

While overall suicides declined, youth suicides remained persistently high, exceeding 500 annually since 2020. In response, the ministry released prefecture-level data for the first time, though some breakdowns were withheld to protect identities. Tokyo had the highest number of child suicides (75), followed by Saitama (43), Kanagawa (39), and Aichi and Osaka (32 each), reflecting their large populations. [The Mainichi]

Japan: Civil Aviation Bureau to scrap height requirement for female pilots

(adi) The Japan Civil Aviation Bureau (JCAB) has decided to abolish its minimum height requirement for female pilot candidates, aiming to remove barriers that have contributed to gender disparities in the aviation industry.

Under the current regulation, pilot trainees are required to be at least 158 centimeters tall. The JCAB acknowledged that this standard has deterred women from applying, particularly given that average heights for women in Japan fall below the threshold.

According to government data, only 3.7 percent of licensed pilots in Japan are women, a figure far lower than in other advanced economies. The move is part of broader efforts by the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism to promote diversity and address staffing shortages in the aviation sector.

Industry experts have welcomed the revision as a step toward building a more inclusive workforce. The government has also indicated it may review other physical and procedural criteria to ensure equal access to pilot training. [Asahi Shimbun]

Japan: Tokyo hospital to offer anonymous births

(adi) Sanikukai Hospital in Tokyo's Sumida Ward has begun offering confidential births, becoming the second medical institution in Japan to allow women to give birth without revealing their identities publicly. The initiative is intended to serve as a safety net for women facing unwanted pregnancies.

Under the program, hospital staff will be the only ones aware of the mother's identity, which will not be listed on the child's official family registry. Children born through this process will be placed under the care of local child welfare offices, with the parental section of their birth records left blank. Sanikukai Hospital will keep internal records to ensure children retain the right to learn about their origins.

The system adheres to 2022 guidelines issued by the health and justice ministries, which allow such practices in cases where pregnant individuals face serious social or financial hardship. Hospital president Hitoshi Kato said the program addresses the growing demand for confidential support, particularly in the Tokyo metropolitan area. Sanikukai Hospital also plans to introduce a baby box system, enabling individuals to anonymously leave infants in the hospital's care.

The first hospital in Japan to offer anonymous births was Jikei Hospital in Kumamoto, which has handled 43 such deliveries since December 2021. Both Jikei and Sanikukai hospitals have called for legislation to formalize the practice and safeguard children's right to know their origins.

Founded in 1918, Sanikukai Hospital is a designated perinatal medical center handling around 700 deliveries annually. It began offering anonymous pregnancy consultations in July 2024 to assist women unable to seek help due to poverty or personal circumstances. [Asahi Shimbun]

Japan: World's first uranium-based rechargeable battery developed

(dql) In a major scientific breakthrough, the Japan Atomic Energy Agency has developed the world's first uranium-based rechargeable battery, potentially transforming nuclear waste management and enhancing energy storage solutions.

Unlike conventional batteries that use lithium or lead, the prototype employs uranium as an active material in electrochemical reactions. The uranium used has the same chemical properties as depleted uranium (DU), a byproduct of nuclear fuel enrichment, offering a new use for this waste material. The battery, measuring 10 cm wide and 5 cm tall, features a uranium-containing electrolyte for the negative electrode and an iron-containing electrolyte for the positive electrode. It achieved a voltage of 1.3V, comparable to standard alkaline batteries, and

maintained stable performance over ten charge-discharge cycles. [Nuclear Engineering]

Japan holds approximately 16,000 tons of DU, while global reserves total around 1.6 million tons. If scalable, uranium-based batteries could repurpose this vast stockpile for energy storage, particularly in managing surplus electricity from renewable sources. Researchers aim to enhance capacity through redox flow battery technology, which enables larger energy storage and efficient transfer.

However, due to uranium's radioactivity, deployment would likely be restricted to radiation-controlled environments such as nuclear power plants. Despite this limitation, the innovation aligns with the increasing demand for advanced battery technologies to support renewable energy grids. [Interesting Engineering]

Japan: Solar strategy unveiled

(dql) The New Energy and Industrial Technology Development Organization (NEDO), Japan's government agency that promotes research, development, and deployment of advanced energy and industrial technologies, has unveiled the "NEDO PV Challenges 2025" strategy to accelerate solar deployment and advance next-generation technology, supporting the country's goal of carbon neutrality by 2050.

The strategy outlines five key technical initiatives, focusing on next-generation solar cells to enhance efficiency and global competitiveness; broader solar adoption; operational stability with improved O&M technologies, solar forecasting, and safety guidelines; market diversification to address land constraints and various energy demands; and circular economy solutions, including advanced recycling processes for PV modules.

As part of the initiative, NEDO will launch the Solar Power Expansion and Technology Development Project in fiscal 2025 to accelerate Japan's renewable energy transition. This aligns with the 7th Basic Energy Plan, which targets renewables making up 40-50 percent of Japan's energy mix by 2040, with solar accounting for 23-29 percent. [PV Magazine]

Japan: Rising food prices remain concern

(adi) Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba is set to take strong action to address the continued rise in prices, according to Tetsuo Saito, leader of the ruling coalition partner Komeito. Saito made the remarks following a meeting with the prime minister.

Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshimasa Hayashi later clarified that the government would rely on existing measures included in the fiscal 2024 supplementary budget and the proposed fiscal 2025 budget, rather than pursuing additional spending. The goal is to contain inflationary pressures without undermining fiscal discipline.

These measures come as public dissatisfaction grows over the cost of living, with food prices rising 5.6 percent in March for their fastest year-on-year pace of gain since January 2024 and compared with a 5.0 percent rise in February. [Reuters]

In November 2024, the government approved a JPY 13.9 trillion (approximately USD 92.4 billion) supplementary budget to alleviate the impact of rising living costs. The package included handouts for low-income households, fuel subsidies, and utility bill support (see AiR No. 48, November/2024, 4).

More recently, Ishiba ordered the release of rice from national reserves in an effort to counter soaring food prices—the first time the government has deployed stockpiles for price relief (see AiR No. 7, February/2025, 3).

On March 26, the agriculture ministry launched its second auction of rice from national stockpiles to stabilize distribution amid soaring supermarket prices. Over three days, 70,000 tons will be offered, including 40,000 tons from last year's harvest and 30,000 tons from the previous year, covering 35 varieties, including premium grades. Wholesalers submit bids via email, with a minimum sale price set by the ministry.

Earlier this month, Japan auctioned 150,000 tons from emergency reserves, with over 90 percent acquired by a federation of agricultural cooperatives. The federation announced that most of its purchased rice will reach retail shelves next month. [NHK]

Despite these measures, rice prices in Tokyo surged 89.6 percent in March from a year earlier, marking the steepest increase since 1971 and exceeding February's 77.5 percent increase, despite the government's efforts to curb prices by releasing stockpiles. Rice-related food items also saw notable price hikes. [Kyodo News 1]

Rice shortages in Japan began last summer due to record heat in 2023, which impacted the harvest, and natural disaster warnings in August that triggered panic buying. Strict government limits on rice production to maintain high prices further amplified supply chain disruptions. An 11-pound bag of rice now costs nearly JPY 4,000 (USD 27), double the price from a year ago. While authorities had predicted the fall harvest would replenish stocks and lower prices, only the first proved accurate—despite a larger harvest, distributors had less rice to sell in 2024. [The New York Times]

The government continues to coordinate with the Bank of Japan to achieve a stable two percent inflation target. Officials have expressed concern about the burden of rising energy and food costs on households and businesses. [Asahi Shimbun] [Reuters]

First stockpiled rice reaches stores

On March 29, the first batch of rice released from government reserves went on sale in supermarkets, but without any labelling to indicate its stockpiled origin.

The National Federation of Agricultural Cooperative Associations (Zen-Noh) requested that retailers refrain from labelling the rice as stockpiled to avoid confusion. Typically, rice bags display the variety and production region, but this was omitted due to the blend and Zen-Noh's directive.

The release marks a rare instance in which reserve rice is deployed to curb inflation rather than in response to natural disasters or poor harvests. The lack of transparency, however, has raised questions about consumer awareness and equitable access to affordable staples. [Asahi Shimbun]

Food supply emergency measures law takes effect

Meanwhile, on April 1, Japan's new food supply emergency measures law, enacted in June last year, entered into force, enabling the government to instruct farmers to submit plans for increasing production of key foods, such as rice, when domestic supply declines and prices surge.

The law aims to mitigate food shortages amid climate change and disruptions caused by Russia's war in Ukraine. It designates 12 essential food items, including rice, meat, soybeans, wheat, sugar, eggs, and dairy, and mandates securing fertilizer and pesticide supplies.

If food supply falls by 20 percent or more below the average and prices rise sharply, the government can order farmers and food-related businesses to draft plans to boost production, increase imports, or expand market distribution. Noncompliance is subject to penalties, though the government will not enforce directives if imports can offset shortages.

Despite rice prices surging 80.9 percent year-on-year in February—the highest jump since 1971—the government is not currently considering mandatory production expansion, as supply levels have recently increased. [Kyodo News 2]

Japan: Cryptocurrency insider trading rules to be expanded

(dql) Financial Services Agency (FSA), Japan's primary financial regulatory authority, is reportedly planning to classify cryptocurrencies as financial products under the law, extending insider trading restrictions to crypto assets. The agency seeks to submit an amendment to the Financial Instruments and Exchange Act by 2026, to the parliament as early as next year, following expert discussions in closed-door study groups. [Dig Watch]

Currently, cryptocurrencies like Bitcoin are categorized under the Payment Services Act as a means of settlement. The reclassification would place them in a distinct category from securities, such as stocks and bonds.

Reclassifying crypto as an investment would also require companies soliciting investments to register with regulators, expanding oversight beyond exchanges. The FSA is addressing a rise in crypto-related scams and intends to tighten regulations regardless of a company's location. However, enforcement remains a challenge, given the prevalence of overseas-based crypto firms.

The scope of assets covered under the new rules is yet to be determined, as the crypto market includes a broad range of assets, from widely traded Bitcoin to speculative "memecoins."

Cryptocurrency trading in Japan has surged, with active accounts reaching 7.34 million as of January—more than triple the number five years ago—driven by increased accessibility through smartphone trading services.

The proposed insider trading rules will likely mirror those for traditional financial products. Similar

regulations exist in the European Union under the Markets in Crypto-Assets Regulation. In 2022, the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission charged a former Coinbase manager with insider trading, highlighting the need for regulatory oversight. [Nikkei Asia]

Japan: New restrictions on foreigners' purchase of farmland take effect

(dql) Japan is set to prohibit foreigners from acquiring farmland if their visas are set to expire soon, aiming to prevent misuse amid rising food prices.

Effective on April 1, the revised Cropland Act will require foreign buyers to report their remaining visa duration when purchasing farmland. This follows concerns from ruling party lawmakers over foreign-linked entities acquiring land for unintended purposes.

Farmland buyers must engage in farming for at least 150 days a year, with municipal agricultural committees deciding on approvals. Since September 2023, foreign individuals and companies have been required to report their nationalities and visa status but not visa expiration dates. Under the new rule, foreigners without prospects for visa renewal will be barred from acquiring farmland. The restriction also applies to individuals, regardless of nationality, who plan to move far from the land. However, no specific minimum visa period has been set, with local committees making decisions on a case-by-case basis.

In 2022, foreign individuals and companies with foreign shareholders acquired 154 hectares of farmland in Japan, dropping to 90 hectares in 2023. Between 2017 and 2023, foreign entities headquartered abroad acquired 73 hectares across six prefectures, with the largest purchases linked to a French company, followed by firms from China and Hong Kong. [Kyodo News]

Japan: USD 134 billion allocated to boost disaster resilience

(dql) Japan plans to invest over JPY 20 trillion (USD 134 billion) from fiscal 2026 to 2030 to strengthen disaster resilience, particularly against a potential Nankai Trough megaquake, according to a new draft plan. This marks an increase from the JPY 15 trillion (USD 100 billion) allocated for 2021–2025, reflecting rising

construction costs and inflation. The government aims to finalize the plan in June.

Critics suggest the initiative is politically motivated, intended to garner support from the construction sector ahead of the upcoming House of Councillors election, as Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba's minority government seeks to consolidate power. Additionally, concerns persist over labor shortages and the feasibility of projects, some of which may take over 50 years to complete.

The urgency of infrastructure upgrades was underscored by recent disasters, including a projection estimating up to 298,000 fatalities from a Nankai Trough quake and a sinkhole incident in Saitama Prefecture linked to deteriorating sewage pipes. [South China Morning Post]

Following the prolonged water supply disruption after the 2024 Noto Peninsula earthquake, the government aims to make 34 percent of water and sewer pipes quake-resistant by 2030, up from 15 percent in 2023. Additionally, 80 percentof the 92,000 road bridges requiring urgent repairs will be fixed by 2030, an improvement from 55 percent in 2023. [Kyodo News]

Japan: Arctic research vessel launched

(dql) Japan has launched its first purpose-built ice-class Arctic research vessel, Mirai II, marking a significant milestone for the Japan Agency for Marine-Earth Science and Technology (JAMSTEC). Construction began in 2021, and JAMSTEC will oversee its operations.

The launch is part of the country's efforts to address challenges posed by the Arctic's rapid environmental changes and their global impact through scientific research. Mirai II is designed for comprehensive observations of the atmosphere, weather, ocean, and sea ice. Built with Japan's advanced icebreaking technology, the 13,000-ton vessel (128 meters long) is Polar Class 4, capable of continuously breaking 1.2 meters of flat one-year ice at 3 knots. It will accommodate 97 people, including 34 crew members and 63 researchers. [The Maritime Executive]

Mongolia: Ruling party debates controversial internal voting regulation

(fs) The ruling Mongolian People's Party (MPP) has proposed an internal regulation to evaluate its Members of Parliament (MPs) based on their voting alignment with the government and party decisions.

The draft, introduced in a closed-door parliamentary group meeting, suggests deducting points from MPs who oppose party-backed laws or fail to participate in final votes. Those accumulating the lowest scores may face political consequences, including disqualification from future elections or appointments.

The proposal, presented by MPP parliamentary group leader L. Munkhbaatar, was met with strong opposition from some members, leading to a heated debate. As a result, the party failed to approve the regulation and postponed discussions to the next meeting.

Critics argue that the measure undermines parliamentary pluralism, restricting MPs' ability to express diverse opinions.

Deputy Speaker Kh. Bulgantuya emphasized the importance of internal debate, while MP Kh. Gankhuyag stated that lawmakers should be evaluated by the public, not through internal scoring. [iToim]

Mongolia: Financial Stability Council discusses measures to boost foreign exchange reserves

(fs) Mongolia's Financial Stability Council held an extraordinary meeting on March 25, chaired by Finance Minister B. Javkhlan. Officials, including the Governor of the Bank of Mongolia and the Chair of the Financial Regulatory Commission, discussed measures to strengthen the country's financial stability and increase foreign exchange reserves.

The meeting focused on mobilizing financial resources from foreign markets into the domestic economy and issuing domestic government securities under the Budget Law.

The Deposit Insurance Corporation was advised to sell government foreign bonds without causing price fluctuations and reinvest the released funds into the domestic market.

The council also reviewed strategies to increase foreign exchange reserves. Measures discussed included raising USD 550 million through the Bank of Mongolia's swap agreement with China's central bank, securing

USD 300 million through gold-backed loans from foreign financial institutions, and selling government bonds internationally to recover USD 283.4 million.

Mongolian export revenues rose by 9 percent in the third week of March, reaching USD 268 million, driven by increased exports of coal (1.9 million tons), copper concentrate (57,000 tons), and iron ore (176,000 tons). Imports stood at USD 225 million, with a rise in diesel and fuel imports.

As a result, Mongolia's foreign exchange reserves grew by USD 291 million, reaching USD 4.7 billion, covering more than four months of imports. [GoGo]

Mongolia: Ulaanbaatar City Council approves 2025 budget amendments

(fs) The Ulaanbaatar City Council approved amendments to the 2025 capital city budget on March 28, aiming to strengthen fiscal discipline.

The amendments include a reduction of approximately USD 56 million in total budget resources due to adjusted revenue projections. The city's direct budget revenue is estimated to exceed USD 459 million, while the overall capital city budget revenue is expected to reach USD 1.18 billion. Total available budget resources now stand at over USD 1.92 billion.

Expenditures have been restructured, with USD 373 million allocated for current expenses and USD 1.26 billion for budget investments. The six central districts are projected to generate USD 402 million in revenue, while USD 4.7 million will be allocated to support the three remote districts of Baganuur, Bagakhangai, and Nalaikh.

Total revenue for the capital city budget is projected at USD 482 million, including USD 310 million from tax revenue, USD 167 million from non-tax revenue, and USD 6.9 million from Local Development Fund transfers. Additional revenue sources include collections from other organizations and budget-generated funds.

On the expenditure side, USD 1.64 billion has been allocated for various projects and administrative costs. The City Council has been assigned USD 18.7 million, while the National Development and Reform Commission will oversee USD 1.64 billion in expenditures.

Road infrastructure is set to receive USD 43.6 million from the Road Fund, and USD 546 million from Capital Securities funds will finance long-term projects. Public transportation development is allocated USD 8.3 million, while USD 156 million will be invested throughout the year. [UB Post]

Mongolia: Trafigura investigates billion-dollar fraud, suspends local executive

(fs) Trafigura Group, a multinational commodities trading company headquartered in Singapore, is investigating a USD 1.1 billion fraud case involving its Mongolian operations, where its suspended local executive, Jononbayar Erdenesuren, allegedly loaned over USD 500 million of company funds to Lex Oil, a firm owned by his aunt, D. Erdenetuul. [Reuters 1]

An internal review by Trafigura had already revealed serious misconduct in its Mongolian petroleum supply business in October 2024, including document manipulation to conceal overdue receivables and inflate payments. The company did not name specific individuals but confirmed disciplinary actions were being taken. [Reuters 2]

As a consequence, Trafigura's net profit for the financial year ending September 2024 dropped by 62 percent. [Bloomberg TV]

Lex Oil, established in 2019, partnered with Trafigura to supply fuel in Mongolia. The company provided credit to local fuel users, using Trafigura's financing, but accumulated substantial debt.

The Mongolian government has launched an investigation, though findings have not yet been disclosed.

The fraud case has unsettled Trafigura's financial backers, especially following a separate USD 600 million nickel fraud in Singapore. [The Straits Times]

Mongolia: Espionage case hearing postponed

(fs) The preliminary hearing for the espionage case that was scheduled for March 28 against defendants Z. Sanjdorj and D. Byambajav, accused of collaborating with a foreign intelligence, has been postponed until April 24 at the request of their defense attorneys.

The hearing, which has been delayed multiple times, will be conducted behind closed doors.

The General Intelligence Agency initially reported the arrests on March 29, 2024, announcing the detention of Mongolian monk Sanjdorj, abbot of Ikh Khüree Monastery, and his advisor Byambajav, accused of treason (see Asia in Review No. 12, March/2025, 4).

The accused are charged with illegal cooperation with foreign intelligence services. If convicted, they face prison sentences ranging from eight to fifteen years. [News.mn]

North Korea: Instructors mobilized to instill youth loyalty to Kim Jong-un

(mm) North Korea recently held a large-scale gathering of instructors from the children's union to emphasize their role in fostering young people's loyalty to leader Kim Jong-un. The four-day event took place in Pyongyang, bringing together instructors from across the country to discuss their responsibilities in shaping youth as "revolutionaries and patriots."

The "Red Necktie" union, which students aged 7-14 are required to join, has been active since 1946 and currently counts around 3 million members. According to state media, the gathering was held at Kim Jong-un's instruction, and his remarks were shared during the meeting, although no specifics were provided.

Key discussion points included the instructors' role in instilling political loyalty among children and strategies to improve educational methods. There was also a focus on addressing gaps in current programs to strengthen the union's influence and better engage its young members. [Korea JoongAng Daily]

North Korea: AI driven drone technology advances amid deepening military ties with Russia

(mm) North Korea has unveiled new drone technology incorporating artificial intelligence (AI) to autonomously identify and strike South Korean and U.S. military assets. The development follows reports from North Korean state media that North Korean leader Kim Jong-un personally oversaw recent tests of "suicide attack" drones equipped with AI-driven targeting systems.

Kim reportedly emphasized that unmanned equipment and artificial intelligence should be top priorities in the country's military modernization. Highlighting the growing role of intelligent drones in modern warfare, he called for a well-structured long-term national plan to accelerate their development and integration as a strategic initiative. [KCNA] [Al Jazeera]

State media images indicate that these drones were tested against mock-ups resembling South Korean and U.S. military equipment, including South Korea's Long-range Surface-to-Air Missile system and the U.S. Stryker armoured fighting vehicle stationed on the peninsula. The drones' attack capabilities mark a notable advancement from similar tests conducted last year. [Yonhap News Agency]

These developments come as Pyongyang deepens its strategic partnership with Moscow, reportedly drawing on Russia's battlefield experience in Ukraine. Between January and February, Pyongyang allegedly deployed an additional 3,000 troops to Russia, bringing the total to 14,000 North Korean soldiers supporting Moscow's war effort. Concerns are growing over North Korea's expanding military cooperation and pursuit of advanced weaponry, which pose a serious threat to stability on the Korean Peninsula and broader regional security. [Korea JoongAng Daily]

Meanwhile, satellite imagery analysis indicates that Pyongyang has begun constructing new factory facilities near existing aircraft plants and an airbase used for recent drone tests.

Construction activity at the "Panghyon Airfield Repair Base PUG" began last September with the establishment of a worker camp. Several large but unfinished buildings were demolished in January, and by February, foundations were laid for a new 2-hectare factory featuring multiple production halls, office space, and support buildings. The site is about 300 meters from underground facilities potentially linked to aircraft or weapons production.

A separate aircraft factory, previously identified by state media as the "Machine Plant Managed by Jon Tong Ryol," also saw new construction in February, though a larger project there remains stalled since last fall. The specific purpose of the new facilities is unclear, but their locations suggest they may support Kim's plans to develop reconnaissance and combat drones.

Additionally, recent roofing work on seven large new hangars at Panghyon Airbase suggests North Korea is preparing to deploy up to seven new reconnaissance

drones with 40-meter wingspans. Each hangar could also accommodate multiple Saetbyol-9 combat drones with 20-meter wingspans, signaling potential expansion in North Korea's drone capabilities. [NK News]

South Korea: Constitutional Court to rule on Yoon's impeachment on April 4

(mm/fn) South Korea's Constitutional Court will announce its ruling on April 4, deciding whether impeached President Yoon Suk-yeol will be permanently removed from office or reinstated.

It has been 38 days since the court began daily deliberations after Yoon was impeached by the opposition-controlled National Assembly over his Dec. 3 martial law declaration, which threw the country into political crisis. To remove Yoon, at least six of the court's eight justices must vote in favor. If upheld, a presidential election must be held within 60 days. If overturned, Yoon will immediately be reinstated and resume Presidential duties.

At the heart of the case is whether Yoon's decision to deploy military and police forces to the National Assembly - allegedly to prevent lawmakers from overturning his martial law decree - was unconstitutional. While Yoon claims he acted to maintain order, military officials have testified that he ordered them to forcibly remove lawmakers from the chamber. The martial law lasted just six hours before lawmakers re-entered the assembly and unanimously struck it down. [Associated Press]

The prolonged wait for the ruling has deepened South Korea's political divide. For months, thousands have rallied, both for and against Yoon, prompting Seoul police to issue a "Gapho" alert - the highest emergency level – placing all available officers on standby ahead of the ruling. Authorities are bracing for potential civil unrest, regardless of the outcome.

Meanwhile the political climate remains tense. The ruling People Power Party (PPP) is calling for Yoon's reinstatement, while the opposition Democratic Party (DP) warns that his return would further destabilize the country. Nonetheless, opinion polls indicate a majority of the public wants Yoon removed from office. [Reuters]

Both the ruling PPP and the opposing DP expressed their reactions to the court's announcement. Leaders from the PPP expressed gratitude for resolving the

constitutional instability, while the DP leaders voiced confidence in the impeachment's success. The presidential office stated it would "calmly wait" for the court's ruling.

Security measures have been heightened around the Constitutional Court, including the shutdown of adjacent subway stations and precautions to prevent protests. [Yonhap News Agency]

South Korea: Opposition leader's prison sentence overturned by court

(kp) Prosecutors appealed the acquittal of opposition leader Lee Jae-myung to South Korea's Supreme Court on March 27, a day after a high court overturned his conviction for making false statements during the 2022 presidential election. The appeal prolongs legal uncertainty for Lee, head of the main opposition Democratic Party, whose candidacy in the potential presidential election remains closely tied to the political fate of impeached President Yoon Suk Yeol.

On March 26, an appeals court in South Korea acquitted opposition leader Lee Jae-myung of violating election law, overturning a suspended prison sentence that had threatened to block his path to the presidency. The Seoul High Court's decision reverses a lower court ruling from November that convicted Lee of making false statements during the 2022 presidential race, providing a major boost to his political future amid ongoing national upheaval.

The ruling arrives at a politically sensitive moment, with Yoon urgently suspended following his impeachment over a failed martial law declaration in December 2024. Lee, the head of the main opposition Democratic Party, was previously sentenced to one year in prison, suspended for two years, for allegedly misrepresenting details about a land development project and his ties to a deceased aide.

South Korean law bars individuals from running for public office for five years if they are fined over 1 million won for election law violations, or for ten years if they receive a prison sentence even if suspended. Should the Constitutional Court uphold Yoon's impeachment, South Korea would be required to hold a snap presidential election within 60 days. Lee, who narrowly lost to Yoon in 2022, is widely viewed as the front-runner in such a scenario. [Yonhap News Agency 1] [Yonhap News Agency 2]

Despite the favorable ruling, Lee still faces four ongoing criminal trials, none of which are expected to conclude soon. Speaking after the verdict, Lee thanked the court for its “right ruling based on truth and justice” and accused the Yoon administration of orchestrating politically motivated prosecutions. The ruling People Power Party voiced strong disappointment, calling on the Supreme Court to issue a swift decision on the appeal. [AP News]

South Korea: Acting President vetoes bill expanding corporate directors' fiduciary duty

(fn) Acting President Han Duck-soo vetoed a bill that would broaden the fiduciary responsibilities of corporate directors in South Korea to encompass not only the corporation but also its shareholders. The bill, which was approved by the opposition-led National Assembly, aimed to ensure fair treatment for shareholders and required electronic shareholder meetings for listed companies. Han expressed concerns that the legislation might adversely affect the business environment, especially for small and medium enterprises, by creating ambiguity around what constitutes "fair treatment" in decision-making. This ambiguity could make corporate directors vulnerable to civil and criminal liabilities, which might deter them from being actively involved in management.

In response, the government introduced an alternative approach through an amendment to the Capital Markets Act, which would specifically target listed companies and require directors to safeguard the interests of shareholders during mergers or spinoffs. This amendment would only impact on about 2,500 listed companies, in contrast to the wider Commercial Act, which would have impacted both listed and unlisted entities. Han urged the National Assembly to reconsider the bill and engage in more discussions to arrive at a more balanced solution.

During the Cabinet meeting, the government also promulgated a revision to the national pension scheme after it received approval from the National Assembly last month. The revision was secured through a historic agreement between the opposing parties, which stipulated an increase in premium payments from 9 percent to 13 percent, as well as an increase in pension benefits from a nominal income replacement rate of 41.5 percent to 43 percent. [Yonhap News Agency]

South Korea: LG Energy Solution expands global reach with ESS battery deals in US and Europe

(kp) LG Energy Solution (LGES), South Korea's leading battery manufacturer, has secured new supply contracts in both the United States and Poland to deliver lithium iron phosphate (LFP) batteries for energy storage systems (ESS), as part of its strategy to expand in the growing global ESS market. The company announced on March 25 that it has signed an agreement with Taiwan's Delta Electronics, before announcing a separate agreement with Poland's state-run utility firm Polska Grupa Energetyczna (PGE) on March 26.

Under the five-year agreement with Delta Electronics, LGES will supply LFP batteries for residential ESS systems to be sold in the U.S. market through 2030. These batteries will be produced at LGES's Michigan facility, with commercial rollout expected later this year. The U.S. residential ESS market is projected to grow from KRW 1.28 trillion in 2022 to KRW 6.76 trillion (USD 4.74 billion) by 2030, and LGES sees the deal as a stepping stone to securing further contracts in the North American market. [Yonhap News Agency 1]

In Europe, LGES has committed to supplying 1 GWh of LFP batteries for an ESS facility to be built by PGE in Poland, which is set to begin operations in 2027. These batteries will be manufactured at LGES's plant in Wroclaw, where production lines have been partially converted from electric vehicle batteries to ESS batteries in response to growing demand. The company anticipates this deal will support additional ESS battery partnerships across Europe. [Yonhap News Agency 2]

South Korea: Government proposes additional budget to prop up economy

(kp) The South Korean government announced plans on March 30 for a supplementary budget of at least KRW 10 trillion (approximately USD 6.8 billion) to address urgent national challenges, including the destructive wildfires and political uncertainty. Finance Minister Choi Sang-mok emphasized that the extra funding is essential to stabilize the livelihoods of South Koreans and support critical industries.

The Ministry of Economy and Finance outlined that the supplementary budget will be used to respond to recent natural disasters, notably the country's worst wildfires to date. Funds will also be allocated to enhance South Korea's trade competitiveness, advance artificial intelligence (AI) capabilities, and provide support for citizens who have been negatively affected by recent events.

Choi also cited external economic pressures as contributing factors to the proposed budget, including sweeping tariffs under the Donald Trump administration, and domestic political uncertainty following President Yoon Suk Yeol's impending impeachment after a short-lived martial law decree in December 2024. The government aims to finalize and submit a detailed plan to the National Assembly before the end of April, contingent on bipartisan cooperation.

Appearing on a KBS special broadcast addressing the wildfires, acting President Han Duck-soo affirmed the government's commitment to swift action. He pledged to consult with both ruling and opposition parties to secure passage of the supplementary budget by the end of next month. [Yonhap News Agency]

South Korea: HD Hyundai Infracore secures major excavator deal in Ethiopia

(kp) HD Hyundai Infracore has signed a supply agreement to deliver 100 large excavators to two Ethiopian mining companies, marking a significant step in its strategy to expand across Africa's rapidly growing construction and mining equipment markets. The 36-ton crawler excavators are part of a broader surge in demand driven by Ethiopia's development of key mineral resources such as cobalt and lithium. Delivery of the units is expected to be completed by June 2025.

Ethiopia has emerged as a strategic hub for HD Hyundai Infracore, amid ongoing investment in mining and infrastructure, including the construction of what is projected to be Africa's largest airport near Addis Ababa. In 2024, HD Hyundai Infracore recorded a 57 percent market share in Ethiopia, with the country accounting for over one-third of its total African sales. The company's construction equipment is sold under the "Develon" brand.

Africa's construction equipment market has grown significantly, with excavator and wheel loader sales rising from 13,500 units in 2023 to 18,200 in 2024, indicating a 34.8 percent increase year-on-year. Amid intensifying competition from South Korean, Japanese,

and Chinese manufacturers, HD Hyundai Infracore is aiming to leverage its leading position in Ethiopia to expand into neighboring countries and solidify its brand presence across the continent. [The Chosun Daily]

South Korea: No timeline set for DeepSeek AI service resumption

(fn) South Korea has not set a specific date for the resumption of the Chinese AI application DeepSeek's local operations, which were put on hold in February due to issues regarding its data collection practices. The Personal Information Protection Commission (PIPC) temporarily stopped new downloads of the application, pointing to breaches of the nation's data protection laws.

The service will only restart after DeepSeek implements necessary improvements to comply with South Korea's regulations on personal information. Recently, DeepSeek assured regulatory bodies that it values South Korea as a vital market and is dedicated to adhering to local laws. A representative from DeepSeek has been designated in South Korea to tackle these concerns, and discussions are ongoing between both sides to find a satisfactory resolution; however, no exact timeline for resumption has been established. [Yonhap News Agency]

South Korea: Worst wildfire in history contained, man charged with starting fire

(mm) South Korea's worst wildfire in history has been extinguished after burning 48,239 hectares of land between March 21 and March 30, leaving 30 people dead and 75 injured. Communities across southeastern South Korea are facing a long road to recovery with 3,285 homes destroyed in the fire, and displaced some 4,700 people remain who remain living in shelters. [The Korea Herald]

Authorities charged a 56-year-old man with causing the fires while allegedly tidying his grandparents grave at Goesan-ri in the North Gyeongsang province – the worst hit region. However, the cause of two separate fires across the region remain unaccounted for, prompting further investigation. Forestry authorities believe another fire in Angye-myeong was started from field burning, though the resident responsible has not been identified.

Authorities have begun recovery efforts to support residents and rebuild areas devastated by the wildfires. The provincial government will provide KRW 300,000 (USD 220) per person in heavily affected areas and relocate temporary shelters to more comfortable accommodations, with plans for permanent housing for those who lost their homes. Emergency disaster relief funds will also be distributed to small businesses and residents who have lost their livelihoods.

Meanwhile, the South Korean government is pushing for a national supplementary budget of KRW 10 trillion (USD 6.8 billion) for wildfire disaster relief. [Korea JoongAng Daily1] [Korea JoongAng Daily 2]

Taiwan: Parliament gripped by procedural dispute

(ce) The political turmoil within the Legislative Yuan, Taiwan's parliament, has intensified, with the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) escalating its accusations against Legislative Speaker Han Kuo-yu of the main opposition party, the Kuomintang (KMT), over controversial referendum bills. Building upon the initial "nighttime raid" allegations against the KMT and the opposition Taiwan People's Party (TPP), the DPP now alleges Han used illegitimate means to advance the bills without proper committee review, further inflaming the legislative deadlock.

The disputed bills, proposing referendums on "opposing the abolition of the death penalty" and "opposing martial law," were pushed to a second reading in a move the DPP claims bypassed established procedures. DPP caucus chief executive Rosalia Wu declared the motion invalid, citing procedural breaches. This prompted a continued sit-in by DPP legislators, now in its second day, as they guard the legislative chamber's entrance to prevent further "secret votes." [Taipei Times 1]

The DPP's formal complaint, delivered directly to Han, demands a Discipline Committee probe into alleged procedural violations. They accuse KMT caucus whip Fu Kun-chi, TPP Chairman Huang Kuo-chang, and Legislative Yuan Secretary-General Chou Wan-lai of unauthorized maneuvers. DPP caucus whip Ker Chien-ming detailed the alleged violations, stating that the scheduled meeting was supposed to conclude at 6 PM, but opposition parties convened an unscheduled session afterward, without the Speaker requesting an extension.

The "nighttime raid," as the DPP terms it, occurred after the scheduled meeting time, leading to accusations of procedural breaches and tarnishing the legislature's integrity. The DPP also alleges that Chou Wan-lai and legislative staff violated impartiality rules.

This new confrontation adds to the existing tensions. Previously, the KMT and TPP's actions were criticized by the Central Election Commission Chairman Lee Chin-yung, who pointed out the unprecedented use of Article 15 of the Referendum Act which grants the Legislative Yuan, Taiwan's parliament, the power to initiate national referendums, and was being used in a manner deemed inappropriate.

The clash has now evolved from disagreement over procedural legitimacy to a direct challenge to the Speaker's conduct, deepening the legislative crisis and casting further uncertainty over the referendum bills' future. The DPP also released the wording of the referendums, which further adds to the controversy. [Taipei Times 2]

Taiwan: Ko Wen-je detention extended

(ce) The Taipei District Court has extended the detention of former Taipei mayor Ko Wen-je by two months, citing concerns that he might flee or attempt to destroy evidence. This decision, made public on March 28, also extends the detention of three other individuals implicated in the case: Core Pacific Group founder Sheen Ching-jing, former mayoral office head Lee Wen-tsung, and Taipei City Councilor Ying Hsiao-wei.

Ko Wen-je faces multiple allegations, including bribery, embezzlement, and breach of public trust, stemming from his second term as mayor (2018-2022) and his 2023 presidential campaign. Prosecutors allege that Ko accepted bribes to facilitate a favorable redevelopment project for Core Pacific Group and misused over NTD 60 million (USD 1.8 million) in political donations.

In his defense, Ko Wen-je maintains his innocence, claiming that he has been wrongfully accused. He stated that he believed the political donations in question were from supporters and denied any intent to embezzle funds.

The court's decision to extend Ko's detention has drawn sharp criticism from the opposition Taiwan People's Party (TPP) which Ko founded. TPP Chairman Huang Kuo-chang labeled the ruling "unacceptable," arguing that the prosecution failed to provide sufficient

evidence to justify the continued detention. He further stated that the ruling damages the credibility of Taiwan's judicial system. Ko's lawyers have announced that they will file an appeal. [Taipei Times]

Taiwan: Major healthcare funding approved

(ce) Taiwan has unveiled a bold five-year healthcare plan, backed by NTD 48.9 billion (USD 1.47 billion) in government funding, to strengthen its medical system and position itself as a leader in the Asia-Pacific region. The Cabinet's approval of this initiative, set to run from 2025 to 2029, marks a significant step toward transforming Taiwan's healthcare landscape.

The plan focuses on four key areas: improving working conditions for medical professionals, cultivating a diverse pool of healthcare talent, advancing smart medical technologies, and enhancing the healthcare system's social responsibility. Medical facilities and associations are invited to submit project proposals for funding in these areas.

Premier Cho Jung-tai emphasized the importance of fair resource distribution. He instructed the Ministry of Health and Welfare (MOHW) to carefully evaluate all applications to ensure that funds are allocated equitably, preventing any single entity from dominating the resources. Cho also stressed the need for inclusivity and long-term sustainability in the plan's execution.

This initiative aligns with President Lai Ching-te's vision of a "Healthy Taiwan," aiming to address existing healthcare challenges and create a more resilient, accessible, and high-quality system for all citizens. The government's goal is to overhaul Taiwan's healthcare environment to better serve public well-being and ensure widespread access to top-tier medical care. [Focus Taiwan]

Taiwan: Scholars accuse President Lai of eroding free speech

(ce) A group of 75 scholars has publicly criticized President Lai Ching-te for fostering a populist climate in Taiwan that they say is undermining free speech. Led by Academia Sinica academician Chen Pei-jer, the scholars issued a statement urging the government to reconsider its current path, warning that it resembles

an “ideological censorship mechanism” akin to the martial law era.

The scholars’ statement, titled “Defending Taiwan's Democracy, Rule of Law, and Peace”, asserts that President Lai’s recent actions, such as designating China as a “foreign adversary” and rolling out 17 strategies to counter Beijing’s influence, have sparked public discontent and are eroding Taiwan’s democratic principles. They argue that these measures, which include the reinstatement of military courts and stricter cross-strait exchanges, are fueling anti-China sentiment at the expense of civil liberties.

One of the key points of contention is the deportation of Liu Zhenya, a Chinese spouse who was expelled for advocating China’s "military unification" of Taiwan on YouTube (see AiR No. 12, March/2025, 4). This case, along with the 17 strategies, has raised alarm over a potential "political tightening" and deteriorating relations between Taiwan and China.

In response, the Presidential Office defended its actions, asserting Taiwan's commitment to free speech. However, the Office emphasized that advocating violence and aggression toward Taiwan crosses a "red line" and violates international law. The Mainland Affairs Council (MAC) supported this stance, citing China’s ongoing intimidation as justification for Taiwan’s actions under the Anti-Infiltration Act.

The main opposition Kuomintang (KMT) has sided with the scholars, expressing concern over the potential impact of the government's actions on free speech and supporting the scholars' "rational and pragmatic" viewpoint. [Focus Taiwan]

Taiwan: Navigating trade tensions and political uncertainty

(ce) Taiwan's Central Bank has addressed the nation's growing trade surplus with the United States, a point of contention amidst potential tariff threats from the Trump administration. On April 2nd, the administration announced plans for reciprocal tariffs on 15 countries, including Taiwan, which hold the largest trade surplus with the US, representing a significant portion of US foreign trade, as reported by Reuters.

The Central Bank attributed Taiwan's surplus to a structural shift in demand, primarily driven by the surge in demand for Taiwan's advanced technological products, notably semiconductors. They emphasized

that this surplus is not the result of unfair trade practices, a position they assert is understood by the US

Last year, Taiwan's trade surplus with the US reached a record high, escalating by 83 percent to NTD 3.69 trillion (USD 111.4 billion), largely propelled by the robust demand for technology and semiconductors. This substantial trade imbalance previously led the US Treasury Department to place Taiwan on its foreign exchange 'monitoring' list, further highlighting the nation as a potential target for tariffs, given President Trump's vocal criticism of US trade deficits. [Reuters]

The Central Bank also voiced concerns regarding the unpredictability of Trump's trade policies, particularly his tendency for policy reversals. They cautioned that increased tariffs could negatively impact global economic growth and potentially trigger higher inflation. [Taiwan News]

Taiwan: Former presidential guards sentenced for espionage

(ce) A significant breach of national security has resulted in the sentencing of four former Taiwanese military personnel, including guards who served at the Presidential Office, for selling classified military intelligence to China. The Taipei District Court delivered prison terms ranging from five years and ten months to seven years. [The Guardian]

These individuals, formerly members of the 211th military police battalion responsible for the Presidential Office's security, worked in conjunction with a military communications officer. They were found guilty of transmitting sensitive information to Chinese intelligence agents, receiving payments that reflected the data's classified nature. The court revealed that the information was conveyed through an intermediary acting as a Chinese intelligence operative.

The investigation commenced following a tip-off from a military police officer stationed in Keelung, which led to the arrests and subsequent confessions of the four individuals. All had been discharged from military service between 2023 and 2024. The court withheld the specifics of the compromised information.

In response to the sentencing, the Presidential Office issued a statement condemning the former guards' actions. They emphasized that this incident was isolated and did not represent the professionalism of

the 211th Battalion. The office further pledged to enhance security protocols and training within the unit to prevent future security lapses. [Taiwan News]

Taiwan: Pro-China group sentenced for military espionage

(ce) Taiwan has sentenced three individuals associated with the China Unification Promotion Party (CUPP) for spying on behalf of China, highlighting Beijing's ongoing efforts to infiltrate the island's military. Among those sentenced were a CUPP official and two retired military officers, all convicted under the National Security Act.

The investigation revealed that the defendants had been recruited by Chinese operatives and used their connections to target both current and former military personnel. One such attempt, which involved trying to recruit an air force officer, was reported to authorities. The court found evidence of direct communication between the defendants and Chinese intelligence officials.

Confessions from two defendants resulted in reduced sentences, and interrogations confirmed all three had admitted to meetings with Chinese intelligence and 'united front' figures. [Taipei Times]

Taiwan: Collision fuels cross-strait accusations

(ce) A collision in the Taiwan Strait between a Taiwanese navy ship and a Chinese fishing trawler has ignited a diplomatic row, deepening existing cross-strait tensions. China's Taiwan Affairs Office swiftly condemned the incident, labeling the Taiwanese vessel's actions "wicked," while Taiwan's Defense Minister Wellington Koo refuted these claims, asserting the collision occurred outside restricted waters and that military exercises would proceed as planned. Koo also dismissed suggestions of espionage, stating the trawler couldn't gather meaningful intelligence.

Investigations are underway by both sides, with Taiwan's Coast Guard taking the lead. The incident's location near the median line, a boundary China no longer acknowledges, complicates the situation, adding a layer of jurisdictional dispute. Analysts warn this could be exploited by Beijing to further assert control over the strategic waterway.

This maritime clash unfolds against a backdrop of increasing regional instability, with China escalating military drills and reaffirming its sovereignty claims, which Taiwan firmly rejects. Adding to the political friction, China's recent publication of a list of alleged "separatists" and its call for tip-offs has been seen as a provocative move. The collision has intensified concerns about the potential for further escalation in the critical Taiwan Strait. [Reuters]

Taiwan: Air Force accelerates pilot training program

(ce) Taiwan's Air Force has implemented a streamlined "three-phase, two-aircraft" fighter pilot training program, designed to accelerate the development of combat-ready pilots. The revised curriculum eliminates the AT-3 Tzu Chung, Taiwan’s domestically developed an advanced jet trainer, allowing trainees to progress directly from the T-34 Mentor, a US. propeller-driven, single-engined, military trainer aircraft, to the Brave Eagle advanced jet trainer.

Previously, aspiring fighter pilots underwent training on three aircraft models before transitioning to operational fighters. The shift to a two-aircraft program aims to reduce training time and increase efficiency.

The Brave Eagle now plays a pivotal role in this accelerated training process, having officially assumed unit training responsibilities in 2023 following the retirement of Taiwan’s F-5 fleet. This change coincides with the Air Force Flight Training Command's upgrade to a headquarters in 2023, a move aimed at enhancing oversight and effectiveness in fighter pilot development. [Taiwan News]

Taiwan: Reinforcing defense with longer conscription

(ce) Taiwan is significantly increasing the number of young men undergoing a full year of compulsory military service, with a 41 percent rise expected in 2025 compared to the program's inaugural year. This expansion reflects Taiwan's efforts to bolster its defense capabilities in the face of growing regional security concerns.

Major General Cheng Chia-chi of the Ministry of National Defense (MND) announced that

approximately 9,839 conscripts will be enlisted in the full-year program in 2025, up from 6,956 in 2024. As of June 2024, 2,047 individuals had already completed their full-year service.

The training regimen for these conscripts is also being enhanced. While the initial eight-week boot camp remains, it will now include advanced weapons training, such as pistol, machine gun, and Stinger missile system firing, as well as drone operations. Following boot camp, conscripts will undergo 13 weeks of base training in their designated units.

This move to a full year of compulsory service, implemented in January 2024, reverses a trend of shortening conscription periods. Initially, compulsory service was reduced from two or three years to one year by 2008, and then further shortened to four months by 2013 under former President Ma Ying-jeou's administration, which aimed to transition to a volunteer military.

However, the current security landscape, marked by increased Chinese military activity, has prompted Taiwan to reassess its defense strategy. The one-year conscription now applies to men born after January 1, 2005, though many eligible individuals defer their service while attending college. Consequently, the MND anticipates a substantial surge in full-year conscripts only after college graduates born in 2005 or later are conscripted in 2027.

Despite the shift, Taiwan's military remains primarily a volunteer force, with approximately 152,885 active-duty voluntary personnel as of June 2024. In 2024, nearly 7,000 individuals entered the full-year service program, with a notable number opting to join the armed forces as volunteer soldiers. [Focus Taiwan]

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

Bangladesh: Independence Day marred by controversies across districts

(lm) This year’s Independence Day in Bangladesh was marked by significant political debates and controversies, particularly surrounding the interpretation of the "second independence" and the role of the July uprising – the mass uprising resulting in the ouster of ex-Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in August 2024.

The term "second independence" has become a focal point of tension between different political groups. Student leaders, who played a central role in the July uprising, and some of whom are now organized in the National Citizen Party (NCP), view last year's uprising as the true form of independence for Bangladesh. These leaders argue that the mass protests that led to the ousting of ex-Prime Minister Hasina and her Awami League government signify a return to the spirit of independence achieved in 1971. NCP Convener Nahid Islam emphasized that for those who have suffered under the current regime, the July uprising represents true liberation from oppression. [The Daily Star 1]

On the other hand, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) has strongly rejected the notion of a "second independence." BNP Standing Committee Member Mirza Abbas dismissed these claims, asserting that such statements undermine the significance of the 1971 Liberation War. According to Abbas, true independence was won in 1971 through the sacrifices of the nation’s martyrs, and the struggles since then should not be framed as a new form of independence. Abbas further argued that referring to the July uprising as a second independence diminishes the historical importance of the Liberation War. [The Daily Star 2]

These conflicting views were evident during Independence Day ceremonies, where protests and disruptions occurred.

In Lalmonirhat, a mural at the Liberation War Memorial, depicting key moments from the Language Movement to the 1971 Liberation War, was covered by the district administration, sparking outrage from civil society groups like Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) and the Conscious Citizens Committee (CCC). The mural's covering was reportedly due to objections from activists linked to the July uprising, which some see as a challenge to the historical narrative of Bangladesh's independence. [The Daily Star 3] [Dhaka Tribune]

In Jhenaidah, tensions flared when a recording of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman – the founding president of Bangladesh and father of ex-Prime Minister Hasina - iconic March 7 speech was played at the Muktijoddha Sangsad Bhaban. The incident escalated into violence when locals opposed the playback, resulting in an injury to the building's caretaker. While some local leaders downplayed the attack, others called it a politically motivated disruption.

In Pabna, a reception for freedom fighters descended into chaos when BNP leader Masud Khandaker allegedly claimed that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had fled the country during the Liberation War. This sparked protests from freedom fighters in attendance, leading to a brief disruption of the event. Masud denied the accusation, blaming the protest on pro-Awami League elements. [The Daily Star 4]

Bangladesh: BNP criticizes vague election timeline, warns of unrest if polls are delayed beyond December

(lm) The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), one of the two main political parties in Bangladesh, has intensified criticism of the interim government led by Muhammad Yunus, warning of instability if national elections are not held by December 2025. The warning follows Yunus's recent statement suggesting elections could be scheduled between December 2025 and June 2026, a timeline BNP leaders have called vague and politically irresponsible.

BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir accused Yunus of failing to provide a clear election roadmap, warning that continued uncertainty could deepen the political crisis. Fakhrul also urged the interim leader to remove advisers allegedly compromising the neutrality of the government by using state resources to promote certain political groups. He stressed that the BNP would not accept a government that loses its impartiality and hinted that

the party could resume street protests if the electoral process is further delayed or undermined. [The Daily Star 1] [The Daily Star 2]

Abdul Moyeen Khan, a member of the BNP's top decision-making body, reiterated the demand for elections by December, warning that postponement would lead to "strong resentment" among the population and possible unrest. He noted that BNP would seek to return to democracy this year and, once elected, would be open to forming a government with other democratic parties, including the newly formed National Citizen Party led by student activists. However, the BNP currently has no plans to contest the election as part of any coalition. [The Daily Star 3]

Other political parties, including the Communist Party of Bangladesh and Biplobi Workers Party, have also expressed concern over the lack of a definitive timeline, arguing that it undermines trust in the electoral process. Despite some defense from figures such as Sarwar Tushar of the National Citizen Party, who argued Yunus's remarks marked a preliminary step toward reform, opposition voices remain largely united in demanding immediate clarity. [The Daily Star 4] [The Daily Star 5]

Bangladesh: Term of five reform commissions extended again

(lm) The interim government has once again extended the term of the five reform commissions formed on November 18, 2024. These commissions are focused on health, media, local government, labor, and women's affairs.

The new deadline for the submission of reports is now set for April 30, 2025. The original deadline for the reports was February 17, 2025, but due to delays, the term was first extended by one month, with the new submission deadline of March 31. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: Student leader calls for Awami League ban, citing public support and legal action

(lm) Nahid Islam, convener of the National Citizen Party (NCP), has demanded the banning of the Awami League, asserting widespread public support for dissolving the party, which he claims no longer has the right to engage in political activities in Bangladesh.

Islam made these remarks on March 31 after visiting the graves of victims from the 2024 mass uprising, which resulted in the ousting of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

Islam emphasized that the people of Bangladesh delivered a verdict against both the Awami League and its founder's ideology, Mujibism, when Hasina fled to India on August 5, 2024. He expressed confidence that a combination of legal action and political consensus could lead to the party's dissolution. Islam also criticized the government for failing to deliver justice to the victims of the uprising, demanding accountability for those responsible for the killings. He called for the immediate cancellation of the Awami League's political registration, asserting that the party should not be allowed to participate in the upcoming elections. [Dhaka Tribune]

Simultaneously, a sedition case has been filed against Sheikh Hasina and 72 others, accusing them of plotting to overthrow the interim government through civil war. The case, lodged by the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) with the Dhaka Chief Metropolitan Magistrate's Court, revolves around an online meeting held in December 2024. The meeting allegedly planned the formation of a group, the "Joy Bangla Brigade," aimed at Hasina's return to power through violent means. Among those accused is Rabbi Alam, vice president of the Awami League's U.S. chapter, who allegedly convened the meeting. The charges include sedition, conspiracy to wage war, and common intention under the Penal Code. [The Daily Star 1]

In a related legal development, a case has been filed against Hasina and nine journalists for their alleged involvement in attacks on protesters during the July 2024 uprising. The violence in Kakrail, Dhaka, on July 19 resulted in several deaths and injuries, including the plaintiff's cousin, following protests over government mismanagement and corruption. [The Daily Star 2]

Bangladesh: Ministry recommends withdrawal of 6,681 politically motivated cases

(lm) The Ministry of Law, Justice, and Parliamentary Affairs has recommended the withdrawal of 6,681 politically motivated and harassment cases filed against political figures, activists, and innocent individuals due to political vengeance. This recommendation comes after the formation of two committees under the Ministry of Home Affairs tasked

with reviewing and advising on the withdrawal of such cases.

The committees have held nine meetings so far, with the ministry-level committee, chaired by the adviser to the Ministry of Law, Justice, and Parliamentary Affairs, making the recommendations. The district-level committee, led by the district magistrate and consisting of police and legal officials, also plays a role in reviewing cases at the local level. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: Secretariat ration proposal sparks dissatisfaction among other government staff

(lm) The Ministry of Food has recommended ration facilities for employees working in the Bangladesh Secretariat, which has sparked dissatisfaction and claims of discrimination among government staff in other offices and agencies. The proposal, forwarded to the finance secretary on March 25, came after the Bangladesh Secretariat Officers and Employees Coordinated Council requested ration benefits for their members, citing the extensive work hours, including holidays, often required without additional financial compensation.

The Secretariat workers' demand follows the food ration benefits enjoyed by approximately 800,000 military and civilian personnel across various government departments, which include both ration facilities and special risk allowances. The disparity in benefits has led to claims of discrimination against Secretariat employees.

Despite the proposal's approval by the food adviser, several employee groups have expressed concerns. Mahmudul Hasan, general secretary of the Bangladesh Government Employees' Claim Recovery Council, stated that granting ration benefits only to Secretariat employees would perpetuate existing inequalities. The "11-20 Grade Government Employees' Forum" also condemned the move, arguing that it undermines their collective demand for ration facilities for all lower-grade employees and further exacerbates the imbalance in government benefits. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Monthly food aid for Rohingya revised to USD 12 as WFP avoids drastic cuts

(lm) The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) has reversed its earlier plan to halve food aid for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. Monthly food rations have now been set at USD 12 per person in the camps at Cox's Bazar and USD 13 in Bhashan Char, nearly maintaining previous levels. This change follows intense concerns over the humanitarian impact of the initially proposed cut to USD 6 per person.

The adjustment comes amid ongoing funding constraints, but WFP has committed to sustaining basic food security for the nearly 1.2 million Rohingya refugees who fled to Bangladesh from Myanmar during a military crackdown in 2017. Refugee leaders expressed relief and gratitude while reiterating calls for safe and dignified repatriation to Myanmar, including the creation of a protected zone in Rakhine State.

Meanwhile, the United States has pledged USD 73 million in new assistance to the Rohingya population via the WFP, helping to avert further disruption to aid delivery. Despite broader foreign aid reductions under the Trump administration's "America First" agenda, a waiver has been granted for life-saving support. Washington remains the largest donor, with contributions totaling nearly USD 2.4 billion since 2017. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Government official removed after Facebook post on Sheikh Mujibur Rahman sparks protest

(lm) A loca government official has been relieved of duty following controversy over a Facebook post asserting that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the country's founding president, referred to as "Bangabandhu," declared Bangladesh's independence. The post was deleted after 45 minutes, with a subsequent claim that the account had been hacked.

The post triggered backlash during Independence Day celebrations, with local leaders from the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) staging protests at a school parade where the official was present. She later left the venue amid escalating tensions. [The Daily Star]

On the night of March 25, 1971, the Pakistan Army launched Operation Searchlight, a brutal military crackdown on Dhaka and other parts of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). Shortly before his arrest that same night, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, leader of the Awami League, reportedly sent out a message declaring independence. This declaration was transmitted from Dhaka and picked up by Awami League activists and

members of the Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra, a clandestine radio station.

On March 26, Ziaur Rahman, a major in the East Bengal Regiment who later founded the BNP and served as sixth president of Bangladesh, made a radio announcement from Chittagong, declaring independence on behalf of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

Bangladesh: Journalists assaulted at court, Chhatra Dal leader accused

(lm) Two journalists were injured in an assault at the Barishal District and Sessions Judge Court premises, where attackers also set fire to their motorcycle. The incident occurred while the journalists were reporting on the confinement of accused individuals. The victims, working for local newspapers, were hospitalized for treatment.

The attack was allegedly led by a member of the Chhatra Dal, the student wing of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), along with his associates. The journalists claimed they were accused of having ties with the Awami League of ousted ex-Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina before being beaten.

Following the assault, local journalists staged a protest and blocked a major road near the court, demanding justice. Law enforcement, including police and army personnel, intervened and assured action, prompting the protest to be called off. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Hindu man’s house vandalized over alleged insult of Muslims

In Tangail's Sakhipur subdistrict, a Hindu man's house was vandalized following allegations that a Facebook comment made by a local shopkeeper insulted Muslims. The shopkeeper claimed his Facebook account was hacked and used to post objectionable content, leading to the attack. Local police have pledged to investigate and take appropriate legal action. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Workers protest over unpaid wages and bonuses, government vows to address concerns

(lm) In Bangladesh, a combination of unpaid wages, financial hardships, and lack of employment has left many workers unable to celebrate Eid. Tea workers in Sylhet, shoal residents in Kurigram and Lalmonirhat, and industrial workers across the country have faced severe economic challenges.

At Kalagul Tea Garden in Sylhet, over 2,500 workers have been deprived of their wages, rations, and Eid bonuses for the past three months. Workers, many of whom are widows or the sole earners in their families, have been forced to take loans and buy essentials on credit. Despite repeated promises from Burjan Tea Company, which owns several tea gardens, no payments have been made, and the company is now seeking a bank loan to clear the arrears. Protests are growing louder, with workers demanding government intervention and immediate payment of their dues. [The Daily Star 1]

Meanwhile, the situation in the shoals of Kurigram and Lalmonirhat is equally dire. The local population, primarily dependent on agriculture, has faced severe unemployment due to the lack of work in the fields. Many families have resorted to borrowing money at high-interest rates, and despite some assistance from the government's Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) program, it has not been enough to bring any real celebration to their Eid. With little ability to afford basic items like vermicelli or new clothes, these communities are left struggling to make ends meet. [The Daily Star 2]

In addition to these rural hardships, protests have erupted among industrial workers demanding unpaid wages and bonuses. On March 31, workers of RR Spinning and Cotton Mill in Sirajganj blocked the Dhaka-Bogura highway to protest the company's failure to pay salaries and Eid bonuses. Similar protests have taken place among garment workers, particularly those from TNZ Group, who are also demanding arrears for three months and Eid bonuses. [The Daily Star 3] [The Daily Star 4] [The Daily Star 5]

The government has committed to addressing workers' concerns but has also warned against disruptive actions, stating that law enforcement will take action against road blockages and violence. However, the government faces mounting pressure as numerous factories still owe workers' wages and bonuses. According to Industrial Police data, a significant portion of the garment sector has not paid February wages or Eid bonuses, leaving workers frustrated and in need of urgent support. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: Over 70 percent of returnee migrants from Sundarbans face harsh conditions abroad

(lm) A recent study by the Ovibashi Karmi Unnayan Program (OKUP), a Bangladesh-based migrant rights organization, reveals that over 70 percent of returnee migrants from Bangladesh's Sundarbans region, displaced by climate change, endured difficult conditions abroad. The study, titled "Migration Not a Choice, but a Compulsion," found that 72 percent of returnees worked excessive hours without leave, with many forced to continue working out of fear of arrest.

Additionally, 69 percent faced restricted movement due to a lack of work permits or confiscation of passports. Over 90 percent paid migration fees far exceeding government-fixed rates, and around 80 percent were apprehended and deported from jails. These migrants, often returning without sufficient earnings, added to their families' debt burdens, worsening their situation.

The study highlights that climate-induced disasters in Bangladesh, particularly after cyclones Sidr in 2007 and Aila in 2009, have forced increasing numbers of people to migrate, both locally and abroad. International migration from the Sundarbans now makes up 14 percent, up from 2 percent in 2022. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: U.S.-based expert warns inefficiency and overcapacity hindering power sector progress

(lm) Bangladesh’s power sector is struggling with inefficiencies, overcapacity, and a weak grid system, according to U.S.-based Bangladeshi energy expert Professor Saifur Rahman of Virginia Tech. In an interview, he highlighted that power generation capacity exceeds demand by 40 percent—far beyond the optimal 8–10 percent margin—due to a lack of attention to transmission, distribution, and skilled manpower.

Rahman criticized the heavy investment in generation while neglecting grid upgrades, noting frequent power cuts result from unstable voltage and frequency. He also said Bangladesh’s power imports from India are more expensive due to incompatibility between grids, despite a USD 500 million high-voltage transmission project.

He argued that the Integrated Energy and Power Master Plan 2023 lacks realistic short-term goals and warned against unviable technologies like hydrogen due to high costs and absent market demand. Instead, Rahman recommended improving energy efficiency, expanding solar power, and exploring cross-border electricity trade with Nepal, Bhutan, and possibly China.

He also called for adoption of small modular nuclear reactors (SMRs) as a more cost-effective and safer alternative to large nuclear plants. On the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant, he stated that cost overruns beyond USD 12 billion were expected, citing global trends, but raised concerns over incomplete transmission infrastructure and unclear nuclear waste management plans.

Rahman emphasized raising coal plant efficiency and leveraging international climate funds to reduce coal usage. He urged Bangladesh to strengthen international engineering collaboration and prioritize expert training over bureaucratic routines to build a more competent energy workforce. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Eid drives record remittance surge, set to top USD 3 billion in March

(lm/zh) Bangladesh has seen a historic surge in remittances in March, with inflows reaching USD 2.94 billion during the first 26 days of the month, driven by Eid-ul-Fitr spending. This marks an 82.46 percent increase from the same period in 2024, and the total is expected to exceed USD 3 billion by month-end, setting a new all-time high for a single month. This surge has contributed significantly to the country's foreign exchange reserves, stabilizing the forex market.

From July through March 26 of the current fiscal year, remittance inflows totaled USD 21.43 billion, up from USD 16.69 billion during the same period last year. Several factors are driving this growth: seasonal remittances during Ramadan, a crackdown on illegal money transfer channels like hundi and hawala, and increased confidence in formal banking routes following a political shift in August 2024.

This influx of remittances has positively impacted the banking sector, with banks' net open positions (NOP) in foreign currency rising to USD 550 million as of March 20, 2025, up from USD 150 million earlier in the month. The rise in remittances has led to improved liquidity and reduced volatility in the foreign exchange market,

with the overnight call money rate dropping below 10 percent, signaling better liquidity conditions.

In addition to remittances, export earnings have further stabilized the foreign exchange reserves, which now exceed USD 20 billion. The stronger dollar inflows have been bolstered by tighter oversight from Bangladesh Bank, which has contributed to greater confidence in the economy. The country's foreign reserves are now more stable, with expectations that this will reduce market volatility and support long-term economic stability. [The Daily Star 1] [The Daily Star 2]

Bangladesh: Starlink deal to bridge digital divide and provide reliable internet access

(zh) Bangladesh's interim leader, Muhammad Yunus, has announced that a commercial deal with Elon Musk's Starlink satellite internet service will be finalized within three months, aiming to provide reliable internet access across the country, including remote and underserved areas. Yunus emphasized that Starlink's satellite-based technology would make internet service more resilient, preventing government-imposed disruptions like those seen during last year's protests when internet and messaging services were temporarily suspended. [Dhaka Tribune] [Reuters]

This move is part of efforts to address Bangladesh's growing digital divide. While urban areas enjoy relatively good connectivity, many rural, hilly, and coastal regions still struggle with limited or no internet access. The Starlink service, with its low Earth orbit satellites, could significantly improve connectivity in these regions by bypassing the need for ground-based infrastructure, which is costly and difficult to build in sparsely populated areas.

Starlink's satellite internet could also support the growing Internet of Things (IoT) sector, particularly in agriculture, healthcare, and smart city development, which faces limitations due to poor connectivity in rural areas. While the potential of Starlink to expand IoT applications is clear, the service's high cost—about USD 549 for the kit and USD 110-USD 120 monthly for internet access—could be a significant barrier to widespread adoption. To address this, the government may explore business models to reduce costs, such as renting devices or setting up community-based models. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Violence erupts in Rajshahi as BNP and Jamaat clash over VGD card dispute

(lm) In Rajshahi's Bagha subdistrict, violent clashes between Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) activists and the Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami party have left several people injured. The conflict, which began on March 20, escalated over allegations of irregularities in the distribution of Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) cards.

Jamaat-e-Islami had organized a human chain to protest the alleged fraud in the VGD card allocation, during which BNP activists allegedly attempted to disrupt the protest, leading to initial tensions. On March 30, these tensions erupted into violence, with both sides engaging in physical confrontations. Five motorcycles and a van were set on fire, while four shops were vandalized.

Jamaat leaders condemned the attacks, alleging that BNP supporters had disrupted their protest on March 20 and later attacked their members, including an attempted murder of a student leader on March 30. They have called for justice and action against those responsible.

BNP leaders, on the other hand, accused Shibir (the student wing of Jamaat-e-Islami) activists of initiating the violence, with one of their leaders being seriously injured during an attack. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: 59 armed forces personnel receive honorary promotions on national day

(lm) To mark Bangladesh's Independence Day and National Day, 59 members of the Army, Navy, and Air Force have been awarded honorary promotions. These promotions are effective immediately.

Among those honored, 14 Bangladesh Army honorary lieutenants were elevated to honorary captains, while 25 master warrant officers were commissioned as honorary lieutenants. In the Air Force, seven master warrant officers became honorary flying officers, and three flying officers were promoted to honorary flight lieutenants. Additionally, 10 master chief petty officers from the Navy were granted honorary commissions as sub-lieutenants. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Political protection enables illegal logging in Patuakhali reserve forest

(lm) The Majher Char Reserve Forest in Patuakhali's Rangabali sub-district is being rapidly depleted due to illegal logging, allegedly backed by political protection. Since 2020, a local influential individual has been clearing forest land—primarily at night—to expand fish enclosures, first under the then ruling Awami League's protection and later under Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) affiliation following the ouster of ex-Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in August 2024. BNP have denied any current ties to the activities.

Recent visits revealed extensive damage, including felled trees, buried roots, and the construction of canals and dams to divert water into the enclosure. Forest officials confirmed the illegal occupation of approximately 100 meters of protected land and reported their findings to higher authorities. [The Daily Star]

Bhutan: Bad loans surge past USD 42.6 million, raising concerns in four key sectors

(lm) Bhutan's economic recovery is under strain as non-performing loans (NPLs) in agriculture and livestock, trade and commerce, transport, and construction have all surpassed the critical 5 percent threshold. As of November 2024, the transport sector recorded the highest NPL ratio at 13.11 percent, followed by agriculture and livestock at 11.01 percent, trade and commerce at 7.07 percent, and construction at 6.92 percent. The combined bad loans in these sectors total BTN 3.55 billion (USD 42.6 million).

Key contributors to loan defaults include a downturn in boulder exports, lack of transport contracts, limited agricultural markets, labor shortages, and delays in government payments to contractors. Overdraft loan reliance in trade and commerce, especially among shopkeepers, has also exacerbated defaults.

While housing loans have not breached the 5 percent threshold, they hold the highest total NPL value at BTN 1.43 billion (USD 17.2 million). The finance ministry warns that the concentration of bad loans in multiple sectors could pose systemic risks to the financial system, despite a slight year-on-year improvement in the overall NPL ratio to 3.3 percent.

In response, the Royal Monetary Authority has implemented tighter rules through the revised Prudential Regulations 2024, requiring banks exceeding sectoral caps to apply higher risk weights on new loans. [Kuensel]

Bhutan: MoIT faces backlash over controversial recruitment process

(lm) The Ministry of Infrastructure and Transport (MoIT) in Bhutan is facing criticism over its recruitment process for the Enhancing Climate Resilience of Urban Landscapes and Communities in the Thimphu-Paro region (ECRUL) project. Allegations of administrative lapses and a lack of communication have surfaced after the ministry posted the shortlist of candidates on social media, rather than contacting candidates directly through official channels. This led to confusion, with many shortlisted candidates missing their interviews.[Kuensel]

Bhutan: Private newspapers cash-strapped, dependent on government support

(lm) The Bhutanese government allocated BTN 4.3 million (USD 50,000) in cash incentives for six privately owned newspapers – Bhutan Today, Bhutan Times, Business Bhutan, Gyalchi Sarchog, The Bhutanese, The Journalist, and Kuensel – in the 2024-2025 fiscal year under the Media Enterprise Development Budget (MEDB). This fund helps cover operational costs, pay salaries, and improve content quality. Over the past decade, the government has spent BTN 40 million (USD 480,000) on similar subsidies, but concerns remain about the sustainability of these policies.

Despite this support, private newspapers struggle financially, with salaries ranging from BTN 12,000 (USD 145) to BTN 24,000 (USD 290) per month, and occasional delays in payments. Media houses also criticize the fund for being misused on consultants and studies instead of directly benefiting the newspapers. Some media outlets, like Gyalchi Sarchog, have switched to digital formats to cut costs.

The Department of Media, Creative Industry, and Intellectual Property (DoMCIIP) has proposed a merit-based system to distribute funds more equitably, but many media houses have rejected this proposal. DoMCIIP officials have acknowledged that while the

MEDB offers temporary relief, media outlets must eventually develop sustainable business models for long-term survival. [Kuensel]

Bhutan: Deep-rooted barriers continue to limit women's political participation

(lm) Despite Bhutan's efforts toward inclusive democracy, women remain severely underrepresented in politics. In the 2023 elections, women secured only one seat in the 20-member National Council and just two seats in the 47-member National Assembly. A 2024 study by the Centre for Research on Bhutanese Society (CRBS) identified structural, cultural, and economic obstacles limiting women's political engagement.

Findings from a nationwide survey of 448 women revealed that entrenched gender roles, lack of confidence, and limited access to campaign resources hinder participation. Rural women face added challenges due to difficult travel conditions and job insecurity. The study also highlighted political party biases and the absence of institutional support for female candidates.

At a two-day workshop on March 25, CRBS urged awareness programs in schools, financial safety nets for women candidates, mentorship networks, and policies requiring political parties to field a minimum percentage of women. Bhutan ranks 124th out of 146 countries in the Global Gender Gap Report 2024, underscoring the urgency for reform. [Kuensel]

India: GMC to host global digital asset conference to shape financial future

(lm) The Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC) Special Administrative Region – an urban development initiative that integrates economic growth, mindfulness practices, and sustainable living – is preparing to host a pivotal global conference on digital assets, bringing together senior leaders from around the world, including policymakers, central bankers, sovereign wealth funds, asset managers, and digital asset specialists. The conference will focus on integrating digital assets into strategic reserves, addressing regulatory frameworks, financial stability, risk management, and technological infrastructure for national resilience and economic sovereignty.

Although the event's dates and venue are yet to be confirmed, it will serve as a critical platform for discussing how digital assets can strengthen global financial systems and foster strategic partnerships. The GMC, which has already announced plans to include Bitcoin (BTC), Ethereum (ETH), and Binance Coin (BNB) in its strategic reserves, aims to lead the integration of digital assets into its financial framework. The decision aligns with the enactment of Bhutan's "Application of Laws Act 2024," providing a legal framework for businesses dealing with digital assets like BTC, ETH, and BNB. [Kuensel]

Bhutan: BoB introduces flexible credit line and premium cards

(lm) The Bank of Bhutan (BoB) launched two new financial products—Credit Line Limit (CLL) and BoB Premium Card—at a networking event with business partners on March 28 in Thimphu. The CLL aims to help businesses manage cash flow more efficiently, offering both revolving funds for operational expenses and non-revolving funds for capital investments. The CLL is designed to be a cost-effective financing solution, with businesses paying interest only on the utilized amount.

BoB also introduced a client segmentation model, categorizing customers into Platinum and Gold tiers based on their financial standing to offer prioritised services. The BoB Premium Card offers exclusive financial privileges and premium banking services. The bank reported that its total deposits have surpassed BTN 100 billion (USD 1.2 billion). [Kuensel]

Bhutan: Over USD 450,000 in unclaimed dividends

(lm) The Royal Securities Exchange of Bhutan Limited (RSEBL) has reported that over BTN 60.5 million (USD 450,000) in dividends remain unclaimed by shareholders from 15 of the 18 listed companies. The total dividends declared over the years by these companies amounted to BTN 16.73 billion (USD 126 million), of which BTN 16.67 billion (USD 125 million) has been paid out.

Bhutan Insurance Limited accounts for the largest portion of unclaimed dividends, with BTN 16.64 million (USD 124,000), followed by Druk PNB Bank Limited with BTN 16.02 million (USD 119,000). Other

companies with significant unclaimed amounts include T-Bank Limited and Royal Insurance Corporation of Bhutan Limited.

In response to the unclaimed dividends, the RSEBL has implemented the Regulations for Investor Protection Fund 2025, which mandates that all unclaimed dividends be transferred to an Investor Protection Fund. Eight companies have already transferred their unclaimed dividend amounts to this central fund, and the RSEBL plans to begin disbursing these funds to eligible shareholders starting next month.

The funds will be invested in liquid assets, and the interest earned will support the promotion of capital market activities and financial literacy programs. [Kuensel]

Bhutan: Experts urge research-driven solutions to tackle mounting waste crisis

(lm) Experts in Bhutan are calling for data-driven research and policy reform to address the country's escalating waste crisis. At the PLEASE Project Waste Symposium held on March 24, stakeholders from government, academia, and the private sector emphasized the need to rethink waste management by shifting public perception and integrating circular economy principles.

Panelists highlighted a lack of reliable data, particularly on plastic waste, and stressed the importance of waste mapping and characterization studies. Suggestions included innovative approaches such as "green collateral loans," where waste materials could serve as economic assets. Despite high levels of public awareness, experts noted a persistent gap between knowledge and action.

Thimphu alone produces 51 metric tons of waste daily —nearly one-third of Bhutan's total 172 metric tons— underscoring the urgency. [Kuensel]

Bhutan: Making way for Gelephu International Airport

(lm) The Gelephu International Airport project, part of the Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC), has led to the relocation of 224 households from Samtenthang and Samtenling chiwogs (administrative subdivisions) in the rural municipality of Samtenling. Residents have begun preparations for relocation to make way for the new

airport infrastructure. The project, expected to be completed by 2029, aims to accommodate up to 15 million passengers annually in its final phase.

As part of the relocation, compensation packages are being finalized, offering residents land replacement, financial compensation, or a tokenization scheme. Many have opted for financial compensation, while others prefer land replacement, with some families considering relocation to nearby areas such as Samtse and Tsirang. [Kuensel 1]

The development also includes the much-anticipated Maochhu Bridge, a critical element of the Gelephu-Tareythang highway project. After years of delays, construction is set to begin next year, funded by the Royal Government of Bhutan and the World Bank, with an estimated cost of USD 150-200 million. The bridge, along with three smaller bridges over the Jengkhurung-Taklai, Langer, and Singye rivers, will improve transport connectivity and support the GMC's development. [Kuensel 2]

Bhutan: Wildlife-friendly infrastructure prioritized in USD 2.15 billion road expansion plan

(lm) Bhutan is working to balance economic growth with environmental conservation as it moves forward with the USD 2.15 billion (BTN 187.72 billion) Bhutan Highways Connectivity Master Plan. The plan, scheduled for completion by June 2025, includes extensive road projects such as tunnels, bypasses, and bridge replacements aimed at boosting national connectivity. However, conservationists warn these projects risk fragmenting habitats and endangering species, including Bhutan's population of 678 Asian elephants.

In response, a three-day workshop organized by the Department of Forests and Park Services, in collaboration with the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) Bhutan and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), brought together experts to explore wildlife-sensitive infrastructure designs. Participants discussed threats like increased wildlife mortality, habitat degradation, and the construction of highways through protected areas.

Despite the absence of key policymakers, the event emphasized integrating mitigation measures such as highway underpasses and eco-tourism elements into future development. The Master Plan includes environmental safeguards aligned with Bhutan's

national laws and international commitments, including the Paris Agreement, while also supporting anti-poaching efforts and sustainable development goals. [Kuensel]

India: Supreme Court probes Justice Varma after fire; Allahabad HC Bar Association protests transfer

(lm) The Supreme Court is currently investigating Justice Yashwant Varma following a controversial fire at his residence on March 14, during which partially burnt currency was discovered [see AiR No. 12, March/2025, 4]. Video footage released by the court contradicted earlier reports from the Delhi Fire Service, which had claimed that the fire only involved "stationery and domestic articles." Justice Varma has denied that any currency was found in areas used by his family, suggesting the possibility of a conspiracy. This has prompted an in-house inquiry into the source of the money and how it was handled.

Justice Varma, formerly a judge at the Allahabad High Court before his transfer to Delhi, is under scrutiny as the Supreme Court's three-member inquiry committee examines the details of the fire and the circumstances of the discovery. The investigation could lead to criminal action or a recommendation for parliamentary removal, with the focus on determining how the money ended up in the storeroom and who was responsible for its removal. [The Hindu] [Frontline]

While the inquiry continues, the Supreme Court Collegium recommended Justice Varma's transfer back to the Allahabad High Court. The transfer, decided on March 24, was described as "independent and separate" from the ongoing investigation. However, the Allahabad High Court Bar Association (HCBA) has strongly opposed the transfer, citing concerns over corruption and a lack of transparency. After calling off a five-day strike on March 29, the HCBA announced plans to boycott Justice Varma’s oath-taking ceremony and continue protesting the alleged judicial corruption. [Hindustan Times]

India: Supreme Court slams Uttar Pradesh government, development body over demolitions

(lm) The Supreme Court of India on April 1 criticized the Uttar Pradesh government and the Prayagraj

Development Authority for carrying out demolitions of homes in the city, calling the actions "inhuman and illegal." A bench led by Justices Abhay S. Oka and Ujjal Bhuyan condemned the demolition for being conducted in a "high handed" manner and without adherence to due legal process. The court emphasized that there is a right to shelter, and residential structures should not be demolished arbitrarily, sending a "shocking and wrong signal."

The demolition, which targeted properties allegedly linked to gangster-politician Atiq Ahmad's associates, was contested by petitioners who argued the state had wrongly demolished their homes. The court highlighted that proper legal procedures were not followed in the demolitions, including insufficient notice and failure to provide adequate justification for the actions.

In response, the Supreme Court directed the Prayagraj Development Authority to pay INR 1 million (USD 12,000) compensation to each affected homeowner within six weeks. The demolition, which primarily affected properties in the Lukerganj area, was initially carried out in 2021, but the petitioners' appeals were rejected by the Allahabad High Court. [The Hindu]

India: 24 percent salary hike for MPs

(lm) The Central government has notified a 24 percent increase in the salaries of members of Parliament (MPs), effective retrospectively from April 1, 2023. MPs will now receive INR 124,000 (USD 1,488) per month, up from INR 100,000 (USD 1,200) previously.

The salary hike is based on the Cost Inflation Index. Additionally, the Ministry of Parliamentary Affairs announced a rise in the daily allowances for sitting MPs and increased pensions for former MPs with more than five years of service.

The daily allowance for MPs attending Parliament sessions and meetings of parliamentary committees has been raised from INR 2,000 (USD 24) to INR 2,500 (USD 30). Pensions for former MPs have also been increased from INR 25,000 (USD 300) per month to INR 31,000 (USD 372), while the additional pension for each year of service beyond five years will rise from INR 2,000 (USD 24) to INR 2,500 (USD 30) per month.

The last salary hike was in February 2018, when MPs' salaries were increased from INR 50,000 (USD 600) to INR 100,000 (USD 1,200). Before this, Parliament had the authority to revise MPs' salaries through

legislation, but since the Finance Act of 2018, salary increases are tied to the Cost Inflation Index under the Income Tax Act, which mandates adjustments every five years.

During the COVID-19 pandemic in April 2020, the allowances and pensions of MPs were reduced by 30 percent for a year. [Daily Mirror]

India: Farmer leader ends 123-day hunger strike after demands remain unmet

(lm) Jagjit Singh Dallewal, a 70-year-old farmer leader from Punjab, ended his 123-day hunger strike, which he began in November 2024, demanding action on issues like loan waivers, minimum support prices, and compensation for farmers' families. Dallewal's health deteriorated during the strike, prompting a Supreme Court order for his hospitalization in December. He returned to the protest site soon after, claiming detention.

This protest is part of ongoing farmer demonstrations that started in February 2024, following unfulfilled demands from the 2020 protests, despite the repeal of controversial farm laws. India's agricultural sector continues to face challenges, including low productivity and high debt, as the government remains cautious in responding to demands for comprehensive reforms. [BBC]

India: Comedian sparks free speech debate with parody song targeting political figure

(wyn) Indian stand-up comedian Kunal Kamra has ignited a nationwide debate on free speech after a parody performance at a Mumbai studio triggered backlash from supporters of Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Eknath Shinde. Though Kamra's parody song did not explicitly name anyone, Shinde's followers from the hardline Hindu nationalist Shiv Sena party interpreted it as an attack on their leader, leading to the vandalization of the performance venue.

Kamra, a vocal critic of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his allies, has refused to apologize, asserting his right to artistic expression. In response, Shiv Sena supporters filed a police complaint alleging defamation, and Kamra has delayed his appearance before authorities citing death threats.

The incident has sparked intense public and political discourse on the boundaries of satire and the state of free expression in India. While some Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leaders have denounced what they view as abuse of speech, many citizens rallied behind Kamra online. His video has amassed over six million views and tens of thousands of supportive comments, with many users donating to him in solidarity. [Reuters]

India: Government slams X for calling compliance site a censorship portal

(wyn) India has strongly criticized Elon Musk's social media platform X (formerly Twitter) for labeling a government-run compliance website as a "censorship portal." In a court filing reviewed by Reuters, India's Ministry of Information Technology called the terminology "unfortunate and condemnable," dismissing X's claim as a "groundless concern of censorship."

The dispute centers around a government initiative that provides a platform for notifying tech companies of harmful content and their due diligence obligations. The Indian government maintains that the site is not used to issue blocking orders but merely serves as a notification tool.

However, X filed a lawsuit on March 5 in Karnataka, arguing that the government has unlawfully broadened its censorship powers by creating a mechanism that enables "countless" officials to issue takedown requests, effectively facilitating content removal without proper oversight.

The legal clash intensifies tensions between the Modi administration and X over content regulation, even as Elon Musk prepares to expand his other ventures in India, including Starlink and Tesla. [Reuters]

India: Controversial preacher Bajinder Singh sentenced to life for repeated rape

(lm) On April 1, Bajinder Singh, a self-styled "prophet" and the founder of the Glory and Wisdom Church in Punjab, was sentenced to life imprisonment by a court in Sahibzada Ajit Singh Nagar for his role in a 2018 rape and sexual harassment case. Singh, aged 42, was convicted of repeated rape under section 376(2)(n) of the Indian Penal Code, which addresses repeated

offenses of rape on the same victim. He was sentenced to serve the remainder of his life in prison.

The case stemmed from allegations made by a woman who claimed that Singh had developed a physical relationship with her without consent beginning in 2017. She further accused him of raping her multiple times, making her unconscious to film obscene videos, and blackmailing her for money with threats to expose the videos. An FIR was filed in April 2018, leading to Singh's conviction, while five other accused in the case were acquitted.

Singh, who gained attention for his ministry's controversial "miracle services," had been previously accused of fraud in 2022 by a family in Delhi, claiming he took money to cure their daughter, who passed away despite his intervention. Singh had also faced recent charges in February 2025 for sexual harassment and stalking after another woman came forward with a complaint against him. [The Hindu]

India: Rupee rebounds, but U.S. tariffs remain key concerns

(wyn) The Indian rupee has recently rebounded strongly, reaching its highest point in 2025, buoyed by inflows of foreign investment, including over USD 6 billion in equity purchases in March. This positive movement is attributed to financial year-end dollar-denominated corporate profit repatriations and a shift in foreign portfolio flows. The rupee has gained more than 2 percent in March alone, positioning it as the best-performing major Asian currency this month. However, the resurgence of the rupee follows a sharp decline earlier this year, as it hit record lows in February due to slow domestic growth and investor pullbacks.

Despite the recovery, analysts caution that the upcoming U.S. tariffs, which are set to be announced on April 2, could negatively impact the rupee. India is bracing for the potential economic fallout from these tariffs, with estimates suggesting a possible loss of around USD 6 billion in exports at 10 percent tariffs, which could rise to USD 31 billion at 25 percent. The rupee's appreciation this year may have created room for depreciation, which could occur if tariffs cause significant economic disruptions. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has noted that a depreciation of up to 5 percent could increase inflationary pressures, adding complexity to the currency's outlook. [Reuters] [Nikkei Asia]

In addition to currency movements, India's financial stability remains robust, as Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman assured Parliament that the country's foreign exchange reserves are healthy. As of March 21, India's forex reserves stood at USD 658.8 billion, sufficient to cover up to 11 months of imports. Despite slight fluctuations in the reserves, Sitharaman emphasized that India's position remains strong, providing the country with a buffer against global economic uncertainties and helping to stabilize the rupee. [Business Standard]

India: Markets close FY2025 with March rebound, financial stocks lead recovery amid tariff concerns

(wyn) India's stock markets ended fiscal year 2025 on a high note, with a strong rally in March offsetting much of the weakness seen earlier in the year. The Nifty 50 index—India's benchmark index tracking the performance of 50 major companies listed on the National Stock Exchange—rose by 6.3 percent during March, its best monthly performance in 15 months. The BSE Sensex—another key benchmark comprising 30 leading companies on the Bombay Stock Exchange—gained 5.1 percent. For the full fiscal year, the Nifty 50 recorded a 5.34 percent increase. The rebound was driven by renewed foreign portfolio investor (FPI) inflows, easing valuation concerns, and improved domestic economic indicators. Despite net FPI outflows of USD 15.57 billion for the fiscal year—the second-highest on record—investors injected USD 2.65 billion into Indian equities during the last five trading sessions of March. [Reuters 1]

The financial services sector played a key role in the recovery. The Nifty Financial Services Index—which tracks major listed financial institutions—surged 9 percent in March after three consecutive months of losses. The rally was fueled by expectations of interest rate cuts from the Reserve Bank of India, strong credit growth, and improved liquidity. Analysts forecast credit growth of 12 to 13 percent in FY2026, positioning financial stocks—especially banks—as likely leaders in India's next growth phase. [Reuters 2]

However, markets closed the fiscal year with modest declines on the final trading day, as caution prevailed ahead of a possible announcement by U.S. President Donald Trump on reciprocal tariffs. The Nifty 50 fell 0.31 percent to 23,519.35, while the BSE Sensex dropped 0.25 percent to 77,414.92. Sectors with high U.S. exposure, such as information technology and automobiles, were hit hardest. [Reuters 3]

Despite these concerns, analysts remain optimistic about FY2026. Market valuations have corrected, earnings growth is projected at 12 to 15 percent over the next two years, and regulatory changes by the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI)—including a proposed adjustment to derivatives expiry schedules—have helped ease market concerns. The Bombay Stock Exchange (BSE), which operates alongside the NSE as one of India's major stock exchanges, rose approximately 17 percent in March.

India: Fiscal deficit reaches 85.8 percent of annual target by end of February

(wyn) India's fiscal deficit for the period April 2024 to February 2025 reached INR 13.47 trillion (USD 157.62 billion), amounting to 85.8 percent of the full-year target, according to data released by the government on March 28. The fiscal year in India runs from April to March.

Net tax receipts over the 11-month period totaled INR 20.16 trillion (USD 236.1 billion), representing 78.8 percent of the annual projection and marking an increase from INR 18.49 trillion (USD 216.6 billion) collected during the same period the previous year. Total government expenditure stood at INR 38.93 trillion (USD 456 billion), about 82.5 percent of the yearly goal. Capital expenditure, including infrastructure investments, reached INR 8.12 trillion (USD 95.1 billion), or 79.7 percent of the target.

In its February 2025 budget, the Indian government revised its fiscal deficit goal for the full year to 4.8 percent of GDP and set a target to reduce it further to 4.4 percent in 2025–26. It also announced a shift from deficit-to-GDP to debt-to-GDP as the primary fiscal benchmark beginning in 2026–27, aiming to lower the debt ratio from 57 percent to 50 percent by March 2031. [Reuters]

India: Government to borrow USD 93.34 billion in April–September via bonds

(wyn) India plans to raise INR 8 trillion (USD 93.34 billion) through bond sales between April and September 2025, accounting for 54 percent of its projected gross borrowing target of INR 14.82 trillion (USD 172.89 billion) for the fiscal year. This is slightly above the 53 percent share during the same period last year. The government aims to reduce the fiscal

deficit to 4.4 percent of GDP in 2025–26, down from the 4.8 percent target for the current fiscal year.

The bond issuances will include maturities ranging from 3 to 50 years, with an increased focus on the 10-year benchmark security, which will now comprise 26 percent of the total, up from 22 percent. Ultra-long bonds (30–50 years) will be reduced to 35 percent of the total, responding to weak investor demand. Additionally, INR 100 billion (USD 1.17 billion) in green bonds will be issued in the first half of the fiscal year. The government will also raise INR 2.47 trillion (USD 28.81 billion) through Treasury bills in April–June—below market expectations. [Reuters]

India: Central bank expected to cut rates in April and August, signaling shortest easing cycle on record

(wyn) The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) is expected to cut its benchmark repo rate by 25 basis points to 6.00 percent at its April 9 meeting, according to a Reuters poll of economists. This would mark the second consecutive rate cut, with a final reduction likely in August to 5.75 percent, making it the shallowest easing cycle since the repo rate became the RBI's main policy tool in the early 2000s.

The expectations are driven by cooling inflation, which dropped to a seven-month low of 3.61 percent in February, and slowing economic growth, projected at 6.4 percent for the current fiscal year—its weakest in four years. Economists argue the RBI now has space to recalibrate monetary policy and support demand, as recent liquidity injections—totaling approximately USD 64 billion—signal broader easing intentions.

While the RBI is expected to hold rates steady at its June meeting, the August rate cut would likely be followed by a prolonged pause, with economists citing uncertainties in global monetary policy, capital flows, and the U.S. Federal Reserve's decisions. [Reuters]

India: Quick commerce dominates 2024 e-grocery market, but faces sustainability questions

(wyn) India's quick commerce sector—defined by delivery times under 30 minutes—captured over two-thirds of all e-grocery orders in 2024, with its market share surging to an estimated USD 6–7 billion,

according to a joint report by consultancy firm Bain & Company and e-commerce giant Flipkart. This marks a fivefold increase in market size from 2022. The sector, led by companies like Blinkit (owned by Zomato), now accounts for 10 percent of all e-retail spending in India.

The report notes that quick commerce platforms—delivering everything from groceries to electronics—are expected to grow more than 40 percent annually through 2030. Over 20 million Indians shopped via quick commerce services last year, and the sector employs more than 400,000 people.

Despite this rapid expansion, concerns remain about the sector's long-term sustainability. The report highlights challenges such as difficulties expanding into smaller cities, intensified competition from established e-commerce giants like Flipkart and Amazon, and the need for business model adjustments and supply chain optimization. New entrants like Flipkart Minutes, BigBasket's BB Now, Amazon's Tez, and Myntra's M-now are also crowding the space.

Critics argue the current growth may not last. A separate report from Blume Ventures warned of a slowdown, and TVS Capital Funds Chairman Gopal Srinivasan called the quick commerce boom a "passing fad" that may prove unsustainable over time. [Reuters]

India: Infrastructure output growth slows to five-month low in February

(wyn) India's infrastructure output grew by 2.9 percent year-on-year in February 2025, marking the slowest pace in five months, according to government data released on March 28. The deceleration was largely due to steeper declines in crude oil and natural gas production. Crude oil output dropped 5.2 percent, compared to a 1.1 percent fall in January, while natural gas production declined 6 percent, from a 1.5 percent drop the previous month.

Infrastructure output, which includes eight core sectors and constitutes 40 percent of the country's industrial production, had grown at a revised 5.1 percent in January. February saw weaker performances in refined oil products (0.8 percent growth versus 8.3 percent in January) and coal (1.7 percent versus 4.6 percent). Electricity generation slightly improved to 2.8 percent, and steel production rose 5.6 percent. Fertilizer output surged by 10.2 percent, and cement output increased by 10.5 percent, though both marked slower growth than the prior month.

From April 2024 to February 2025, infrastructure output grew by 4.4 percent, down from 7.8 percent in the same period the previous year. [Reuters]

India: Cabinet approves USD 2.7 billion plan to boost electronics components manufacturing

(wyn) India's cabinet has approved a plan worth INR 229.19 billion (USD 2.68 billion) aimed at strengthening domestic production of electronic components, with a focus on sectors such as telecommunications, automobiles, and power. The initiative is expected to generate nearly 92,000 direct jobs and is structured around employment-linked incentives to encourage local manufacturing.

According to Information Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw, the plan aligns with New Delhi's broader push to scale up domestic electronics production and reduce reliance on imports. Between fiscal years 2014–15 and 2023–24, electronics manufacturing in India grew fivefold, while exports increased sixfold, government data show. The government expects the new scheme to further consolidate India's position in the global electronics supply chain. [Reuters]

India: Sugar millers permitted to export 1 million metric tons of sugar this year

(rt) India, the world's second biggest sugar producer, set an export allowance of 1 million metric tons from January through September 2025. This decision was based on initial government and industry assessments that a surplus was available for overseas markets. Since then, industry groups have lowered output forecasts for the current year, raising concerns about potential supply shortages and export restrictions. However, the government maintains that there are sufficient reserves to meet domestic consumption and ethanol production needs, and has therefore allowed sugar mills to proceed with the planned exports.

According to government estimates, sugar mills are expected to produce 26.4 million metric tons this year, while domestic demand is estimated at 28 million metric tons. However, carryover stocks at the start of the current season on October 1, 2024, totaled 8 million metric tons. [Economic Times] [Business Standard]

India: Court rejects JSW Steel, Trafigura request to clear met coke imports

(wyn) On March 30, the Delhi High Court rejected requests from JSW Steel and Trafigura to allow certain shipments of metallurgical coke (met coke) to be cleared, despite the shipments being ordered before India's January 2025 policy curbing imports of the steelmaking raw material. This decision follows India's move to impose country-specific quotas on low-ash met coke imports in a bid to support domestic suppliers.

JSW Steel, a leading Indian steel manufacturer, sought to clear USD 90 million worth of imports, while Trafigura, a global commodities trading company, filed a lawsuit to clear one of its rejected shipments. The court ruled that allowing these imports would undermine the purpose of the new curbs, agreeing with the Indian government's stance that the companies were aware of the impending restrictions when placing the orders.

The import curbs, which limit the total overseas purchase of met coke to 1.4 million metric tons between January and June 2025, have raised concerns within the steel industry. Major players like ArcelorMittal Nippon India have warned the government that these restrictions could severely impact steel production and delay expansion plans. [Reuters]

India: Defense Ministry signs over USD 8.4 billion in indigenous military procurement deals

(rt/wyn) India has finalized a series of major defense contracts totaling over USD 8.4 billion as part of its ongoing push for military modernization and self-reliance in defense production. The deals include one of the largest helicopter procurements in the country's history and multiple orders for domestically developed weapon systems.

The most significant of the agreements is a USD 7.3 billion (INR 624 billion) contract for 156 'Prachand' light combat helicopters, designed and manufactured by Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd. (HAL). The dual-engine helicopter, developed in collaboration with France's Safran, can operate at altitudes exceeding 5,000 meters and is already in service with the Indian Air

Force since 2022. The new procurement includes 66 helicopters for the air force and 90 for the army, with deliveries to begin in three years. Officials say the platform has also drawn interest from countries in Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America. [Reuters]

In parallel, the Ministry of Defence has signed a USD 290 million contract for indigenous anti-tank guided weapons and light specialist vehicles. The tracked version of the Nag Missile System, developed by the Defence Research & Development Laboratory (DRDO), will be produced by state-owned Armoured Vehicle Nigam Ltd under a USD 210 million agreement. These systems are intended to enhance the army's anti-armor capabilities. Another USD 80 million contract covers the purchase of 5,000 light specialist vehicles capable of navigating difficult terrain, to be manufactured by Mahindra & Mahindra and Force Motors. [Economic Times] [The Hindu]

In a separate deal signed earlier last week, the ministry also ordered 307 Advanced Towed Artillery Gun Systems (ATAGS) from Bharat Forge Limited and Tata Advanced Systems Ltd, valued at nearly USD 800 million. The agreement includes the corresponding towing vehicles and represents a significant step in replacing aging artillery with high-performance indigenous alternatives. [The Indian Express]

These contracts underscore India's commitment to bolstering its domestic defense industry, which now manufactures 65 percent of its defense equipment, significantly reducing reliance on imports. Since the launch of the "Make in India" initiative, defense production has surged, reaching a record USD 14.8 billion, with plans to expand to USD 35 billion by 2029. India's defense industry includes 16 Defense Public Sector Undertakings, over 430 licensed companies, and around 16,000 Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), highlighting the sector's growth and its contribution to both national security and economic development. [Economic Times] [Deccan Herald] [MSN]

India: Modi highlights decline in Naxalism and blames Congress policies for past extremism in Chhattisgarh

(lm/wyn) Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has sharply criticized the main opposition Indian National Congress (INC) party for what he described as decades of failed policies that encouraged the spread of Naxalism—Maoist insurgency—in Chhattisgarh and other states. Speaking at a public rally in Bilaspur

district on March 30, Modi argued that the INC government's labeling of tribal and underdeveloped regions as "backward" allowed extremism to flourish in the absence of meaningful development.

Modi's remarks coincided with major symbolic and operational developments. Earlier that same day, 50 Naxalites surrendered to security forces in Bijapur district, a key Maoist stronghold. Among them were 14 individuals with a combined bounty of INR 6.8 million (USD 81,600). The surrender was attributed to growing dissatisfaction with Maoist ideology, exploitation of tribal communities by senior insurgent leaders, and increasing trust in government initiatives such as the "Niya Nellanar" scheme, which provides essential services in remote areas. Union Home Minister Amit Shah hailed the event as a success, reiterating the government's goal to eliminate Naxalism by March 31, 2026. [The Indian Express 1]

Modi used the occasion to underscore what he called a transformative shift under the "double-engine" BJP-led government at the center and in Chhattisgarh. He emphasized that peace is returning to Naxal-affected areas due to increased development and welfare measures, including the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY), under which 300,000 families in Chhattisgarh have recently received homes. Other initiatives highlighted included the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (cleanliness drive), the Ayushman Bharat health scheme, and large infrastructure projects exceeding INR 337 billion (USD 4.06 billion).

The Prime Minister linked the improving situation to deeper systemic changes, such as the electrification of Chhattisgarh's entire rail network, the expansion of solar-powered energy generation, and the laying of gas pipelines to promote industrial development. He added that piped gas is expected to reach over 200,000 homes, generating new employment and business opportunities.

Chhattisgarh remains India's most severely affected state by Maoist violence, with 267 incidents reported in 2024 alone. However, officials claim progress, citing over 2,200 surrenders or arrests since December 2023 and the killing of more than 350 insurgents. On March 29 alone, 18 Naxalites, including 11 women, were killed in two encounters in Sukma and Bijapur. [Reuters]

As the state marks the 25th anniversary of its formation—declared the *Atal Nirman Varsh* (Atal Construction Year) in honor of former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee—Modi reaffirmed his vision that Chhattisgarh will rank among India's leading states by its 50th anniversary. [The Indian Express 2] [The Week]

India: Four policemen, two suspected rebels killed in clash in Jammu and Kashmir

(lm) A gun battle in the forested Kathua district of India-administered Jammu and Kashmir on March 28 resulted in the deaths of four police officers and two suspected rebel fighters. The clash erupted when a police patrol searching for militants was ambushed in a densely wooded area near the Pakistan border. Authorities reported the recovery of weapons, including grenades, a bulletproof vest, and rifle magazines.

Officials believe the militants, who evaded capture days earlier, were likely from Pakistan, though no evidence has been publicly presented. The Indian army's Rising Star Corps confirmed the rebels' deaths and vowed continued counterinsurgency operations.

The incident adds to a long-standing conflict in the disputed region, where armed groups have fought Indian forces for decades. Although overall violence has declined, clashes persist. New Delhi accuses Pakistan of backing the insurgency, while Islamabad denies involvement, supporting Kashmiri calls for self-determination.

Tensions have intensified since India revoked Jammu and Kashmir's special status in 2019, curtailing local autonomy and tightening security controls. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has reiterated that the revocation is irreversible, framing it as part of a broader national integration strategy. [Al Jazeera]

Maldives: Supreme Court's newest judge Hussein Shaheed joins Judicial Service Commission

(db) On March 27 Justice Hussein Shaheed, the latest appointee to the Maldivian Supreme Court, was elected as a member of the Judicial Service Commission (JSC). The JSC's membership is comprised of judges from various levels of the judicial system, including the Supreme Court, the High Court, and lower courts.

This appointment followed the departure of former Justice Husnu'ssood, having stepped down from his position at the JSC following his suspension in the context of an Anti-Corruption Commission probe.

Justice Shaheed's elevation to the Supreme Court took place in the third week of March. Subsequently, the Supreme Court's judicial council assigned him to the vacated JSC seat previously held by Justice Husnu'ssood.

Before his recent appointment to the Supreme Court, Justice Shaheed held the position of chief judge at the High Court, to which he had been appointed in March 2018. Prior to his tenure at the High Court, he served as a judge at the Criminal Court from January 2018 onward. [The edition]

Maldives: High Court dismisses appeal in case against former immigration chief over alleged extortion

(lm) The High Court has dismissed an appeal filed by former Immigration Controller Mohamed Shamaan Waheed challenging his arrest on allegations of abuse of power and extortion. Shamaan, who was removed from office two weeks ago, is accused of collaborating with immigration officers to extort over MVR 500,000 (USD 32,500) from an expatriate previously held in immigration custody. Authorities claim the money was brought to his residence following the expatriate's release [see AiR No. 12, March/2025, 4].

Shamaan's legal team filed the appeal on March 26 after the Criminal Court ordered a 15-day remand. However, the Assistant Registrar of the High Court dismissed the case based on the arguments submitted by his defense. [the edition 1]

Four other individuals have been arrested in connection with the case, and their remands have been extended. Police have also imposed travel bans on additional suspects and seized the mobile phone of Shamaan's wife as part of the investigation. [the edition 2]

Maldives: Travel ban lifted for officials investigated in Binveriyaa land allocation case

(db) Authorities have released the passports of former Housing Development Corporation (HDC) Managing Director Ibrahim Fazul Rasheed, his brother and Maldives Water and Sewerage Company (MWSC) Deputy Managing Director Ibrahim Fazeel Rasheed, and 20 others implicated in the alleged unlawful

allocation of land under the Binveriyaa housing scheme.

The Binveriyaa program is a government initiative that provides land plots to eligible Maldivian citizens who do not own land in Male' or its surrounding areas. The group, which included officials from both HDC and the Ministry of Housing, had their passports seized in December 2024 after suspicions arose over land plots being allocated to ineligible individuals. Police have now lifted the travel restrictions imposed on all parties involved.

The case gained attention when Fazeel, who was not listed as a beneficiary and did not meet eligibility criteria, applied to build a boundary wall around a plot designated under the scheme. He is currently under investigation for forgery. Another applicant also sought access to the same plot despite not residing in Male', a core requirement of the Binveriyaa program.

Documents related to the case surfaced on social media in December, prompting an official inquiry. Fazul and the HDC board were suspended following the revelations, and Fazul subsequently resigned. [the edition]

Maldives: Student loans made fully Shariah-compliant as government opens 500 new slots

(sl) President Mohamed Muizzu has ordered that all student loans in the Maldives—both domestic and international—be made fully compliant with Islamic Shariah principles. As part of this directive, the 1 percent administrative fee charged on higher education loans by the Ministry of Higher Education, Labor, and Skills Development has been abolished. Borrowers will now repay only the principal amount, with no added charges. For those with existing loans, previously collected administrative fees will be deducted from their outstanding balances. [President Dr. Mohamed Muizzu on X]

The move is part of President Muizzu's broader commitment to Islamic financial practices and reflects the country's identity as a 100 percent Muslim nation. It also comes amid concerns from students abroad, including pilot students in Barcelona, who reported financial hardship due to visa challenges, lack of scholarships, and course durations exceeding loan terms. In response, the ministry clarified that students facing unexpected costs could apply for top-up loans

under specific eligibility criteria. [SunOnline] [the edition 1]

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Higher Education has opened 500 new loan slots for both new students and those seeking top-up loans of up to MVR 700,000 (USD 45,500). Applications are open until April 30. The previous administration had earlier reduced administrative fees from 5 percent to 1 percent and extended repayment periods to 20 years. [the edition 2]

Maldives: Imam suspended over delay in Eid prayer at Hulhumale' mosque

(sl) The Islamic Ministry has suspended the imam of Masjid Azeeza Moosa in Hulhumale' for five years after he failed to arrive on time for the Eid prayer on March 30. The prayer, scheduled for 7:00 a.m., was delayed by about seven minutes due to the absence of both the designated imam and his replacement, who has also been suspended pending further review.

Social media reports suggest that a foreign national ultimately led the prayer and delivered the sermon in Arabic. [the edition]

Maldives: Generation ban on smoking to target youth, expand tobacco control

(lm) President Mohamed Muizzu has announced plans to introduce a generation ban aimed at preventing young people in the Maldives from ever starting to smoke. The measure, to be detailed later, is part of a broader public health strategy discussed during the president's new podcast, Rayyithunnaa Eku ("With Citizens").

The generation ban model, already implemented in some other countries, would restrict tobacco access based on year of birth to gradually eliminate smoking in future generations. President Muizzu also emphasized wider efforts to encourage healthier lifestyles, including initiatives to lower the cost of fruits and vegetables.

This follows the government's recent enforcement of the Tobacco Control Act, which banned vapes starting December 15, 2024. Since then, authorities have collected over MVR 160,500 (USD 10,430) in fines. Penalties under the law include MVR 5,000 (USD 325) for using vapes, MVR 10,000 (USD 650) for distributing

them freely, MVR 20,000 (USD 1,300) for selling them, and MVR 50,000 (USD 3,250) for selling to individuals under 21. [the edition]

Maldives: Government and rights body condemn Raajje TV for derogatory remarks about disabilities

(sl) The Human Rights Commission of Maldives (HRCM) and the Ministry of Social and Family Development have both strongly condemned offensive remarks made about individuals with disabilities during a Raajje TV broadcast. The program featured former Colonel Ahmed Fayaz Ali (Papa Fayaz), who stated that President Dr. Mohamed Muizzu "seems to have autism, not only operating autism, he also seems to have Down syndrome." Former Nolhivaram MP Mohamed Nasheed Abdulla was also criticized for encouraging the remarks.

The Ministry has filed a formal complaint with the Maldives Broadcasting Commission (Broadcom), stating that the remarks violated the Maldivian Constitution, local laws, and international conventions protecting the rights and dignity of people with disabilities. It warned that such rhetoric undermines efforts to promote inclusivity and risks normalizing discrimination. [PSM News]

In a separate statement, HRCM emphasized that all individuals, including those with disabilities, have equal human rights and called on media organizations to ensure their content respects human dignity. Raajje TV has since apologized for the incident, which sparked widespread outrage and condemnation, particularly across social media platforms. [the edition 1] [the edtition 2]

Maldives: Government launches new power project in Thulusdhoo amid ongoing criticism over island power cuts

(lm) The Maldives has signed a contract worth MVR 11.9 million (USD 773,500) with SUNWILL Pvt Ltd to construct a new power plant, customer service building, and boundary wall in Thulusdhoo, Kaafu Atoll. The project, to be completed within 175 days, aims to improve electricity supply reliability on the island, especially during high-demand periods such as Eid. The current powerhouse, located in a residential area, will be relocated to a newly reclaimed site in line with

the State Electric Company's (STELCO) policy of minimizing disruptions to urban communities.

At the contract signing event, STELCO Managing Director Hussain Fahmy highlighted Thulusdhoo's historical importance to the company, while Thulusdhoo MP Ibrahim Naseem emphasized the island's persistent electricity shortages. [the edition 1]

Meanwhile, opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) Chairperson Fayyaz Ismail criticized the government for failing to prepare for recurrent electricity shortages, particularly during Ramadan, citing ongoing power cuts in Addu City. He called for new approaches such as incorporating renewable energy into a national electricity grid and urged a review of existing policies. Former MP Mohamed Aslam echoed the criticism, urging the transfer of electricity provision in Addu from Fenaka Corporation to STELCO, arguing that Fenaka lacks capacity. Fenaka, however, attributes the outages to maintenance lapses by the previous administration. [the edition 2]

Maldives: President Muizzu inspects progress on new Criminal and Drug Court facilities in Hulhumale

(sl) President Dr. Mohamed Muizzu inspected the progress of the construction of the new Criminal Court and Drug Court facilities. During the visit, President Muizzu reviewed the construction plans and received updates from senior officials of the Housing Development Corporation (HDC), the Minister of Construction, Housing and Infrastructure, and other key government officials.

The current Criminal Court building, located in the former service station building, has deteriorated significantly. As a result, the government is building a temporary facility in Hulhumale at a cost of MVR 33 million (USD 2.1 million).

Delivering the presidential address earlier this year, the president emphasized that delays in hearings and sentencing are among the biggest challenges facing the judiciary. The new Hulhumale Criminal Court complex aims to address these issues, and the president has promised to begin construction within a year.

The government also announced plans to begin construction of a permanent court complex for lower courts in Malé later this year. [the edition] [Atoll Times]

Maldives: Over 2,800 complaints filed regarding government flat allocation list

(lm) The Maldives' Ministry of Housing has received 2,843 complaints concerning the government housing flat list published on February 27. Complaints have been open since March 1, with most—2,079—pertaining to three-bedroom flats and 764 to two-bedroom units. In response to the volume of concerns, the ministry has extended the complaint deadline from March 31 to April 15.

Many disqualified applicants have contested their ineligibility and challenged the eligibility of those included in the list by submitting supporting documentation. The ministry stated it will evaluate the complaints based on official records and take appropriate action.

The revised list currently includes 1,820 eligible individuals—1,423 for three-bedroom units and 397 for two-bedroom units. Meanwhile, 2,695 applicants were deemed ineligible, and 424 saw their scores revised, resulting in removal from the recipient list. [the edition]

Maldives: President Muizzu announces over 550 development projects

(db) Maldivian President Dr Mohamed Muizzu announced that over 550 development projects have been signed for implementation, including both previously stalled and newly launched initiatives. Speaking in the debut episode of the podcast Rayyithunnaa Eku [With Citizens], the president said many of the projects are scheduled for completion in 2025 and 2026, with expedited work expected across various islands starting this month.

Among the entities involved are state-owned companies such as the Maldives Transport and Contracting Company (MTCC), Road Development Corporation (RDC), and Fenaka Corporation, a government-run utility company that provides electricity, water, and sewerage services to island communities across the Maldives. [the edition]

Maldives: Police uncover drug trafficking, weapons storage in cafés, struggle with

legal hurdles in closing them down

(lm/sf) The Maldives Police Service has uncovered that certain cafés, particularly shisha lounges with private booths, are being used as fronts for drug trafficking and weapons storage. Superintendent of Police Aarif, head of the newly established gang crime prevention unit, reported that raids have found alcohol, narcotics, and sharp weapons concealed in various locations, including under tables, on individuals, and in café kitchens. While some weapons supply chains have been disrupted, drug trafficking remains a persistent issue. Police continue to monitor cafés frequented by gang members and conduct searches with either the owner's consent or a court order if suspicious activity is detected. [the edition 1]

Despite efforts to tackle this issue, police have faced legal challenges in closing down these establishments. Chief Inspector Ahmed Naif revealed that 14 drug cafés in Malé have been shut down since January, but six remain operational. More than 60 such cafés have been identified, yet property disputes and the reluctance of family members to testify present significant obstacles. Naif pointed out that loopholes in the current Drug Law hinder efforts to close down all the establishments involved in illicit activities.

To address these challenges, proposed amendments to the Drug Law aim to grant police the authority to close drug cafés for up to 72 hours without a court order and seek court approval to extend closures for up to 90 days. Last year, the police shut down over 40 drug cafés and deported 142 expatriates for drug-related offenses. [the edition 2]

Nepal: Government and parties condemn former king after deadly pro-monarchy riots

(lm) Nepal is facing heightened political turmoil following the March 28, 2025, pro-monarchy protests in Kathmandu, which turned violent and resulted in two deaths, dozens of injuries, and extensive property damage. Thousands of demonstrators, demanding the restoration of the monarchy and Hindu statehood, clashed with police near the Tinkune area. Authorities responded with curfews, mass arrests, and warnings of legal action against those responsible—including former King Gyanendra Shah. [The Guardian] [EuroNews]

The protests, reportedly incited by a Democracy Day video message from Shah urging support for his return, were the most intense since the monarchy's abolition in 2008. Protesters vandalized and torched media outlets, party headquarters, and commercial properties, leaving 45 people injured. Two people were killed: Sabin Maharjan, a protester, and journalist Suresh Rajak, who died after being trapped in a burning building while filming for Avenues Television. [The Kathmandu Post 1]

Amid nationwide outrage, Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli addressed Parliament, condemning the violence as "acts of terrorism" and warning that even the former monarch would face prosecution if found guilty. He acknowledged the government's earlier miscalculation in anticipating a peaceful demonstration and confirmed that an investigation was underway. [The Kathmandu Post 2]

The Kathmandu Metropolitan City fined Shah NPR 793,000 (USD 5,800) for environmental and infrastructure damage—a symbolic first legal measure against the former king since 2008. Morever, authorities have arrested at least 111 individuals, including Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP) leaders Rabindra Mishra and Dhawal Shumsher Rana, royalist organizer Swagat Nepal, and "Royal Task Force" commander Munindra Rajbhandari. Police also placed protest coordinator Nawaraj Subedi under house arrest and are searching for businessman Durga Prasai, accused of leading the unrest and now in hiding. Self-styled religious leader Pushkar Khatiwada has also been arrested for incitement. [The Kathmandu Post 3] [The Kathmandu Post 4] [The Kathmandu Post 5]

The incident drew harsh rebukes from political leaders across the spectrum. Home Minister Ramesh Lekhak emphasized that Nepal's federal democratic republic, built through a long struggle, would not tolerate anti-constitutional activities. Main opposition Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) (Maoist Centre) Chair Pushpa Kamal Dahal and former Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai directly accused Shah of incitement and demanded his prosecution. The ruling Nepali Congress also supported legal action, while Prime Minister Oli's CPN (Unified Marxist–Leninist) called for an impartial investigation. [The Kathmandu Post 6] [The Kathmandu Post 7]

The violent protests have also mobilized Nepal's civil society. Journalists staged nationwide demonstrations calling for justice for Rajak and protection of press freedom. The Federation of Nepali Journalists gave the government a seven-day ultimatum to ensure

accountability. Prime Minister Oli met Rajak's family and pledged state support, while Home Minister Lekhak condemned the attacks on media as a "criminal assault on democracy." [The Kathmandu Post 8] [The Kathmandu Post 9] [The Kathmandu Post 10] [The Kathmandu Post 11]

Meanwhile, divisions within the pro-monarchy camp have deepened. The RPP distanced itself from rally organizer Nawaraj Subedi and criticized the lack of organization within the royalist movement. Despite this, the RPP continues to advocate for the restoration of the monarchy and announced further protests, including a new rally on April 8 and a larger Capital-centric movement starting April 20. The royalist movement's future remains uncertain, with republican forces firmly resisting any attempts to restore the monarchy. [The Kathmandu Post 12]

Nepal: NEA chief's dismissal sparks legal battle, political rift, and street protests

(hgk/lm) The government's abrupt dismissal of Kulman Ghising as Managing Director of the Nepal Electricity Authority (NEA) has sparked a rift between government and opposition parties, legal contestation, and parliamentary protests. Ghising, who had four months remaining in his term, was replaced by former NEA chief Hitendra Dev Shakya following a Cabinet decision on March 25. The move triggered uproar across Parliament and the streets of Kathmandu.

Ghising responded by filing a writ petition at the Supreme Court on March 26, seeking an interim order for reinstatement. The Court registered the case on March 27 and held a preliminary hearing on March 28, but declined to issue immediate relief. Instead, it issued a show-cause notice and summoned both parties for a hearing on March 30. [The Kathmandu Post 1]

Opposition parties, including the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre), Rastriya Swatantra Party, Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP), and CPN (Unified Socialist), criticized the government's actions and blocked Parliament since March 26, alleging that Ghising's dismissal was driven by vested interests and industrial pressure. They demanded an explanation from Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli in Parliament. Oli, however, rejected the accusations, describing the dismissal as a routine administrative matter. [The Kathmandu Post 2] [The Kathmandu Post 3]

Tensions also surfaced within the ruling Nepali Congress, a key coalition partner and the single-largest party in Parliament's lower house. Senior Congress leaders including Gagan Thapa, Bishwa Prakash Sharma, and Shekhar Koirala condemned the decision, while party president Sher Bahadur Deuba defended the government. Reports suggest that Energy Minister Deepak Khadka, who had longstanding disagreements with Ghising, advocated for the dismissal, while Home Minister Ramesh Lekhak opposed it during the Cabinet meeting. [The Kathmandu Post 4]

Amid the controversy, the Ministry of Energy issued an official letter listing ten reasons for Ghising's termination. These included failure to submit performance reports on time, unauthorized international negotiations, negligence in recovering dues from industrial clients, and violating board decisions. The ministry also accused him of undermining institutional integrity and publicly criticizing the government and Parliament. Despite these claims, Ghising remains widely credited with resolving Nepal's chronic power shortages.

Adding further complexity, newly appointed NEA chief Hitendra Dev Shakya—himself removed by the Deuba-led government in 2021—has a pending case before the court challenging his earlier dismissal and seeking restoration of his entitlements. [Khabar Hub]

Against this backdrop, Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli convened an all-party meeting on March 30 to address the dismissal of NEA chief Kulman Ghising. At the time of writing, no official readout was available. [The Kathmandu Post 5]

Nepal: Rabi Lamichhane reaffirms party's support for constitution amid criticism and legal scrutiny

(lm) Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) chair Rabi Lamichhane has publicly defended his party's allegiance to Nepal's democratic system and constitution, amid ongoing criticism and allegations surrounding his leadership. Speaking at the party office in Kathmandu after resuming his role as party chief, Lamichhane rejected doubts about the RSP's republican stance, calling repeated scrutiny unjustified.

Lamichhane, who stepped down in December 2024 following allegations of money laundering and cooperative fraud, returned to his position and argued that his party has consistently respected the constitutional framework. He also accused the

government of undermining democracy, citing its failure to address constitutional amendment issues and respond effectively to recent unrest.

Referring to recent monarchist-led violence in Kathmandu's Tinkune area, Lamichhane demanded accountability and questioned the Ministry of Home Affairs' ability to maintain public order. He claimed that the government is using legal cases to target him politically and vowed to confront any such actions without backing down. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Government withdraws land reform ordinance amid coalition objections, plans to reintroduce as revised bill

(lm) Nepal's ruling coalition has decided to withdraw a contentious land reform ordinance and introduce it as a regular bill in Parliament after facing strong resistance from within the alliance. The decision follows a series of high-level meetings at Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli's residence on March 25 and 26, where coalition leaders discussed fast-tracking pending legislation, including the land reform measure.

The ordinance, officially titled the Ordinance to Amend Some Nepal Acts Related to Land Management 2025, was issued in January by President Ramchandra Paudel on the Cabinet's recommendation. It sought to grant land ownership to landless Dalits and squatters—either free of cost or through prescribed fees—if they had resided long-term on public land. However, the Janata Samajbadi Party (JSP), a key coalition partner, opposed it, citing risks of arbitrary land distribution, environmental degradation in the Chure hills, and downstream impacts in the Madhesh region.

During the coalition's March 26 meeting, the Nepali Congress's chief whip Shyam Ghimire confirmed that the ordinance would be withdrawn before the March 28 constitutional deadline for ratification. He stated that a new bill addressing coalition concerns would be tabled instead. The consensus reflects growing efforts within the alliance to maintain political unity by resolving legislative disputes collaboratively.

The move also forms part of a broader agreement among coalition parties—including the CPN-UML, Nepali Congress, Loktantrik Samajbadi Party, Janamat Party, Janata Samajbadi Party, and Nagarik Unmukti Party—to expedite all pending legislation in

Parliament. Labor Minister Sharat Singh Bhandari emphasized the importance of building consensus to ensure swift legislative progress in the ongoing session. [The Kathmandu Post 1] [The Kathmandu Post 2]

Nepal: Supreme Court halts Pathibhara cable car project amid local opposition

(lm) Nepal's Supreme Court has issued a short-term interim order suspending all construction on the Pathibhara Cable Car project in Taplejung. The order follows a petition filed by concerned individuals challenging the project, citing cultural and historical preservation concerns.

The court directed that the project remain in its current condition until further notice, with a hearing scheduled for April 8. The case has drawn increasing attention as the 'No Cable Car Group,' representing local communities, has intensified protests, arguing that the development threatens the cultural integrity of the Pathibhara region. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Agriculture Minister Adhikari pledges transparency in agricultural grants distribution

(rs) Minister for Agriculture and Livestock Development, Ramnath Adhikari, has pledged transparency in agricultural grants, ensuring past irregularities are not repeated. Speaking at the Agro Investment Conference, he announced that all grant details are now publicly accessible. Over the past five years, the government has allocated USD 7.7 million in agricultural grants. He also confirmed that direct allocations from the ministry have been discontinued. Adhikari emphasized that achieving agricultural self-sufficiency requires both government and private sector efforts. [The Himalayan Times]

Nepal: New panel begins fresh selection of transitional justice officials

(lm) Nepal's newly reconstituted committee for nominating officials to the transitional justice bodies—the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Commission of Investigation of Enforced Disappeared Persons—has officially begun its work, marking a

renewed effort to revive stalled transitional justice processes.

Formed on March 24 under former chief justice Om Prakash Mishra, the committee retains the coordinator and three members from a previous panel that failed to meet its two-month deadline due to internal disagreements. It now has until May 23 to recommend 10 office bearers—five for each commission, including chairpersons—after conducting interviews and presentations from applicants.

The move comes after a prolonged delay in implementing reforms to the Enforced Disappearances Enquiry, Truth and Reconciliation Commission Act, which was finally amended in August 2024 following years of political negotiations. The commissions have remained inactive since July 2022.

At a recent national conference, top leaders from the Nepali Congress, Communist Party of Nepal–Unified Marxist–Leninist (CPN-UML), and CPN (Maoist Centre) publicly reaffirmed their commitment to delivering justice to conflict victims. The truth commission has received over 63,000 complaints related to war-era atrocities, while the disappearances commission has around 2,500 pending cases, involving victims of both Maoist insurgents and state security forces. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Facebook, X, and Instagram could face ban next month over registration non-compliance

(hgk) Nepal's government has warned major social media platforms, including Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and Instagram, that they could face a nationwide ban if they fail to register within 30 days. The warning comes under the newly enforced Directives for Managing the Use of Social Networks, 2023, which require platforms to register with the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology, appoint a Grievance Handling Officer, and assign a Compliance Monitoring Officer to ensure self-regulation.

So far, only TikTok, Viber, and Weetok have completed the registration process. The ministry has invoked Subclause (7) of Clause 3 of the directive, stating that platforms operating without registration will face restrictions. The move is part of a broader effort to enhance digital platform regulation, ensure accountability, and address issues such as misinformation, online safety, and data protection.

If implemented, the measure could significantly impact both global tech giants and emerging platforms operating in Nepal. The government has called on all concerned companies to comply with the directive to avoid disruption of services. [Bizness News]

Nepal: Conflict victims call for need-based reparations as survivors of sexual violence remain sidelined

(rs/lm) Survivors of Nepal's Maoist conflict (1996–2006), particularly those subjected to sexual violence and torture, continue to be neglected in state compensation programs despite years of advocacy and suffering. Conflict victims across the country are now demanding a coordinated and inclusive national reparations policy grounded in victims' needs and developed through meaningful consultations, not political favoritism.

While some families—such as those affected by movements in Madhesh—have received compensation (NPR 100,000 or approximately USD 730 in 2022 and NPR 300,000 or approximately USD 2,190 in 2024), many victims of enforced disappearances, sexual violence, and torture remain without any support. Survivors of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) report being repeatedly sidelined, even as other victims of the insurgency have received various forms of interim relief. Most have avoided coming forward due to the stigma surrounding sexual violence, lack of confidentiality, and fear of social rejection.

Testimonies from survivors reveal the deep and ongoing trauma they endure, including untreated physical injuries, psychological harm, and social ostracism. Despite the creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), only 314 out of over 63,700 complaints are related to rape or sexual violence—a figure widely believed to underrepresent the true number of cases. Rights groups, including the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ), have pointed to systemic failures to ensure safe and confidential reporting, gender-sensitive support, and reparative justice.

Efforts by provincial governments in regions like Bagmati and Madhesh to roll out relief programs have been hampered by poor planning and minimal victim consultation. For example, Bagmati Province allocated NPR 50 million (approximately USD 365,000) in 2019–20, but less than half of it was spent. Recent allocations, such as NPR 3 million (approximately USD

21,900) for disabled victims and skills training, have been deemed inadequate and inaccessible.

Survivors and advocacy groups argue that these programs often benefit political party affiliates rather than those genuinely affected. The Conflict Victims' Common Platform (CVCP) and other civil society actors are urging all tiers of government to adopt a unified reparations framework that includes legal aid, public acknowledgment of abuses, community security, and the creation of memorials and public spaces honoring victims. [The Kathmandu Post 1] [The Kathmandu Post 2]

Nepal: Dalit family displaced after home demolition faces threats, inducement to withdraw complaint

(lm) A Dalit family in Nepal's Siraha district has come under pressure to accept an out-of-court settlement after their home was demolished to clear space for a religious event. The demolition, carried out under claims that the site had become "impure," led to the arrest of two local officials, while the event's organizer remains at large [see AiR No. 12, March/2025, 4]. The victims were allegedly threatened and coerced into signing a false statement and recording a video stating they had willingly vacated the premises.

The family, who had lived at the location for 30 years and built their home under a government housing scheme, has since taken shelter in a makeshift hut by a river, without access to electricity or clean water. Authorities have launched an investigation under Nepal's caste-based discrimination laws, which carry penalties of NPR 50,000 to NPR 200,000 (approximately USD 365 to USD 1,460) and up to three years in prison.

Despite the investigation, the family has been approached with offers of land, a new home, and utilities in exchange for retracting their complaint. Meanwhile, a political party affiliated with one of the accused submitted a memorandum calling for the official's release but later faced public criticism for defending an act of caste-based discrimination. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Water crises worsen in Saptari and Sindhupalchok as communities face severe shortages

(lm) In Chhinnamasta Rural Municipality, Saptari, the Musahar community, consisting of 90 impoverished families, is grappling with an acute water shortage. This Dalit settlement, home to around 400 people, relies on a single tube well for all its basic needs, including drinking, cooking, and hygiene. The community, which has long struggled during the dry season, now faces long queues every morning as they wait for access to the overburdened tube well. The previous three tube wells, which were contaminated with iron and had unsafe, yellow water, have been abandoned. Daily wage workers in the area, often forced to skip bathing to avoid missing work opportunities, bear the brunt of the crisis.

The crisis extends to the Dalit National Basic School, where 122 students lack proper water and sanitation facilities. Students are forced to walk to another building for basic needs, as the school lacks toilets and a dedicated water source. A new school building is partially constructed, but budget shortages have halted its completion, leaving the school without a boundary wall or necessary sanitation facilities. [The Kathmandu Post 1]

Meanwhile, in Sindhupalchok district, a prolonged drought has left many farmers unable to cultivate their once-fertile lands. With diminishing water sources and a lack of irrigation, the district faces a dire situation for both crop production and drinking water. According to the Agricultural Knowledge Centre in Kavrepalanchok, 36 percent of Sindhupalchok's 73,710 hectares of arable land remains uncultivated, and only 8 percent of farmland has year-round irrigation. The drought's severity has increased since the 2015 earthquake, which damaged infrastructure and disrupted water resources. Villages like Archale, Sahele, and Melamchi have seen fields abandoned as farmers face reduced yields due to altered rainfall patterns attributed to climate change. Frustrated and desperate, farmers are calling on authorities for urgent irrigation solutions. [The Kathmandu Post 2]

Nepal: Human rights commission set to retain top global ranking amid calls for reform

(lm) Nepal's National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) is expected to retain its 'A' status from the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions (GANHRI) following a successful periodic review. The Subcommittee on Accreditation (SAC), which conducted the review in Geneva on March 17, has recommended the continuation of the highest

accreditation, affirming the NHRC's compliance with key global standards.

The SAC, however, urged the NHRC to intensify its advocacy for a new legal framework that strengthens its independence. Although the NHRC submitted a draft bill for a new Act in September 2024, the government has yet to finalize it. The proposal is still under review at the Ministry of Finance. GANHRI also recommended ensuring financial autonomy, setting clear removal mechanisms for underperforming commissioners, and mandating that at least one-third of commissioners be women.

This regular five-year review follows two special reviews in 2022 and 2023, which were triggered by civil society complaints over alleged irregularities in commissioner appointments. Although GANHRI decided not to downgrade Nepal's ranking during those reviews, it has repeatedly called for alignment with the 1993 Paris Principles, which define the standards for national human rights institutions' independence, pluralism, and legal powers. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Tenant farmers suspend protest after government agrees to amend land law

(lm) Tenant farmers cultivating land owned by the Swargadwari Ashram Trust – a religious institution that manages over 700 hectares of land – in Nepal's Dang district have suspended their 51-day protest after the government pledged to amend the Guthi Sansthan Act, 1976. The farmers had been protesting in Kathmandu since February 2, demanding land ownership rights, the reinstatement of previously evicted tenants, and a one-time waiver of land-related dues.

Under the agreement, the Ministry of Land Management, Cooperatives, and Poverty Alleviation committed to tabling a draft amendment bill in the current winter session of Parliament. Key provisions in the draft address the formal registration of 600 bighas (approximately 408 hectares) of land with established tenancy rights under the farmers' names, and the proper management of another 450 bighas (about 306 hectares) currently lacking legal status.

The farmers, who represent over 3,500 households supporting more than 15,000 people, have long argued that their generations of cultivation entitle them to ownership. Despite a 2006 Supreme Court ruling that barred division of trust land, the tenant farmers

maintain that existing laws and historical practice support their claims.

Though previous agreements were not implemented, farmers say they will remain in Kathmandu until the bill is formally tabled. They warned that protests will resume if the government fails to act. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Government rolls out insurance and free treatment for wildfire victims amid rising incidents

(lm) Nepal has introduced free treatment and insurance coverage for wildfire victims through the REDD Implementation Centre under the Ministry of Forests and Environment. This year, 496 individuals have been insured with Sanima General Insurance, a figure four times higher than the annual average of affected persons.

Under the scheme, victims with minor injuries will receive NPR 100,000 (USD 730), while those seriously injured or deceased will receive NPR 500,000 (USD 3,650). The initiative aims to relieve financial burdens faced by victims, particularly in rural areas near forests.

Since January 2025, 38 people have died and 202 have been injured in 1,448 fire-related incidents. Officials warn that continued dry conditions could worsen the wildfire crisis, threatening both lives and the country's forest gains, which now cover 45 percent of Nepal's territory. Meanwhile, 110 firefighters have been trained in Madhesh and Lumbini—two of the most wildfire-prone provinces. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Trade deficit hits USD 7.2 billion, driven by petroleum, smartphones, and electric vehicles

(rs) Nepal's trade deficit has reached USD 7.2 billion in the past eight months, with total foreign trade amounting to USD 9.8 billion. Imports surged by 11.2 percent driven by rising purchases of petroleum products, electric vehicles, and smartphones. Major imports include USD 575 million worth of diesel, USD 312 million of petrol, USD 299 million of LPG, USD 70.7 million in electric vehicles, and USD 159.8 million in smartphones.

Nepal's trade deficit with India stands at USD 4.11 billion, with imports totaling USD 5.02 billion and exports at USD 911 million. The trade deficit with China is USD 158.3 million, with imports at USD 1.59 billion and exports at only USD 15.5 million.

Despite the deficit, exports have increased by 57.2 percent, reaching USD 1.15 billion, with major contributors being soybean oil (USD 349.7 million), sunflower oil (USD 58.2 million), cardamom (USD 42.5 million), and carpets (USD 31.5 million). However, Nepal has recorded trade surpluses with 34 countries, including Afghanistan, Denmark, Russia, Austria, and the Maldives. [The Himalayan Times]

Nepal: Medicinal herbs rot as processing centers remain idle and traders profit from unprocessed exports

(rs) A herb collection and processing center in Surkhet, Karnali Province—constructed in 2011 with an investment of approximately USD 300,000—remains unused despite being 80 percent complete. Officials estimate that an additional USD 750,000 to USD 1.1 million is required to complete the facility. In the absence of functioning local infrastructure, large quantities of herbs are left to rot, while traders—mainly from India—purchase raw herbs at low prices and sell processed products at significantly higher rates. For example, Chiraito, bought at USD 3.75 per kilogram, is resold for USD 7.15 per kilogram after processing.

Karnali Province, which is home to 145 medicinal herb species, exported 11,700 metric tons of herbs last year, generating only USD 225,000 in revenue. In Dolpa, where 60,000 tons of Jatamansi are produced annually, farmers see little benefit from the market value of its oil, which fetches up to USD 187 per liter. Processing centers in Dolpa, Jumla, Humla, and Mugu remain non-functional due to electricity shortages, equipment breakdowns, and lack of funding.

In Humla, a center built for USD 16,500 has been defunct for 11 years, while in Jumla, another built for USD 7,650 remains unused. Officials attribute the failures to poor feasibility studies and mismanagement, while locals have called for immediate investment in processing infrastructure to reduce the estimated 20 percent of herbs wasted annually.

Karnali's Minister for Industry, Tourism, Forests, and Environment acknowledged the long-standing problem

but cited budget limitations. The government is reportedly drafting new legislation to support the herbal industry through the construction of new facilities and provision of subsidies. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: USD 215.96 million new Pokhara airport sees first passenger flight

(lm) Pokhara International Airport, Nepal's new USD 215.96 million gateway, saw its first scheduled passenger flight on March 31, 2025, marking a key milestone since its inauguration on January 1, 2023.

Funded by China under the Belt and Road Initiative, the airport faces challenges in establishing regular international flights. To encourage airlines, it is waiving landing, parking, and ground handling fees for two years, along with the passenger service charge for departing tourists. However, high fuel costs and limited infrastructure remain significant hurdles.

As a key entry point to the Annapurna Circuit trekking route, the airport aims to ease the burden on Kathmandu's crowded Tribhuvan International Airport. Local tourism businesses are promoting the airport, including a partnership with Sichuan Airlines for chartered flights from Chengdu to Pokhara. The Pokhara Tourism Council is working with the airline to operate ten charter flights over the next ten weeks, with hopes of transitioning these into regular services. [The Kathmandu Post 1]

In related updates, Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Bishnu Prasad Paudel has announced that Gautam Buddha International Airport, located in Bhairahawa near Lumbini, will soon become fully operational. Speaking at the Lumbiniko Samarthya event on March 26, Paudel stated that key decisions have been made to expand the airport's infrastructure and attract international airlines.

The current terminal will be repurposed for domestic use, while a new international terminal is planned, which would make it Nepal’s largest international airport. He emphasized that prior doubts about the airport's feasibility and utility are outdated and that ongoing discussions with international carriers—alongside planned discount packages—aim to enhance traffic and utilization.

The airport has faced criticism over its underuse since construction, but the government maintains that

strategic efforts are underway to ensure it operates at full capacity. [The Kathmandu Post 2]

Pakistan: Balochistan continues to face dual crisis of violence and political tensions

(afk/mra/sn) Balochistan, Pakistan's southwestern province, continues to grapple with a dual crisis: rising insurgent violence and a political crackdown on rights defenders. This situation has worsened in recent weeks with a series of deadly attacks attributed to separatist groups, most notably the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), which is suspected in several incidents.

On March 27, five passengers from Punjab were executed by militants near Pasni while traveling from Gwadar to Karachi. The attackers, who also set fire to vehicles, are believed to be linked to the BLA, a separatist group that has been responsible for ethnically motivated killings in the region. Just one day earlier, a bombing in Quetta targeted a police van, killing three people, including two police officers, and injuring 21 others. Although the BLA has not officially claimed responsibility for the bombing, the group is again suspected. [Arab News 1] [Arab News 2] [DAWN 1]

In response to this surge in violence, the Balochistan provincial government has implemented a ban on late-night travel across major highways, including the Karachi-Quetta highway, as part of measures to curb the insurgency. The government's focus is on preventing further attacks and securing transportation routes, with national highways being closed at night multiple times since the start of 2025. [ISPR] [Arab News 3] [Arab News 4]

Amid the violence, international pressure is mounting on Pakistan to release detained Baloch activists, including Dr. Mahrang Baloch, a prominent human rights defender. Dr. Baloch was arrested following the March 11 train siege by the BLA, which resulted in more than 30 deaths. Her arrest, along with others, has drawn sharp criticism from human rights organizations such as the United Nations and Amnesty International. These groups have condemned the use of arbitrary detention, forced disappearances, and excessive force against peaceful protesters. They called for the immediate release of the activists and independent investigations into the use of unlawful force by Pakistani authorities. [TIME] [Arab News 4] [DAWN 2]

In response, Islamabad has dismissed these appeals "unbalanced" and "selective." It accused the activists of being participants in a broader campaign of lawlessness and violence, particularly in light of their alleged actions following the train attack. The government insisted that protesters forcibly seized the bodies of militants killed during the rescue operation and disrupted public order. It maintained that the state is entitled to take lawful measures to ensure safety and that its actions were in line with domestic and international law. [Arab News 5]

These political and security crises converged on March 29 when a suicide bomber targeted a protest rally organized by the by Sardar Akhtar Mengal's Balochistan National Party (BNP) in Mastung. The rally was intended to protest the detention of Baloch leaders and the police crackdown on sit-ins. The BNP reported that over 250 of its members were detained during clashes with police, who allegedly used tear gas and fired at protesters. [The Express Tribune] [DAWN 3] [Arab News 6]

Pakistan: Sindh's opposition to Cholistan Canal project intensifies as Chief Minister threatens to use force

(afk) Sindh Chief Minister Syed Murad Ali Shah has escalated opposition to the Cholistan Canal Project, warning that the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) is prepared to confront the federal government if necessary. Shah criticized Punjab's decision to continue with the canal's development despite objections from Sindh, and he claimed that the Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA)'s water scarcity assessments contradict independent research. Additionally, he accused the federal government of falsifying official documents to justify the approval of the project. Shah has urged Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif to officially declare that the federal government does not support the project, warning that failure to do so will result in stronger political opposition from Sindh. [The Express Tribune]

The federal government's plan to construct six canals on the Indus River for the Cholistan desert, with a cost of USD 76 million, has provoked growing opposition from the PPP, Sindh nationalist parties, and environmental activists. The project is part of the broader Green Pakistan Initiative (GPI), launched in 2023 with an aim to boost food security and modernize the agricultural sector. However, critics argue that the project will exacerbate Pakistan's already strained water resources, particularly in Sindh,

a lower riparian province that relies heavily on the Indus River system. [Al Jazeera] [The News International 1] [DAWN]

The PPP has also been criticized by figures from the federal government. Recently, Adviser to the Prime Minister on Political and Public Affairs, Rana Sanaullah, accused the PPP of politicizing the canal issue and emphasized the need for resolution through consensus rather than conflict. The Grand Democratic Alliance (GDA) has added to the criticism, accusing the Sindh government of misleading the public and failing to take effective action. [The News International 2] [The News International 3]

Pakistan: Jailed ex-Prime Minister Imran Khan nominated for Nobel Peace Prize

(lm) Imran Khan, the jailed former Prime Minister of Pakistan and founder of the opposition Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party, has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for his contributions to human rights and democracy. The nomination was announced by members of the Pakistan World Alliance (PWA), an advocacy group, in collaboration with the Norwegian political party Partiet Sentrum.

This is not Khan's first nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize; he was previously nominated in 2019 for his efforts to promote peace in South Asia. The Nobel Committee will review the nominations over an extensive eight-month process before selecting the winner.

Khan has been incarcerated since August 2023 and was sentenced to 14 years in prison earlier this year on charges related to the misuse of authority and corruption, marking the fourth conviction in his legal battles. He has maintained his innocence, describing the charges as politically motivated. [The Hindu]

Pakistan: Journalist body condemns ‘illegal visit’ to Israel by Pakistani journalists

(lm) Pakistan's Karachi Press Club (KPC) has condemned the recent visit of a 10-member delegation of Pakistani journalists, researchers, and intellectuals to Israel. The visit, which took place earlier this month, was reportedly aimed at learning about the Holocaust and the October 7, 2023 attacks by Hamas. The

delegation's travel to Israel was criticized as an attempt to “whitewash Israeli war crimes against Palestinians.”

The KPC, through its joint action committee representing several journalist unions, stated that these individuals do not represent the broader media community of Pakistan and strongly reiterated their support for the Palestinian cause. They denounced any efforts to normalize relations with Israel, a country Pakistan does not recognize and has no diplomatic ties with. The KPC further expressed its dissatisfaction, calling the visit an act of complicity in Israel’s alleged war crimes against Palestinians, and demanded an immediate investigation into how the journalists were able to visit Israel despite Pakistani passports explicitly stating they are "not valid for travel to Israel."

In response, Pakistan’s Foreign Office reaffirmed the country's stance on Israel, emphasizing continued support for Palestinian sovereignty and rights. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Indian fisherman dies by suicide in Karachi jail amid delayed repatriation process

(lm) An Indian fisherman detained in Pakistan’s Malir Jail in Karachi has died by suicide, drawing renewed attention to the humanitarian concerns surrounding cross-border detentions. According to Pakistani authorities, the fisherman had completed his sentence but remained incarcerated due to delays in repatriation procedures on the Indian side.

Prison officials said the fisherman took his own life in the jail washroom and had been suffering from severe depression. Fellow inmates reportedly did not anticipate the incident, though the man had shown signs of distress.

The case highlights the recurring issue of fishermen being detained after unintentionally crossing maritime boundaries between India and Pakistan—boundaries often difficult to navigate due to limited equipment and unclear demarcation in the Arabian Sea. Human rights advocates note that 216 Indian fishermen remain in Pakistani jails, while 81 Pakistani fishermen are currently held in India.

Malir Jail has previously faced criticism after other deaths of detained fishermen due to health complications. Pakistani authorities stress that foreign detainees are treated appropriately and are repatriated promptly once legal formalities are

completed. The fisherman's body has been handed over to the Edhi Foundation for return to India. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Arrests of journalists under cybercrime law raise alarm over shrinking press freedom

(lm) Recent arrests and detentions of journalists under Pakistan's cybercrime law, the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), have raised fresh concerns about press freedom and the state's growing intolerance of dissenting voices. In two separate incidents, journalists Farhan Mallick and Waheed Murad were arrested and charged with circulating "fake" or "misleading" information deemed critical of government officials and state institutions.

Waheed Murad, a journalist with Urdu News, was taken from his home in Islamabad by masked men on March 26. He was later remanded for two days over social media posts that authorities allege incited hatred against government functionaries. His wife described the raid as forceful and intimidating, echoing past incidents of journalist abductions. A court approved his bail on March 28, and Murad has since been released. Rights groups argue that the charges against him are politically motivated and part of a broader pattern of silencing dissent. [Arab News 1]

Meanwhile, in Karachi, journalist and Raftar founder Farhan Mallick remains in detention after being remanded by local courts on new fraud-related allegations involving a call center. Mallick had earlier been detained under PECA for broadcasting allegedly "anti-state" content on his YouTube channel. His lawyer criticized the fresh charges as a tactic to prolong his detention and deter critical journalism. [DAWN]

These arrests coincide with the disappearance of the brothers of exiled journalist Ahmad Noorani, following the publication of a controversial report about Pakistan's army chief on Noorani's website. Together, these incidents point to an escalating crackdown on press freedom, as PECA's vague and expansive provisions are increasingly used to target journalists, activists, and political opponents. [Arab News 2] [National Assembly of Pakistan]

The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), passed in 2016, was intended to combat cybercrime and protect digital security. However, rights defenders say it has become a tool of suppression, enabling state

authorities to criminalize online speech and silence independent journalism.

International watchdogs, including the Committee to Protect Journalists, have warned of a deteriorating climate for media freedom in Pakistan. The country currently ranks 152 out of 180 in the global press freedom index compiled by Reporters Without Borders. Concerns are further compounded by the continued blocking of social media platforms like X (formerly Twitter) and recurring internet restrictions.

Pakistan: IMF approves USD 0.0036 per unit power tariff cut to ease burden on consumers

(lm) The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has approved a reduction of 1 PKR (USD 0.0036) per kilowatt-hour in power tariffs, offering modest relief to inflation-hit consumers. The cut will be financed through a recently imposed PKR 791 (USD 2.85) per unit levy on gas used by captive power plants—industrial facilities that generate electricity for internal consumption.

The IMF's representative in Pakistan confirmed the decision, noting the reduction would benefit all consumer categories. Analysts, however, called the relief limited, estimating an average monthly savings of around PKR 200 (USD 0.72) per household, and emphasized the need for structural reforms in the energy sector for more meaningful relief.

The development follows the IMF's recent staff-level agreement with Pakistan, which includes a USD 1.3 billion climate resilience loan and the release of USD 1 billion under an ongoing USD 7 billion bailout. The Pakistani government plans to announce a broader relief package after Eid, which may include an electricity price cut of up to PKR 8 (USD 0.029) per unit.

The tariff cut comes as Pakistan continues to recover from its 2023 economic crisis, during which compliance with IMF loan conditions led to subsidy withdrawals, steep energy price hikes, and record inflation peaking at 38 percent. Inflation has since declined to 1.5 percent in February 2025, with expectations to remain in the 1–3 percent range. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Fuel prices reduced by USD 0.0036 per liter for two weeks

(sn) The Pakistan government announced a reduction in fuel prices by USD 0.0036 per liter for the next two weeks, beginning March 28. The revised price will see a liter of petrol cost USD 0.91 and a liter of diesel USD 0.92. Pakistan reviews fuel prices fortnightly to ensure that import cost changes are passed onto consumers while also aiming to stabilize the nation's fuel supply chain. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Stock and currency markets surge following IMF agreement, signaling economic stability

(afk/sn/mra) Pakistan's stock and currency markets experienced significant positive movement after a staff-level agreement (SLA) with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) was reached, signaling renewed investor confidence and macroeconomic stability. The agreement includes a new USD 1.3 billion climate resilience loan under the Resilience and Sustainability Facility and the completion of the first review under the ongoing USD 7 billion Extended Fund Facility (EFF). Pending IMF Board approval, the deal is expected to unlock USD 2.3 billion in total for Pakistan. [Reuters] [ANI News]

In response to the announcement, Pakistan's KSE-100 index surged by 4 percent in March, hitting an intraday high of 118,220 points and closing at 117,772 points on March 26, a 1 percent rise for the day. This rally was attributed to the IMF agreement and ongoing energy sector reforms, including progress on circular debt resolution. The rupee also appreciated slightly to PKR 280.2 against the U.S. dollar, bolstered by a stable supply of remittances, which reached USD 3.1 billion in February 2025. [Arab News 1]

The IMF has praised Pakistan's efforts to restore macroeconomic stability, noting that inflation fell to 1.5 percent in February, its lowest level since 2015, after peaking at around 40 percent in May 2023. The country's tax revenue has also increased by 26 percent year-on-year, exceeding IMF targets, and the stock index saw a record 89 percent rise in the 2024 fiscal year. [Arab News 2]

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif expressed that the IMF deal would help secure long-term economic stability, highlighting Pakistan's tax-to-GDP ratio, which reached 10.6 percent, the highest in four years. He noted that with stable exchange rates, low inflation, and improved external balances, the country is poised for continued resilience and a projected 3.6 percent GDP growth for this fiscal year.

However, the IMF has warned that external risks such as geopolitical tensions, rising protectionism, and financial tightening could disrupt Pakistan's progress. Despite these challenges, Pakistan remains committed to structural reforms to ensure long-term prosperity. [Arab News 1]

Additionally, Pakistan's fiscal health continues to improve, with a 691 million USD surplus recorded in the first eight months of the fiscal year. Analysts are optimistic about future growth, forecasting the stock index could reach 123,000 points by June, supported by expected remittances surpassing USD 35 billion. With provisional GDP growth recorded at 1.73 percent for Q2 of the financial year, Pakistan is on track to achieve its growth target of 2.5 to 3.5 percent for the full year. [Arab News 3]

Pakistan: Discovery of strategic antimony reserves boosts economy and defense sector

(lm) Pakistan has announced the discovery of significant antimony reserves in the southwestern province of Balochistan, a critical metal used in a variety of applications, including military equipment such as infrared missiles, nuclear weapons, night vision goggles, and as a hardening agent for bullets and tanks. Antimony is also used in batteries, semiconductors, and flame retardants. The discovery, which was revealed by Pakistan's Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC), is seen as a major development for the country’s defense and economic sectors.

This announcement comes just days ahead of the Pakistan Minerals Investment Forum 2025, where the country aims to attract both domestic and international businesses. The reserves were discovered through a joint venture between the Oil and Gas Development Company Limited (OGDCL) and the Pakistan Mineral Development Corporation (PMDC), which are now working together in a 50:50 partnership. A formal announcement of the venture is expected during the forum on April 8–9.

Currently, China is the world’s largest producer of antimony, but this new discovery could reduce Pakistan’s reliance on imports and enhance its local production capabilities, benefiting both the economy and the defense sector. The government has placed mining and minerals as a priority sector for economic development, aiming to boost exports and reduce imports.

The SIFC also shared that Pakistan is progressing in acquiring ten mineral blocks in Gilgit-Baltistan, where gold, copper, nickel, and cobalt deposits have been confirmed. In Punjab, the OGDCL is working with the provincial mineral department to explore potential mineral deposits, including iron, copper, and gold, in Chiniot. Furthermore, Pakistan is exploring the option of refining antimony in Oman to expedite the commercialization process, alleviating local infrastructure constraints.

To further support the long-term growth of the mining sector, the government plans to align academic curricula with international standards and collaborate with the Higher Education Commission (HEC) and local universities to produce a skilled workforce for the industry. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Among top countries for crypto adoption with 20 million users

(sn) Pakistan is one of the top countries globally for cryptocurrency adoption, with around 20 million users, according to Bilal Bin Saqib, Chief Executive Officer of the newly established Pakistan Crypto Council (PCC). The country ranks among the top three or four globally, with significant potential for blockchain technology in sectors like real estate and agriculture. Despite cryptocurrencies like Bitcoin not being officially regulated, they are not banned or illegal in Pakistan.

The government launched the PCC to establish a regulatory framework for cryptocurrency trading, exchanges, and licensing, aiming to create a secure environment for users. While Saqib did not provide a timeline for the official legalization of crypto, he emphasized the need for a balanced tax structure that promotes growth and attracts international investment.

Pakistan's low operating costs for crypto businesses make it a competitive alternative to established hubs like Dubai and Singapore. Additionally, the country is collaborating with the UAE, Nigeria, and Turkey to refine its crypto policy and regulatory approach. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Study reveals USD 2 billion in zakat paid annually, with women as majority recipients

(lm) A recent study by the UK-based International Center for Tax and Development (ICTD) and Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS) has revealed that Pakistanis contribute more than GBP 1.7 billion (USD 2.19 billion) in zakat annually. The majority of zakat recipients are women.

his form of obligatory almsgiving, one of the five pillars of Islam, requires Muslims to donate a fixed portion of their wealth to those in need. The findings, based on a 2024 survey of 7,500 Sunni Pakistanis, suggest that more money is distributed through zakat than through Pakistan's largest state-led cash transfer program, the Benazir Income Support Program (BISP).

The research highlights that zakat contributions are made directly by individuals, bypassing the state zakat fund. Only 2 percent of zakat givers utilize the official state fund, which is perceived to be inefficient. More than half of the respondents reported giving zakat exclusively to female recipients, especially widows, who are viewed as economically vulnerable. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Sharif says Huawei training program will create jobs and boost IT exports

(lm) Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has expressed strong support for Chinese tech giant Huawei's program to train 300,000 Pakistanis in information and communication technologies (ICT), describing it as a key initiative to generate employment and increase exports. The program, launched through a Pakistan-Huawei agreement last year, includes training in artificial intelligence (AI), cybersecurity, cloud computing, and other advanced technologies.

During a meeting with Huawei's leadership in Islamabad, Sharif emphasized the importance of long-term collaboration and noted that the initiative aligns with the government's goals to promote youth employment and expand IT-related exports. Of the 300,000 Pakistanis targeted, 60,000 will receive high-tech training, with the remainder undergoing basic ICT training by the end of 2025.

Huawei has also partnered with the Higher Education Commission to introduce relevant coursework in 15 universities. Sharif also launched the Digital Youth Hub portal to further connect young people with jobs and education opportunities, as part of Pakistan's broader strategy to achieve USD 60 billion in exports over the next five years. [Arab News]

Pakistan: ECNEC approves 13 development projects worth USD 4.6 billion

(mra) The Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (ECNEC), chaired by Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Senator Mohammad Ishaq Dar, has approved 13 significant development projects totaling approximately USD 4.6 billion. These initiatives span flood rehabilitation, transport infrastructure, and the expansion of Pakistan Railways' capacity, with a special focus on the regions of Gilgit-Baltistan and Sindh.

Among the approved projects is a comprehensive flood rehabilitation program to mitigate the impact of natural disasters and enhance resilience. Additionally, major investments have been allocated for transport infrastructure, including the construction and upgrading of roads and highways. The expansion of Pakistan Railways aims to modernize the railway network, boosting efficiency and economic activity across the country. These developments are expected to play a crucial role in Pakistan’s socio-economic growth. [Profit by Pakistan Today]

Pakistan: World Bank approves USD 300 million loan to support Punjab's smog mitigation efforts

(afk) The World Bank has approved a concessional loan of USD 300 million to assist Pakistan’s Punjab province in improving air quality and tackling smog. The loan will support the Punjab Clean Air Program (PCAP), which is part of the province's broader Smog Mitigation Action Plan (SMAP). The program aims to reduce air pollution, especially in Lahore, which experiences extreme levels of pollution, particularly during the winter months due to factory emissions, traffic, and crop residue burning.

Lahore, home to 14 million people, has recorded concentrations of PM2.5 particles at levels more than 20 times the World Health Organization's recommendations, posing significant health risks. The initiative will introduce measures across various sectors, including transport, agriculture, industry, energy, and municipal services. Key interventions will include the deployment of 5,000 super seeders to curb crop residue burning and the introduction of 600 electric buses to reduce reliance on polluting vehicles.

The loan will also enhance air quality management infrastructure, increase air quality monitoring stations, and establish fuel testing laboratories. In addition, the program will support public awareness campaigns and engage vulnerable groups such as schools and hospitals to mitigate health impacts related to air pollution.

This development comes as smog levels in Punjab reached such severity this year that it was visible from space, prompting school closures across the region. [Pakistan Observer] [Associated Press of Pakistan] [Arab News]

Pakistan: Punjab to launch first carbon credit project to combat pollution and climate risks

(lm) Punjab is set to inaugurate Pakistan's first carbon credit project at the decades-old Mehmood Booti dumpsite in Lahore, aiming to mitigate environmental damage and generate revenue through climate finance mechanisms. The 42.98-acre landfill, active since 1997, has accumulated over 13 million tons of waste, posing serious risks including toxic leachate, methane emissions, and smog-inducing air pollution.

Led by the Ravi Urban Development Authority (RUDA), the rehabilitation effort will convert the site into an urban forest and solar park while deploying technology to capture and utilize methane gas. The project is expected to reduce carbon emissions by one million tons over 15 years, with a potential issuance of 100,000 carbon credits annually, projected to generate around PKR 2 billion (USD 7.14 million) in revenue each year. The total investment in the project is PKR 5 billion (USD 17.86 million).

Officials say the initiative will produce hydrogen energy from waste gases and contribute significantly to Pakistan's climate action goals. Environmental experts have welcomed the project as a major step toward improving Lahore's air quality and reducing the city's long-standing exposure to harmful emissions. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Highest number of militant attacks during Ramadan in a decade

(lm) Pakistan experienced its highest number of militant attacks during the holy month of Ramadan in a

decade, with at least 84 attacks recorded, according to the Pak Institute for Peace Studies. This marks a significant increase from last year's 26 attacks. The surge in violence follows the end of a ceasefire by the Pakistani Taliban in November 2022 and the growing capabilities of militant groups such as the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), which was responsible for a train hijacking in Balochistan on March 11 that resulted in at least 25 fatalities.

The Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies reported 61 attacks in the first three weeks of Ramadan, compared to 60 attacks in the previous year. This Ramadan was also the deadliest in a decade for security forces, with 56 personnel killed between March 2 and March 20.

Analysts point to a rise in group unification, with Baloch factions joining forces and some groups, such as the Hafiz Gul Bahadur faction, competing with the Pakistani Taliban for dominance. Additionally, banned organizations like Lashkar-e-Islam have resurfaced, contributing to the escalating violence. Pakistan's ongoing conflict is exacerbated by the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan, with Pakistan accusing the Afghan government of providing safe havens to militants, a claim Kabul denies. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Khyber Pakhtunkhwa battles growing militancy and cross-border violence

(sn/afk/mra) Pakistan's northwestern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province continues to grapple with a surge in insurgent violence, with recent operations and attacks leading to dozens of casualties. The province is caught in the grip of two distinct yet interconnected security crises—rising militant violence, particularly from Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and ongoing cross-border tensions with Afghanistan.

On March 26-27, the Pakistan army carried out multiple intelligence-based operations, primarily in North Waziristan and Dera Ismail Khan, which resulted in the deaths of 11 militants and the recovery of weapons and ammunition. These operations were aimed at countering the growing threat from the TTP, a banned militant group that has escalated its attacks on security forces and civilians in the region. The Pakistani government blames the TTP for operating from Afghan safe havens, a claim denied by Kabul. [ISPR] [Arab News 1]

One of the deadliest incidents occurred on March 28, when separate attacks along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border killed seven soldiers and a civilian. The military engaged in an intense battle with Taliban fighters, leading to casualties on both sides. [Arab News 2]

The following day, in a tragic turn of events, a drone strike targeting alleged TTP hideouts in the Mardan district killed 10 civilians, including women and children. These victims were reportedly part of nomadic families from the Swat region, leading to protests from local residents who claimed that the casualties were innocent civilians. The attack followed a TTP assault on Pakistani soldiers that killed seven the day before.

The drone strike, part of an anti-terror operation, was carried out without prior notification to provincial authorities, prompting calls for accountability from local leaders. In response, the KP government, led by Chief Minister Ali Amin Gandapur, expressed deep regret over the civilian deaths and promised a thorough investigation into the incident. [Arab News 3] [Arab News 4]

While the drone strike sparked local unrest, the TTP announced a three-day ceasefire for Eid Al-Fitr, a brief pause in its ongoing campaign of violence. However, the group has since claimed responsibility for numerous attacks, with over 190 casualties reported in KP and Balochistan since the beginning of 2025. [Arab News 5]

The violence is compounded by the geopolitical tensions with Afghanistan, where Pakistan accuses the Afghan Taliban of sheltering militants who carry out attacks across the border. Afghanistan's government denies these claims and instead accuses Pakistan of harboring Daesh militants. Despite these denials, the insurgencies in KP and Balochistan continue to fuel instability, making it a critical point of contention for both domestic and regional security.

Pakistan's Army Chief General Asim Munir visited KP during this period of escalating violence, spending Eid Al-Fitr with troops stationed along the border. He praised the dedication and resilience of the armed forces in their ongoing battle against militancy, as the country grapples with a growing insurgency and cross-border threats. [Arab News 6]

Pakistan: Punjab warns of drought as rainfall drops 38 percent over four months

(lm) Punjab, Pakistan's most populous and agriculturally significant province, has received 38 percent less rainfall than average over the past four months, prompting the Provincial Disaster Management Authority (PDMA) to warn of a looming drought. The alert follows an earlier warning from the Pakistan Meteorological Department (PMD), which said that drought conditions could worsen across Punjab, Sindh, and Balochistan due to continued low rainfall, rising temperatures, and depleted water reservoirs.

Punjab contributes approximately 68 percent of Pakistan's annual food grain production and contains 51 million acres of cultivated land. A PDMA meeting chaired by Director General Irfan Ali Kathia reviewed emergency measures for drought-affected areas, particularly in southern Punjab's Cholistan region. The authority announced additional funding and the provision of water through pipelines and bowsers to remote areas.

The PDMA also instructed relevant agencies to ensure availability of essential medicines and take precautionary measures against heat waves. Pakistan, which has the fourth-highest water consumption rate globally, faces increasing water stress, with per capita availability in decline amid rapid population growth. Experts have long warned that the country could face absolute water scarcity by 2025. [Arab News]

Pakistan: National polio vaccination campaign undergoes review

(sn) Pakistan's national polio management team has reviewed plans for the upcoming vaccination campaign, which is scheduled to run through April and May. The review was undertaken following reports of six cases through 2025 thus far and an emphasis on making these campaigns as effective as possible.

While the virus continues to be problematic, Pakistan has successfully reduced the number of cases this year, with 74 cases reported through 2024. The campaign attempts to vaccinate every child throughout Pakistan, though the virus' persistence, as well as militancy at polio vaccinators, has challenged programs in the past. [Arab News]

Seychelles: Government advances key infrastructure and fiscal reforms

(db) On March 26, President Wavel Ramkalawan led a cabinet meeting where significant legal and policy decisions were made, signaling a push for enhanced governance and sustainable development in the Seychelles.

First, the government endorsed the Grand Anse Mahé Land Use Plan. Based on this decision, the Seychelles Planning Authority shall implement the plan, which aims to create a balanced approach to land usage in the district. The plan prioritizes sustainable growth, integrating residential development, agricultural needs, tourism, environmental preservation, and infrastructure improvements.

Additionally, the Cabinet approved the modernization of the Public Finance Management (PFM) legal framework, along with a new Public-Private Partnership (PPP) policy. The revised PFM Act will enhance fiscal responsibility, accountability, and transparency, aligning Seychelles with international best practices. The PPP framework will streamline partnerships with the private sector for infrastructure projects, ensuring value for money and risk mitigation.

Third, the cabinet initiated legal reforms to replace the current Public Debt Management framework with a new law to bolster financial accountability and sustainability. The reform shall be developed in cooperation with the International Monetary Fund to improve governance and transparency. The Ministry of Finance is supposed to lead stakeholder consultations and implement the framework progressively. Key aspects comprise formalizing the Debt Management Division, thus providing the Minister of Finance with the sole borrowing competence under the supervision of the Seychellois National Assembly, and implementing stricter controls on public-sector company borrowing as well as state liability.

Finally, the government reviewed the 2024 Annual Performance Report and highlighted the promising fiscal development of Seychelles. The report pointed out a primary surplus of 3.4 percent of GDP, thus exceeding expectations; enhanced tax collection and strict expenditure control were also mentioned. While acknowledging problems like grant underperformance and capital project delays, the cabinet expressed satisfaction regarding financial discipline, debt management, and the streamlined functioning of the public sector. [Office of the President of the Republic of Seychelles]

Seychelles: Register of Voters 2025 certified

(lm) The Register of Voters for 2025 has been officially certified, confirming that Seychelles now has a total of 73,627 registered voters. The list, which includes voters registered up to December 31, 2024, was certified at the Electoral Commission headquarters in Mont Fleuri. Of the total, 38,056 are females and 35,571 are males. [Seychelles Nation]

Seychelles: President receives annual reports from CBS and SHRC

(lm) On April 1, President Wavel Ramkalawan received the Central Bank of Seychelles' (CBS) Annual Report for 2024, presented by CBS Governor Caroline Abel. The report includes the CBS' financial statements and auditor's report for the year ending December 31, 2024, which was independently assessed by Grant Thornton Audit and Accounting Limited. The presentation is a customary annual event held in late March. [Seychelles Nation 1]

In a separate meeting, the chairperson of the Seychelles Human Rights Commission (SHRC), Justice Bernardin Renaud, also presented President Ramkalawan with the SHRC's Annual Report for 2024. Justice Renaud emphasized the importance of educating the public on human rights to foster better reporting and address violations effectively. He noted that while the SHRC is actively raising awareness, collaboration with other stakeholders, including the media, is crucial to better explain human rights issues and violations. [Seychelles Nation 2]

Sri Lanka: Two Supreme Court judges recuse themselves from hearing Karannagoda appeal

(lm) Two Supreme Court judges in Sri Lanka—Justice A.H.M.D. Nawaz and Justice Priyantha Fernando—have recused themselves from hearing an appeal related to former Navy Commander Admiral of the Fleet Wasantha Karannagoda. The case concerns the Attorney General's 2021 decision to withdraw an indictment against Karannagoda over the 2008 disappearance of five youths, allegedly linked to extrajudicial killings.

Justice Nawaz cited his previous involvement in the case at the Court of Appeal as his reason for stepping aside. The appeal, filed by the parents of the missing youths, challenges the earlier Court of Appeal decision to dismiss their writ petition. They argue the State failed to investigate the disappearances thoroughly and to uphold the right to life of their sons.

The Supreme Court has now fixed the hearing for September 15, 2025. [Daily Mirror 1]

Separately, Karannagoda has condemned the United Kingdom's recent sanctions imposed against him and two other former military leaders under the UK's Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime. In remarks to Daily Mirror, he accused the UK of hypocrisy, stating that while it targets Sri Lankan military officials, it has never apologized for its colonial-era atrocities in Sri Lanka and India. He also criticized the British government for remaining silent on ongoing global conflicts, including in Gaza, Syria, and Afghanistan.

Karannagoda further alleged that pro-LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) sympathizers in Western countries are lobbying to influence foreign governments to sanction Sri Lankan military personnel involved in the defeat of the LTTE. He claimed the UK sanctions were politically motivated and urged the Sri Lankan government to defend its military leadership against what he described as externally driven pressure campaigns. [Daily Mirror 2]

Echoing Karannagoda's position, former President Mahinda Rajapaksa also strongly condemned the UK's move, questioning how military leaders who helped end a decades-long war against terrorism could be sanctioned. He defended the military campaign, stating that it was launched only after the LTTE's continuous violations of the 2002 ceasefire, including mass civilian killings and forced child soldier recruitment. Rajapaksa emphasized that the final offensive in 2009 was necessary after the LTTE shut off irrigation water in Trincomalee and continued its violent attacks.

He further criticized the UK's sanctioning of former LTTE commander Vinayagamoorthy Muralitharan (Karuna Amman), who defected in 2004 and later joined mainstream politics. Rajapaksa argued that such actions were meant to appease segments of the Tamil diaspora in the UK and ignored the complex history of Sri Lanka's civil war. He reminded the international community that over 27,000 Sri Lankan military and police personnel died in the conflict, alongside thousands of civilians, and that lasting peace could not have been achieved while terrorism persisted. [Daily Mirror 3]

Sri Lanka: Government urges nationalist monk to share terrorism intelligence

(lm) Sri Lanka's government has urged nationalist monk Galagoda Aththe Gnanasara Thera, General Secretary of the hardline Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist Bodu Bala Sena (BBS), to directly share with the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) any information he claims to have about active terrorist groups.

This comes after Gnanasara Thera publicly stated he would only share his knowledge with President Anura Kumara Dissanayake and the Defense Secretary. Government officials stressed that investigations are the CID's responsibility and emphasized that all citizens have a duty to support national security by providing intelligence to the appropriate authorities. [Daily Mirror]

The renewed focus on terrorism-related threats comes in the context of ongoing frustration over the unresolved 2019 Easter Sunday bombings, which killed over 260 people and injured hundreds more in coordinated attacks on churches and hotels. The attacks were carried out by local Islamist extremists allegedly inspired by the Islamic State. Despite early promises of swift justice, the government has since admitted that resolving the case within a short period is not feasible due to its complexity [see AiR No. 11, March/2025, 3].

Gnanasara Thera has previously claimed to know the identity of the mastermind behind the Easter bombings and accused authorities of ignoring his prior warnings. His continued refusal to share information directly with the CID has drawn criticism, especially as the country approaches the sixth anniversary of the attacks on April 21.

Sri Lanka: NPP submits motion to remove Deshabandu Tennakoon amid ongoing investigation

(lm) The ruling National People's Power (NPP) alliance has handed over a motion to Parliament's Speaker, Jagath Wickramarathne, seeking the removal of suspended Inspector General of Police (IGP) Deshabandu Tennakoon. This comes after Tennakoon's involvement in the ongoing investigation into a fatal shooting incident near a hotel in Weligama,

Matara, on December 31, 2023. The Matara Magistrate's Court has already ordered Tennakoon's remand until April 3 in connection with the incident, where CCD officers, operating without notifying local law enforcement, were mistakenly fired upon by local police, resulting in the death of a police sergeant and the injury of a sub-inspector. [Daily Mirror 1]

The Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), the main opposition party, has also expressed its support for the motion to remove Tennakoon. MP Ajith P. Perera confirmed that the SJB officially supports the move, citing the party's objections when Tennakoon's name was nominated for the position by then-President Ranil Wickremesinghe, due to concerns over his past misconduct. [Daily Mirror 2]

In parallel, the Court of Appeal has extended an interim order maintaining the status quo concerning former Colombo Crimes Division (CCD) Director Neville de Silva. The court granted additional time for a petitioner to file supporting documents and scheduled the next hearing for April 28. The Attorney General's Department objected to the extension, but the order remains in effect until the next session. [Daily Mirror 3]

Meanwhile, the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) has summoned former Public Security Minister Tiran Alles for questioning, based on suspicions that he may possess relevant information regarding the case. [Daily Mirror 4]

Sri Lanka: High Court judge recuses from Namal Rajapaksa's Krrish case

(lm) Colombo High Court Judge Manjula Tilakaratne has withdrawn from presiding over the case involving Parliamentarian Namal Rajapaksa, the eldest son of former President and Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa, who is accused of laundering LKR 70 million (approximately USD 238,000) through the Krrish transaction. The case has since been transferred to High Court No. 1 and rescheduled for May 21, after both prosecution and defense requested a postponement.

Judge Tilakaratne explained in open court that his decision was driven by public comments made on social media platforms by figures such as Sanath Balasuriya and Poddala Jayantha, which, he said, cast doubt on his ability to ensure a fair hearing. The matter is now under the purview of Colombo Chief High Court Judge Adithya Patabendige, who will

appoint a new judge to oversee the proceedings. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Deputy Minister fails to appear in court over 2022 attack on Ranil Wickremesinghe's residence

(lm) Sri Lanka's Deputy Minister of Youth Affairs, Eranga Gunasekara, failed to appear before the Fort Magistrate's Court on March 26 in connection with the July 2022 arson attack on former President and United National Party (UNP) leader Ranil Wickremesinghe's private residence at Fifth Lane, Kollupitiya. Gunasekara is also accused of obstructing the Fire Brigade's response during the incident.

His legal counsel cited health issues as the reason for his absence. The Magistrate issued arrest warrants for four other suspects who were also absent and instructed Gunasekara to appear at the next court hearing. Several co-accused, including former MP J.C. Ranga, were present in court. [Daily Mirror 1]

In response to media reports, the Ministry of Youth Affairs issued a statement denying that Gunasekara is a suspect in the case. Officials clarified that the Kollupitiya Police had confirmed no warrant had been issued against him and rejected claims that the fire service was obstructed. [Daily Mirror 2]

Sri Lanka: NPP challenges rejection of nominations for local council elections

(lm) The National People's Power (NPP), Sri Lanka's ruling alliance, has filed three writ petitions challenging the rejection of its nominations for the upcoming Local Authorities Election 2025 in three Pradeshiya Sabhas—Mawanella, Medawachchiya, and Damana. Pradeshiya Sabhas are local government bodies that administer rural areas in Sri Lanka, similar to local councils.

The NPP is seeking interim court orders to halt the elections in these areas, scheduled for May 6, arguing that the rejections were procedurally flawed. The petitioners claim that in Mawanella, their nominations were dismissed due to missing certified birth certificates or affidavits for youth candidates, while in Medawachchiya, candidates failed to properly authenticate their signatures as required. The Damana rejection involves similar technical grounds. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Former opposition leader of Central Provincial Council granted bail in bribery case

(lm) The former Opposition Leader of the Central Provincial Council, Don Harindra Chanaka Illapperuma, was granted bail by the Colombo Chief Magistrate after being arrested on bribery charges. Illapperuma was accused of soliciting and accepting a total of LKR 350,000 (approximately USD 1,190) in exchange for promising jobs at the Ceylon Petroleum Corporation and the Ceylon Electricity Board.

The Commission to Investigate Allegations of Bribery or Corruption (CIABOC) arrested him based on complaints filed in 2019. He was initially remanded by the Kandy Magistrate's Court but was released on surety bail of LKR 500,000 (USD 1,700) per charge, totaling LKR 1 million (USD 3,400). A travel ban was also imposed.

The defense stated that Illapperuma admitted to the wrongdoing and had returned the bribe money to the complainants. With investigations completed, the case now proceeds to trial. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: MP Chamara Sampath remanded in bribery probe despite bail in earlier cases

(lm) New Democratic Front (NDF) parliamentarian Chamara Sampath Dassanayake, representing Badulla District, was remanded until April 1 in a bribery case, despite being granted bail in two other related cases on the same day.

Dassanayake was arrested on March 27 by the Commission to Investigate Allegations of Bribery or Corruption (CIABOC) after arriving to give a statement regarding three corruption charges. These include alleged financial irregularities during his previous tenure as a provincial minister. He was later produced before the Colombo Chief Magistrate's Court.

While he was granted bail for two of the cases earlier in the day, the court ordered his remand in a third, separate bribery case that remains under investigation. [Daily Mirror 1] [Daily Mirror 2] [Daily Mirror 3]

Sri Lanka: Authorities suppress student protests over employment crisis

Recent demonstrations by Allied Health Sciences students in Sri Lanka have faced severe responses from the police, highlighting the deepening employment concerns in the country. In two separate incidents, student-led protests were forcefully disrupted by the police, leading to arrests and hospitalizations.

On March 26, Sri Lankan police blocked a protest organized by students from the Allied Health Sciences Faculty at the University of Jaffna. The protest sought to address unemployment, specifically the inability to find job placements following graduation. However, shortly after beginning their protest, numerous police officers disrupted the march and forced students to return to the university campus. Authorities cited election regulations as the basis for the intervention, claiming that public demonstrations were prohibited during the local government election period. The students, however, insisted that their protest was apolitical and focused solely on employment issues. [Tamil Guardian]

Meanwhile, on March 27, students from the Allied Health Sciences Faculty of Peradeniya University launched a nonviolent protest at the Health Ministry in Colombo. Their primary demand was the abolition of the general knowledge and intelligence exam used for recruiting Allied Health graduates into government health services. The Allied Health Sciences Students' Union (AHSSU) argued that this method was unscientific and undermined the merit-based system for graduates of state universities. The Government Physiotherapy Officers' Association (GPOA) also condemned the recruitment process, calling it discriminatory against students from public institutions. [Daily Mirror]

At 2:30 pm on March 28, police stormed the protest site, using force to disperse demonstrators and arresting 27 participants. Among those detained were the Secretary of the Allied Health Science Graduates' Collective and the Convener of the Inter University Students' Federation (IUSF). Five students were hospitalized due to injuries sustained during the police action. While 25 arrested students were later granted bail, two—including the IUSF convener —remained in remand custody. [Daily News] [Daily Mirror]

The police justified the arrests by citing a prior court order prohibiting demonstrations that blocked roads around the Health Ministry and hospital areas. The GPOA has since vowed to escalate trade union actions

if the government fails to address the students' demands.

Sri Lanka: Free Media Movement urges transparency in state media reform plans

(lm) The Free Media Movement (FMM) has called on the Sri Lankan government to ensure transparency and accountability in its proposed restructuring of state-owned media institutions. In a statement issued on March 26, the FMM urged authorities to publicly disclose any reform plans, especially those that may have emerged from President Anura Kumara Dissanayake's recent official visit to China.

The restructuring reportedly targets three financially struggling state media bodies—Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation, Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation, and Independent Television Network—under a unified management structure. The FMM emphasized that while financial sustainability is important, reforms must be informed by public consultation and should aim to transform state media from government mouthpieces into genuine public service institutions.

Concerns have also been raised over the potential connection between the restructuring efforts and a bilateral agreement signed with China during the President's visit, which reportedly pertains to state media but has not been publicly disclosed. The FMM urged the government to release details of the agreement and involve media professionals and civil society in shaping any future reforms to safeguard press freedom and public accountability. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: HIV cases hit all-time high with 824 infections reported in 2024

(lm) Sri Lanka recorded its highest number of annual HIV/AIDS cases in 2024, with 824 new infections, marking an 18 percent increase compared to 2023's total of 694, according to the National STD/AIDS Control Programme. This surge includes 112 individuals aged 15–24 and reflects a significant male predominance, with a male-to-female ratio of 7.3:1.

The final quarter of 2024 saw 217 new cases, the highest recorded in a single quarter since 2009. The year also registered 47 HIV-related deaths, and more than 1 million HIV tests were conducted nationwide.

Among the new cases, 18 were identified within the transgender community. Since 2009, Sri Lanka has reported a cumulative total of 4,909 male and 1,521 female HIV cases. Health officials attribute the rise to expanded testing, low awareness of sexual health, and risky behavior without adequate precautions. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Government sets maximum retail price for medicines in new gazette

(lm) Sri Lanka has issued an Extraordinary Gazette Notification introducing a maximum retail price mechanism for medicines. The regulation, announced by the Ministry of Health, authorizes the National Medicines Regulatory Authority (NMRA) to revise drug prices twice annually.

Additionally, the NMRA retains the authority to adjust prices at any time in the public interest, especially in response to fluctuations in the value of the U.S. dollar that affect pharmaceutical costs. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Worker remittances rise 16.3 percent in early 2025

(lm) Sri Lanka recorded a 16.3 percent year-on-year increase in worker remittances by the end of February 2025, with inflows totaling USD 1.12 billion for the first two months, according to the Central Bank. This compares to USD 963.7 million received during the same period in 2024.

February alone saw remittances reach USD 548.1 million. The Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE) projects that annual remittances could reach USD 7 billion by the end of the year, up from USD 6.6 billion in 2024.

The growing remittance inflow offers crucial support to the country's foreign exchange reserves and broader economic stability. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Government open to privatization and other options for SriLankan Airlines

(lm) The Sri Lankan government is actively reviewing all potential options for restructuring SriLankan Airlines,

the financially distressed national carrier, including privatization, public-private partnerships (PPPs), or changes in management and ownership structures.

Deputy Minister of Finance and Planning Harshana Suriyapperuma stated that an expert committee is assessing the most effective strategy to restructure the airline in line with government policy. While no firm decision has been made, Suriyapperuma emphasized that all alternatives remain on the table and the government does not favor any one outcome in advance.

The government had initially scrapped plans to privatize the airline after taking office in October 2024, opting for internal reforms. However, there is renewed pressure from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to reconsider privatization as part of broader economic restructuring efforts. Although no public timeline has been announced, the committee has reportedly been given a deadline to present its recommendations. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Apparel sector warns of over USD 1 billion loss from SVAT removal

(lm) Sri Lanka's apparel exporters have raised alarm over the planned abolition of the Simplified Value Added Tax (SVAT) system, warning it could cost the sector over USD 1 billion in lost export earnings annually. The Inland Revenue Department is preparing to replace SVAT with a risk-based refund system set to begin on October 1, 2025.

The Joint Apparel Association Forum (JAAF) expressed concern that even under best-case scenarios—where exporters classified as low- or medium-risk receive refunds within 45 days—the industry would still face an added cost of LKR 212 million (USD 718,000) per month in interest, totaling LKR 2.6 billion (USD 8.8 million) per year.

JAAF officials warned that this would drive companies to relocate trading houses overseas, abandon local sourcing and subcontracting, and harm micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs). Currently, 12 trading house operations account for roughly 50 percent of the sector's expenditure.

Exporters also noted that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has denied involvement in the decision to abolish SVAT, attributing the move instead to Treasury efforts to resolve short-term cash flow challenges. The industry is urging authorities to reconsider the

transition, which they say could significantly disrupt one of Sri Lanka's key export sectors. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: KDU hospital identified as financial burden; committee recommends reforms

(lm) A high-level government committee has identified the Sir John Kotelawala Defence University (KDU) Hospital as a burden to the Treasury, citing its inability to generate profits since its opening in 2017. The hospital, located in Werahera, includes 70 ICU/HDU beds, a cardiac catheterization lab, oncology unit, and 20 modular theaters—including Sri Lanka's first hybrid theater. It is affiliated with the Kotelawala Defence University and serves both military personnel and civilians.

The committee, tasked with evaluating 160 state institutions, recommends taking immediate steps to ensure the hospital's financial sustainability. In its report, also seen by the Daily Mirror, the committee further criticizes the management model of Sri Jayewardenepura Hospital, deeming it unviable and suggesting it be run on commercial lines.

The committee's recommendations extend beyond healthcare, proposing the liquidation of a dozen state institutions, including the Sri Lanka Mahaweli Development Authority (SLMDA), and the introduction of public-private partnerships for entities such as the Paddy Marketing Board and the National Film Corporation. These recommendations align with broader efforts by the Sri Lankan government to address the financial sustainability of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in the face of economic challenges. [Daily Mirror 1]

However, the government's plans to close or privatize state institutions have faced strong opposition, particularly from the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP). The FSP has criticized the government's approach, warning of serious socio-economic consequences. Wimal Waththuhewa, National Organiser of the FSP-affiliated Govi Aragala Viyaparaya, highlighted that 166 state institutions are under review, including the Mahaweli Authority, Cashew Corporation, Paddy Marketing Board, and the National Post Harvest Management Institute. A cabinet review report submitted on March 17 recommended winding up several institutions, converting some into public-private partnerships, and fully privatizing others.

The FSP has expressed particular concern over the proposal to dissolve the Mahaweli Authority, which manages 1.7 million hectares of land across seven districts, including Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, and Trincomalee. Waththuhewa warned that up to 210,000 families could face displacement if the plan goes forward. The FSP also accused the government of backtracking on previous commitments to revitalize the Mahaweli Development Program under the "Mahaweli Punarudaya" initiative, despite recent assurances from Deputy Minister of Agriculture Susil Ranasinghe. [Daily Mirror 2]

Sri Lanka: Starlink satellite internet to launch in April

(lm) Elon Musk's Starlink satellite internet services are set to launch in Sri Lanka in April 2025, according to the Telecommunications Regulatory Commission. The announcement marks a significant step in expanding high-speed, low-latency internet access across the island through the world's first and largest low Earth orbit satellite constellation.

Government officials emphasized that national security and service regulation were key considerations in the approval process. The authorities stated that efforts were made to streamline the rollout while ensuring that services meet security and performance standards for users.

Starlink, developed by SpaceX, is designed to support broadband services such as streaming, video conferencing, and online gaming, especially in areas with limited ground-based connectivity. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Ministry of Transport and Highways seeks to accelerate road development projects

(db) On March 27, an expert committee convened at the Ministry of Transport and Highways in Koswatta, Battaramulla, to tackle delays and improve the effectiveness of national road development initiatives.

Bimal Ratnayake, the Minister of Transport, Highways, Ports, and Civil Aviation, led the discussions, with Deputy Minister Prasanna Gunasena and high-level civil servants also participating. The central topic was developing plans to expedite various road projects,

comprising bridges, concrete and country roads, highways, and tunnels.

Minister Ratnayake underscored the need for streamlining administrative structures within the Highways Ministry and the Road Development Authority. The minister's corresponding order shall affect chief engineers' and provincial directors' offices as well as project units.

A key concern raised was the necessity of closer collaboration with service providers to avoid road damage through electricity and telecommunications installations as well as water supply lines. Minister Ratnayake also advocated for the use of cutting-edge technologies to enhance the implementation of initiatives.

Moreover, the expert panel dealt with a systematic approach to project execution supported by both domestic funds and international financial aid. Donors would include the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank, and the Chinese, Indian, South Korean, Kuwaiti, Saudi Arabian, and Spanish governments.

Finally, Minister Ratnayake emphasized the importance of a sustainable infrastructure regarding reducing road damages resulting from heavy traffic, special usage, and water. [Daily News]

Sri Lanka: Daily delays in Central Expressway project add USD 71,400 to outstanding dues

(lm) The Sri Lankan government's debt to the Chinese contractor building the Kadawatha-Mirigama stretch of the Central Expressway has risen to USD 189.5 million (LKR 56 billion), with each day of further delay adding LKR 21 million (USD 71,400) to the outstanding bill.

The project, awarded to the Metallurgical Corporation of China Ltd., has been stalled for years despite loan funding from China EXIM Bank covering 85 percent of the contract value under a USD 989 million agreement signed in 2019. Deputy Transport and Highways Minister Prasanna Gunasena stated that idle machinery and contractual obligations are contributing to the mounting costs, urging the government to resume work to avoid further financial burden.

Originally initiated in 2015, the project has faced repeated delays under successive administrations, with construction costs more than doubling since the initial agreement. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Construction sector expands in February but hiring remains subdued

(lm) Sri Lanka's construction sector showed continued growth in February 2025, with the Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI) for the industry rising to 55.6, up from 52.9 in January, according to the Central Bank of Sri Lanka. A PMI reading above 50 indicates expansion.

The increase was driven by new project awards, especially for road and irrigation system rehabilitation, contributing to higher new orders and improved supplier delivery times. However, the Employment Index contracted, signaling ongoing reluctance among firms to expand their workforce.

Despite the cautious hiring, businesses expressed optimism for the coming months, expecting greater government involvement to sustain the industry's growth momentum. Respondents emphasized the need for more large-scale projects to maintain the positive trend. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Government to act against Muslim extremist group in Eastern Province

(lm) The Sri Lankan government has confirmed that legal steps will be taken against a Muslim extremist group reportedly operating in the Eastern Province, following ongoing investigations. Security agencies remain on high alert and are actively gathering further information on the group's activities.

The issue had been addressed during a recent Cabinet meeting, where it was revealed that intelligence services had received prior warnings. The president also shared relevant details in Parliament. [Daily Mirror]

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

Brunei: Trade declines in Q4 2024 as exports and imports fall

(ga) The International Merchandise Trade Index (IMTI) report for Q4 2024 highlights a 19.3 percent decline in Brunei's total exports, dropping from BND 4,177.3 million (USD 3,127 million) in Q4 2023 to BND 3,371.8 million (USD 2,525 million). This was due to a decrease in both the exports unit value index (-13.8 percent) and the exports volume index (-4.1 percent). However, for the full year, total exports increased by 1.9 percent, reaching BND 15,040.8 million (USD 11,264 million).

Total imports in Q4 2024 also declined by 24.0 percent compared to Q4 2023, with values falling from BND 2,801.2 million (USD 2,097 million) to BND 2,129.7 million (USD 1,594 million). This was largely due to a 13.2 percent decrease in the imports unit value index, although the imports volume index saw a slight increase of 0.8 percent. Over the entire year, total imports dropped by 2.6 percent, attributed to decreases in the unit value indices of manufactured foods (-8.4 percent), chemicals (-6.4 percent), and mineral fuels (-5.2 percent). [Brunei's Department of Economic Planning and Statistics]

Brunei: Trade declines by 10.7 percent in January 2025, trade balance improves

(ga) Brunei's total trade in January 2025 was valued at BND 1,942.1 million (USD 1,453 million), reflecting a 10.7 percent decline compared to January 2024. Exports decreased by 6.8 percent to BND 1,229.5 million (USD 920.2 million), while imports fell by 16.7 percent to BND 712.6 million (USD 533.3 million). Despite the overall decline in trade, the trade balance recorded an improvement of 11.6 percent to BND 516.9 million (USD 386.9 million).

On a month-on-month basis, total trade remained stable, with exports rising by 6.4 percent from December 2024, driven by higher shipments of mineral fuels, which accounted for 76.4 percent of total exports. Meanwhile, imports declined by 9.4 percent, largely due to lower imports of manufactured goods and food. Mineral fuels were the largest import category, making up 65.1 percent of total imports.

Australia was Brunei's top export destination, accounting for 22.0 percent of total exports, followed by Japan (17.2 percent) and China (15.8 percent). Meanwhile, the largest share of Brunei's imports came from the United Arab Emirates (30.1 percent) and Malaysia (27.4 percent). [Brunei's Department of Economic Planning and Statistics] [The Star]

Brunei: 20 arrested in joint anti-drug operation

(ga) Twenty individuals were arrested during an operation on March 18, a joint anti-drug operation by the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB), Internal Security Department, and Royal Customs and Excise Department (RCED). The operation targeted drug activities in RPN Kampong Bukit Beruang, Tutong District, following similar raids in June and July 2024.

Authorities seized 19.33 grams of methamphetamine and drug-related equipment. One suspect is under investigation for drug trafficking under Section 3A of the Misuse of Drugs Act, Chapter 27, carrying a maximum penalty of 20 years in prison and 15 strokes of the cane.

Further inspections led to the confiscation of prohibited items, including cartons of cigarettes, vapes, and vape juice, which were handed over to RCED for investigation. [Borneo Bulletin]

Cambodia: Circular on streamlining functions of ministries issued

(dql) The government has issued a new circular outlining specific functions for ministries and institutions, excluding the Ministry of National Defense and the Ministry of Interior's Public Security and Order Unit. The move is part of efforts to streamline governance and improve public administration.

Released on March 29, the circular aims to modernize state institutions, enhancing efficiency, transparency,

and sustainability. The review process, which began last year, targeted the elimination of overlapping functions and alignment with government policy. The Ministry of Civil Service was tasked with overseeing the reforms.

Prime Minister Hun Manet highlighted that the circular defines core functions and sub-functions for ministries, ensuring clear responsibilities and efficient operations. In cases of overlap, the Ministry of Civil Service will coordinate resolutions and report to the Government.

The circular also allows for the reallocation of functions, creation of new units, or the abolition of outdated ones. [Khmer Times]

Cambodia: Crackdown on human trafficking, sexual exploitation intensified in 2024

(dql) According to National Committee for Countering Human Trafficking Cambodian authorities handled 197 cases of human trafficking and sexual exploitation in 2024, 33 more than the previous year. The number of foreign offenders deported more than doubled.

273 suspects were arrested and prosecuted, up from 194 in 2023. Authorities also addressed 922 cases involving 5,852 detentions and deportations, a sharp increase from 512 cases and 2,159 deportations the previous year.

Among those deported, 2,695 were Chinese nationals, more than double the 1,011 sent back in 2023, followed by 1,198 Vietnamese and 861 Indonesians. [The Phnom Penh Post]

Cambodia: 70 foreigners arrested in online scam operations

(sal) In a crackdown on online crime, authorities in Poipet city, Banteay Meanchey province, arrested 70 foreigners linked to an online scam operation run by Thai criminals. The operation was uncovered during inspections at two locations known for suspicious activities.

Among the 70 arrested individuals, 63 were identified as Thai nationals. Authorities seized 65 mobile phones and 33 computers used in the scam. [Khmer Times]

In a separate development, nearly 125 kilograms of narcotics were seized in two operations in Phnom Penh and Svay Rieng's Bavet town late last week. Eight suspects of Chinese, Burmese, and Cambodian nationality were arrested. [The Phnom Penh Post]

Cambodia: Rising alcohol consumption among youth

(sal) A policy white paper titled "Developing a Policy Landscape in Cambodia to Combat Harmful Alcohol Consumption", released on March 31 by the Southeast Asia Public Policy Institute (SEAPPI) and the Asian Vision Institute (AVI) highlights alarming levels of alcohol consumption among Cambodian youth. The data suggests that 25.8 percent of youth aged 15 to 19 years old are heavy drinkers.

Furthermore, Cambodia, is one of the countries in Asia without a minimum drinking age. The absence of restrictions has left young people vulnerable to harmful drinking behaviors, including binge drinking, drink driving, and illicit alcohol consumption.

Despite these concerns, Cambodia's alcohol industry continues to thrive, contributing USD 1.1 billion to the economy and expected to double to USD 2.2 billion by 2032, with an annual growth rate of 8.18 percent. On average, Cambodians consume 72.2 liters of beer per person each year. [The Phnom Penh Post]

Indonesia: President ratifies regulation protecting children in digital space

(th) President Prabowo Subianto, on March 28, enacted the Government Regulation on the Governance of the Implementation of Electronic Systems in Child Protection, which aims to regulate children's social media usage and restrict their exposure to detrimental digital content.

Communication and Digital Minister Meutya Hafid reported that the government conducted seven focus group discussions and incorporated approximately 200 inputs from diverse domestic and international groups before finalizing the regulation. [Antara 1]

The newly enacted Government Regulation on Governance for Child Protection in the Implementation of Electronic Systems prohibits digital platforms from treating children as commodities. This restriction is among the regulation's five key provisions, which

mandate that digital platforms operating in Indonesia prioritize child safety over commercial interests.

The regulation also forbids child data profiling, seeking to protect children from harmful and commercially exploitative content that could compromise their personal data.

Concerning age restrictions for digital platform usage, Hafid explained that the provisions pertain to children's developmental age, clarifying that they do not introduce a general access restriction, with using an account belonging to a parent with parental supervision being allowed. However, children intending to create personal accounts must adhere to the age-related stipulations.

While children aged 16 are permitted to create independent accounts on digital platforms, they will require access facilitated by parental supervision and guidance. Those aged 18 are authorized to create accounts and access digital platforms independently. [Antara 2]

Indonesia: Government seeks to shrink number of state bank commissioners

(th) President Prabowo Subianto is advocating for prioritizing competence over volume when choosing commissioners for government-owned banks, aiming for the appointment of only dependable and skilled individuals to these crucial roles.

Following a closed-door discussion on the Macroeconomic Framework and Fiscal Policy Principles 2026, held in Jakarta on March 26, Coordinating Minister for Economic Affairs, Airlangga Hartarto, confirmed the issuance of a related directive by the president.

Hartarto stressed that the structure of the commissioners' board will be customized to align with the unique requirements of each state bank, while also guaranteeing to the public that the chosen commissioners will embody diverse strategic components. [Antara]

Indonesia: Criminal Procedure Code Bill set for discussion in parliamentary commission

(th) Legislator Habiburokhman announced on March 27 that deliberations on the Bill on the Criminal Procedure Code (RUU KUHAP) with government representatives will take place within the House of Representatives (DPR) Commission III, which holds jurisdiction over legislative development and budgetary oversight within the law enforcement and legal domain.

The statement followed reports that the House leadership received a presidential letter on March 25, outlining the appointment of government officials to engage in discussion regarding the RUU KUHAP.

Furthermore, Habiburokhman emphasized that the RUU KUHAP is a positively "unusual" piece of legislation, owing to the extensive public input gathered prior to the commencement of the House's formal meetings with the government. [Antara]

Indonesia: Authorities denies support for construction of Christian church in East Borneo

(dql) Local officials in East Borneo have reportedly denied approval for the construction of a church despite the congregation meeting all permit requirements.

In Samarinda, the provincial capital, the Ministry of Religious Affairs refused to issue a recommendation letter for Toraja Christian Church in Sungai Keledang, Samarinda Seberang Sub-District. According to civil society organization Indonesian Movement for All (PIS), the church has pursued the permit for a decade, fulfilling all administrative requirements.

PIS criticized the decision, calling it unjust and unnecessary. The congregation secured the required 90 approvals from local officials, endorsements from 60 residents and village heads, and last September, a recommendation from the local Interfaith Forum. Yet, the permit remains stalled. [Christian Daily]

Indonesia: Government to intensify natural gas use in households

(th) Energy and Mineral Resources Minister Bahlil Lahadalia announced that the Indonesian government intends to promote the wider adoption of natural gas in households, citing its current limited usage.

During a visit to the household gas network at Grudo flat in Tegalsari, Surabaya, on March 25, alongside officials from PT Pertamina Gas Negara (PGN), Indonesia' state-owned oil and gas company, Lahadalia assured residents of the convenience and safety of natural gas for cooking, contrasting it with liquefied petroleum gas (LPG). He emphasized the affordability and safety of natural gas. PGN is

Lahadalia also attributed the limited household natural gas penetration to the suboptimal development of the gas pipeline infrastructure.

PGN Director Arief Setiawan Handoko reported that PGN's natural gas customer base in East Java represents only approximately six percent of the potential market. This restricted coverage is linked to the limited installation of natural gas pipelines, which, as of February 2025, totaled only 8,970 kilometers across Central Java, East Java, Kalimantan, and Sulawesi, under the management of PGN SOR III. [Antara]

Indonesia: National Economic Council seeks deregulation

(th) National Economic Council (DEN) Chairperson Luhut Binsar Pandjaitan held discussions with the Indonesian Employers Association (Apindo) to address regulatory obstacles impending business expansion in Indonesia.

Pandjaitan conveyed that President Prabowo Subianto has directed his staff to implement deregulation measures, aiming to simplify or consolidate regulations deemed detrimental to businesses. He further requested Apindo's assistance in compiling a list of overlapping, complex, and burdensome regulations for the DEN.

Pandjaitan also indicated the President's intention to engage with investors and capital market analysts to foster a more favorable environment for investment and business competition. Furthermore, the DEN leader reported securing support from Coordinating Minister for Economic Affairs Airlangga Hartarto in resolving regulatory challenges within the business sector.

Pandjaitan emphasized Indonesia's regulatory complexity contributing to its lagging behind Singapore, Vietnam and the Philippines in providing a business-friendly regulatory framework. He cited examples such as the 65-day registration period for

foreign companies in Indonesia and the potential 150-day court verdict timeframe of business disputes. [Antara]

Indonesia: State-owned banks overhaul leadership

(dql) Significant leadership shakeups took place in Indonesia's three largest state-owned banks, Bank Rakyat Indonesia (BRI), Bank Mandiri, and Bank Negara Indonesia (BNI), with new CEOs appointed and dozens of directors and commissioners replaced. The government presented the move as an effort to professionalize management, following a market panic that saw the banks' shares among the biggest fallers, briefly prompting a trading suspension.

These banks typically undergo management overhauls every three to four years, but this round has attracted more attention due to the challenges faced by the banks. Since President Prabowo Subianto took office in October, their share prices have dropped significantly, partly due to concerns over government policies, including the transfer of control to a sovereign wealth fund and populist measures like writing off bad loans. Prabowo downplayed these concerns, emphasizing food security over stock prices.

The boards of commissioners were also downsized and filled with more professionals, as directed by the president. Despite some political connections among the new appointees, the leadership changes are widely seen as positive. Analysts believe the banks are in a better position than perceived, with solid returns on equity, and suggest that the government's professionalization efforts could be a catalyst for future growth. [Nikkei Asia]

Laos: Major reform of education system under consideration

(tas) The Lao government is considering a significant reform to its education system by extending primary school from five to six years, adopting a 6+3+3 structure in line with international standards. Discussed at a recent Ministry of Education and Sports meeting, the proposal aims to strengthen students' foundational skills and improve academic performance.

Officials believe an additional year will enhance learning outcomes in core subjects like Lao language and mathematics, better preparing students for secondary education. Before implementation, the government will conduct feasibility studies, update curricula, expand infrastructure, and recruit more teachers. The transition is planned from 2025 to 2035. [The Laotian Times]

Laos: Senior inspection officials to face corruption charges

(dql) Four senior officials from the State Inspection Authority (SIA) and three individuals accused of bribery are reportedly set to face legal action. The suspects, detained in February, remain in custody after authorities gathered sufficient evidence.

The implicated officials include a director, a deputy director, and two deputy division heads of the SIA, while the other three suspects are accused of offering bribes for illegal benefits. The case has raised public concerns about the SIA's credibility, with citizens questioning how an anti-corruption body can uphold integrity when its own officials are involved. Calls for transparency have grown, with demands to reveal the suspects' identities.

This case follows other recent high-profile corruption probes. On March 25, 11 employees from the Bank of Laos and BCEL were detained for corruption and abuse of power, including three director generals and senior staff.

In another case, a former Deputy Director of Electricité du Laos (EDL) and four contractors, including a foreign national, face prosecution for corruption and fraud linked to the Nam Hinboun Hydropower Project in Khammouane Province. [The Laotian Times]

Malaysia: Parliament approves key economic bills

(tl) The First Meeting of the Fourth Session of the 15th Parliament wrapped up after 12 days, during which 10 bills, including two significant economy-related bills, were passed. These include the Supplementary Supply Bill (2024) 2025, allowing for an additional USD 4.27 billion in government expenditures, and the Carbon Capture, Utilisation, and Storage (CCUS) Bill 2025,

aimed at expanding investment opportunities and strengthening the national economy.

Other approved legislation includes the Malaysian Media Council Bill 2024, the Bernama (Amendment) Bill 2024 under the Ministry of Communication to enhance the inclusivity within the media industry, and the YTAR Fund (Amendment) Bill 2025 under the Ministry of National Unity, to contribute to the nation's human capital development by expanding educational and financial support for Malaysia youths. The session also featured a Constitution (Amendment) Bill 2025, presented by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, who emphasized the need for high performance and integrity among government-linked companies (GLCs) and investment boards.

Additionally, nine acts from the previous parliamentary session received Royal Assent, including the Supply Act 2025 (Budget 2025), Finance Act 2024, and various amendments to tax, communications, and legal regulations.

The session also included a briefing on Sarawak's role in the petroleum industry, acknowledging the state's aspirations for a greater oil industry. [Malaymail]

Malaysia: Terengganu UMNO deploys support for BN in Ayer Kuning by-election

(ga) Terengganu state United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) party will deploy its party machinery to support the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition candidate in the upcoming Ayer Kuning state by-election on April 26. The party has been assigned to assist in the Kampung Raya and Pekan Getah polling districts.

Terengganu UMNO Chairman Rozi Mamat stated that a working secretary had attended a coordination meeting in Perak to determine the campaign's operational needs. The number of party machinery members sent will be adjusted based on requirements. Additionally, support will come from four UMNO divisions for each polling district, involving Kuala Terengganu, Marang, Dungun, Kemaman, Besut, Setiu, Kuala Nerus, and Hulu Terengganu.

The Election Commission has scheduled nomination day for April 12, followed by early voting on April 22. The by-election was triggered by the passing of incumbent Ishsam Shahruddin due to a heart attack on February 22. [Bernama]

BN is the third largest political coalition with 30 seats in the Dewan Rakyat (House of Representatives) after Pakatan Harapan (PH) with 82 seats and Perikatan Nasional (PN) with 74 seats. It supports the PH-led Unity Government of Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim.

The coalition consists of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), and United Sabah People's Party (PBRS).

Malaysia: Senate passes CCUS bill 2025 for carbon emission reduction

(ga) The Senate (Dewan Negara) has passed the Carbon Capture, Utilisation and Storage (CCUS) Bill 2025, establishing a legal framework for reducing carbon emissions and supporting industrial decarbonization. Approved after its third reading on March 25, the bill enables the implementation of CCUS technology as part of Malaysia’s strategy to balance economic growth with emission reduction.

Under Budget 2025, the government plans to introduce a carbon tax on the steel and energy industries by 2026 to encourage the adoption of low-carbon technologies. The CCUS initiative includes the establishment of a hub, with Kertih identified as a key industrial center to attract investment and create employment opportunities. The bill also facilitates state governments in collecting revenue through land and business taxes, as well as operational fees for CCUS infrastructure.

The Ministry of Economy has developed a national CCUS governance structure to oversee its implementation, aligning activities with Cabinet directives. This structure includes a steering committee, technical committee, and five focus groups comprising government agencies, industry representatives, and academic institutions. [Bernama]

Malaysia: Investments in public transport services allocated

(tl) The Malaysian government has allocated USD 428 million to Prasarana Malaysia Bhd, a government-owned company that operates Malaysia public transport system, to acquire 1,660 new buses over the next three years. Of these, 310 will be diesel-powered, marking the final batch before a full transition to

electric vehicles (EVs). The first diesel buses are expected to be delivered in June 2025, while 250 EV buses will be introduced by the end of the year. An additional 1,000 EV buses will be added in phases.

In support of the LRT3 feeder service, 100+ electric buses will be deployed along with dedicated charging infrastructure. The government has also earmarked USD 12.4 million for 320 additional vans under the RapidKL On-Demand service, a public transport initiative aimed at improving first- and last-mile connectivity in Klang Valley and Penang. By June 2025, the service is expected to expand to 101 zones to enhance public transport accessibility. [Malaymail]

Malaysia: Sabah's largest battery energy storage system to begin operations in July

(tl) Sabah Electricity's 100-megawatt (MW) Battery Energy Storage System (BESS), the largest of its kind in Malaysia and Southeast Asia, is set to begin operations in July. According to Sabah Electricity CEO Ir. Ts. Mohd Yaakob Jaafar, the Lahad Datu-based project, which commenced construction in September 2024, aims to enhance renewable energy potential, particularly solar power. The system is expected to stabilize electricity supply in Sabah's East Coast, addressing ongoing power shortages. [theBorneopost]

Malaysia: Neritic tuna landings see significant growth in 2024

(tl) Malaysia recorded a notable rise in neritic tuna landings in 2024, reaching 63,780.32 metric tons, valued at over USD 176 million. This marks an improvement from 2023's total of 55,222.67 metric tons.

To further sustain the fisheries industry and stabilize seafood prices, the government has included neritic tuna (aya/tongkol) under the Festive Season Maximum Price Scheme (SHMMP). Other seafood items, such as kembung and selayang, are also regulated under this initiative. [Malaymail]

Malaysia: Government launches fund to accelerate MSME digitalization

(ga) The government has introduced a fund to accelerate the digitalization of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) across the country. The initiative, led by the Ministry of Digital and supported by agencies and private sector partners, aims to enhance MSME competitiveness through digital adoption and financial support.

The program offers financial aid, training, and mentorship to help businesses integrate digital solutions, including e-commerce, cloud computing, and AI-driven management tools. Limited awareness, technical skills, and financial barriers have been identified as key challenges to digital adoption among MSMEs. To address these issues, government agencies have been conducting training sessions to guide businesses in using digital platforms and banking systems.

Several Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) were signed at the program launch to expand MSMEs' access to funding, digital tools, and training. Additionally, 21 MDEC-accredited service providers will offer free and low-cost e-invoicing solutions to support businesses in their digital transformation efforts. [Bernama]

Malaysia: Maritime security tightened in Melaka and Negeri Sembilan for Eid al-Fitr celebrations

(ga) The Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA) for Melaka and Negeri Sembilan has intensified security along waters from Kuala Kesang to Kuala Sepang under Operation Khas Pagar Laut to combat cross-border crimes ahead of Eid al-Fitr on April 1. The operation targets smuggling, illegal fishing, and the trafficking of controlled goods.

Melaka and Negeri Sembilan MMEA Deputy Director of Operations, Maritime Commander Norrimi Hassan, stated that despite no recorded maritime crimes in the first three months of the year, the agency remains on high alert.

Approximately 60 percent of MMEA personnel in the two states will be on duty throughout the operation, which will run for two weeks before and after the festive season. Authorities are monitoring potential smuggling routes, particularly between Dumai, Indonesia, and Sepang, Selangor.

In 2024, the agency conducted 3,228 visual inspections, resulting in 20 arrests, and has carried out

394 inspections under this year's operation, leading to the detention of two tankers for unauthorized anchoring and ship-to-ship transfers. [Bernama]

Malaysia: Massive gas pipeline fire in Selangor leaves over 100 affected

(tl) A massive fire broke out in Putra Heights, Selangor, on the second day of Aidilfitri, following a gas pipeline leak from Petronas. The fire, which started in the morning of April 1 reached up to 500 meters in length and caused significant damage, prompting emergency evacuations. [Malaymail 1]

Authorities confirmed that 112 individuals and 49 homes were affected, with 63 victims hospitalized due to burns, respiratory issues, and other injuries. The blaze damaged 190 homes, 148 cars, and 11 motorcycles, while residents were evacuated to temporary relief centers. [Malaymail 2]

Emergency responders, including the Selangor Fire and Rescue Department (JBPM) and police personnel, worked to contain the fire, which was nearly under control. Road access to the affected area was closed to the public for safety reasons. Authorities have shut down key pipeline valves to control the fire and a second search mission is underway to ensure no victims are left behind. [Malaymail 3]

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim has urged the Selangor government and relevant agencies to aid the victims, while rescue and medical operations continue. [Malaymail 4]

Myanmar: Minister of Home Affairs dismisses demands for military to stay away from politics

(hw) Myanmar's Minister of Home Affairs and Chairman of the National Solidarity and Peacemaking Negotiation Committee (NSPNC), Lieutenant-General Yar Pyae, stated on March 26 that demands for the military to withdraw from politics are impractical. He made this remark during his speech at the junta-sponsored Peace Talk 2025, a conference held in Naypyidaw from March 24 to 26.

Yar Pyae noted that some stakeholders have called for the military to end its political involvement, with some even advocating for its complete abolition. However,

he dismissed these demands as unrealistic. Despite this, he claimed that the military remains open to negotiations.

The Karen National Union (KNU), an ethnic armed organization, has emphasized the need to pressure the military to exit politics. Similarly, the National Unity Government (NUG), along with the KNU, has stated that they would engage in negotiations only if the military agreed to submit to civilian authority. [Radio Free Asia, in Burmese]

Myanmar: Military announces more detailed election agenda

(hw) Myanmar's military leader, Senior-General Min Aung Hlaing, announced on March 25 that the general election will be conducted in four phases between late December 2025 and early January 2026. He made the announcement during a meeting at the Office of the Chairman of the State Administration Council in Naypyidaw.

Min Aung Hlaing stated that the plan does not violate any existing regulations and is necessary due to the ongoing conflict. This will be the first time since Myanmar's independence in 1948 that an election is held in multiple phases.

In addition to the First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) system, Min Aung Hlaing said that Proportional Representation (PR) will also be used. He added that his government is preparing to introduce electronic voting machines to prevent electoral fraud.

For the upcoming election, 54 political parties are registered with the Union Election Commission. [Narinjara, in Burmese]

Myanmar: Another dialogue between military and MNDAA concludes with no result

(hw) Another round of peace talks between representatives of Myanmar's military and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) was held in Kunming from March 22 to 24 but ended without a conclusive outcome, according to a source close to the MNDAA.

The source stated that the primary focus of the talks was the handover of twelve residential wards and two villages in Lashio, the capital of northern Shan State, which has been under MNDAA control since early August 2024. However, neither the military nor the MNDAA has made an official statement regarding the discussions, and the MNDAA continues to govern Lashio.

Local residents fear that the military may launch airstrikes on Lashio following the breakdown of negotiations. On March 20, posters demanding that China cease its intervention were found hanging in the city. [Mizzima, in Burmese]

Myanmar: Senior-General Min Aung Hlaing delivers speech at Armed Forces Day parade

(hw) Myanmar's military leader, Senior-General Min Aung Hlaing, delivered a speech at the parade commemorating the 80th Anniversary of Armed Forces Day (formerly Revolutionary Day) in Naypyidaw. He stated that the Tatmadaw, Myanmar's armed forces, would remain vigilant against threats to the nation and take appropriate action when necessary.

Min Aung Hlaing reiterated his claim that the ruling National League for Democracy (NLD) committed voter fraud in the 2020 election, which, according to him, justified the Tatmadaw's intervention. He asserted that this demonstrated the military's commitment to the country and vowed to eliminate future threats as well.

He also reaffirmed his pledge to hold a free and fair election, which is planned to take place in four phases in December 2025 and January 2026. He stated that his government would transfer power to the new administration following the election.

Additionally, Min Aung Hlaing invited the People's Defense Forces (PDFs) to lay down their arms, participate in party politics, and compete in the upcoming election, arguing that peace can only be achieved through dialogue. [DVB, in Burmese]

Myanmar: UWSA considers lifting restrictions on natural resources mining

(hw) According to the International Tin Association (ITA), the United Wa State Army (UWSA) is considering

lifting the ban on metal extraction and mining, which has been in place since 2023. The UWSA is expected to make an official announcement following a meeting of its Economic Planning Committee.

Companies and firms seeking to engage in metal extraction in Mongmao must apply for permission under the new application system introduced in February. The UWSA has pledged to enhance safety standards, improve the efficiency of natural resource extraction through new technologies, and strengthen regulations governing the sector.

The UWSA imposed the ban in August 2023 to curb illegal mining and protect remaining natural resources. [Radio Free Asia, in Burmese]

Myanmar: Massive 7.7-magnitude earthquake devastates country

(nf/hw/anl) A 7.7-magnitude earthquake hit the central part of Myanmar on Mondat at 12:51 PM with its epicenter close to Sagaing, approximately 17.2 km away from Mandalay, at a depth of 10 km. The strong tremors rattled Myanmar, Thailand, China, and Laos extensively, inflicting damage.

The quake wreaked havoc on key infrastructure, collapsing the old Sagaing Bridge and the Dokhtawady Bridge on the Yangon-Mandalay Expressway, while parts of the Yangon-Mandalay Expressway close to the 362-mile point were badly damaged, prompting road closure. Structures fell in Mandalay, Naypyidaw, Pyinmana, Aungban, and Inlay, with rescue workers forced to administer medical care to injured persons outside hospitals after buildings were damaged.

The destruction of historic and religious structures has been widespread, including images of the destruction of the multistoried Ma Soe Yane monastery in Mandalay. Parts of the ancient royal palace were struck as well. A dam also ruptured in Mandalay, sending water surging into lowlands.

On April 1, military leader Min Aung Hlaing has reported a death toll of 2,719, with 4,521 people injured and 441 still missing.

The Sagaing Fault, the biggest seismic fault in Myanmar due to the movement between the Indian and Eurasian tectonic plates, has been known for a long time as one of the most earthquake-vulnerable areas in the country. Authorities have long stressed earthquake-resistant construction and greater public readiness to

reduce hazards. The extent of damage is still unfolding, with rescue and search crews working by hand to locate survivors. [Myanmar Now] [The Global New Light of Myanmar] [The Guardian 1] [The Diplomat] [ABC News] [BBC News] [Reuters]

Junta announces seven days of national mourning

It is reported that Myanmar's military junta had designated the period between March 31 and April 6 as a period of national mourning. The junta also ordered government offices throughout the country to fly the national flag at half-mast. [Narinjara, in Burmese]

Myanmar junta appeals for international aid

The earthquake has led the junta to make an unprecedented request for foreign humanitarian assistance as six states have been declared in a state of emergency. The magnitude of damage has been seen in Sagaing, Mandalay, and neighboring areas, with rescue operations under way, and support for wounded and displaced civilians a priority.

The National Unity Government (NUG) opposition has also asked for international support on the premise of general damage to infrastructure and cultural sites. International relief groups, such as the Singapore Red Cross, are meanwhile organizing aid, citing the paramount necessity for collective humanitarian aid in the razed areas. [Mizzima 1] [Mizzima 2] [Channel News Asia]

UN reports medical supply shortage hampers earthquake relief

On March 29, the United Nations reported that a severe shortage of medical supplies is hampering relief efforts The UN, in coordination with humanitarian partners, is mobilizing emergency response efforts, but the situation remains critical. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) highlighted the urgent need for trauma kits, blood bags, anesthetics, assistive devices, essential medicines, and tents for health workers. Efforts are further hindered by damaged roads, disrupted communication networks, and extensive destruction of hospitals and health facilities. The earthquake has caused widespread destruction of homes and critical infrastructure, forcing thousands to spend nights in the streets or open spaces, either due to displacement or fear of aftershocks. Hospitals in Mandalay, Magway, and Naypyidaw are struggling to manage the influx of injured patients. OCHA stated that coordination efforts

are underway to conduct rapid needs assessments and scale up emergency response operations. [Mizzima]

Military regime accused of continued airstrikes

The military regime is facing widespread criticism over continued airstrikes and for obstructing humanitarian aid. International agencies have urged for “unfettered access” to aid, but reports indicate that the military is blocking supplies and preventing rescue teams from entering affected areas.

Doctors coordinating the emergency response in Mandalay and Sagaing have accused the military of confiscating aid. Dr. Nang Win, an Australian-based doctor, stated that much of the aid was either diverted or withheld, leaving communities without essential supplies. Makeshift clinics have been set up in response to the lack of proper emergency infrastructure. The military's control of checkpoints has hindered the flow of medicine and aid to areas controlled by opposition forces and ethnic resistance groups. Dr. Tun Aung Shwe, representing Myanmar’s exiled National Unity Government, confirmed that local communities were forced to find alternative, slower routes for aid.

Meanwhile, the junta continues airstrikes on civilian areas, including in Sagaing and Mogwe, even as the population grapples with the aftermath of the earthquake. The UN and human rights groups have condemned the military’s actions, with Tom Andrews, the UN special rapporteur on Myanmar, urging the junta to prioritize saving lives over further violence.

Experts and former diplomats highlighted the military’s history of blocking aid, citing its reluctance to assist citizens during past disasters, such as the 2008 Cyclone Nargis and the Covid pandemic. [The Guardian 2] [Human Rights Watch]

NUG armed forces begin ceasefire

Myanmar’s parallel administration, the National Unity Government (NUG), announced on March 29 that, starting on March 30, armed forces under its command would initiate a two-week ceasefire with the junta forces to facilitate relief efforts. The NUG also expressed its willingness to cooperate with organizations to treat the wounded and open temporary relief centers. Additionally, the NUG stated its readiness to cooperate with the junta by mobilizing medical experts who had participated in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), provided their security is guaranteed. [People’s Spring, in Burmese]

Myanmar: YPPDF attacks military column

(anl) The Yephyu People's Defence Forces (YPPDF) reported an attack on a military column along the No. 8 Ye-Dawei Union Road in Yephyu Township on 24 March, killing approximately 20 soldiers, including a major, and seizing weapons and ammunition.

According to a YPPDF information officer, the clash occurred between Nyin Htwe and Kauk Kanyha villages. While the YPPDF claimed over 20 junta troops were killed and many others injured, these figures have not been independently verified by Mizzima. As the battle escalated, the junta deployed reinforcements from Field Artillery Regiments No. 304 and 302, supported by paramotor attacks.

Fighting remains intense, and revolutionary forces urge the public to stay alert to military movements and exercise caution regarding aerial threats in the Tanintharyi Region and along the No. 8 Ye-Dawei Union Road. [Mizzima]

Myanmar: Arakan Army imposes mandatory conscription

(nf) Arakan Army's conscription of all adults above 18 years is a core transformation in the nature of fighting in western Myanmar's Rakhine State. With 18- to 45-year-old men being forced to serve two years after training and 18- to 35-year-old women also subject to conscription, the action further consolidates the militarization of the region.

As the AA cements its de facto grip—controlling 14 of the state of Rakhine's 17 townships—compulsory military service further entrenches authority but also alarms the civilians already caught in the crossfire of Myanmar's long-running civil war. The junta, seeing the AA as a very real threat to its authority, has also established its own contentious conscription laws, resulting in widespread desertion and a tidal wave of youths fleeing the country.

Uncertainty over the missions conscripts will be sent only further fuels alarm, especially considering that Rakhine State is a hotbed of armed rebellion and deadly military crackdowns. This follows mounting pressure on the ethnic armed groups and military regime as well to hold onto power due to Myanmar's deepening crisis. [Radio Free Asia]

Philippines: Duterte’s ICC trial, birthday rallies, and legal challenges

(jto/cm/lm) Supporters of former Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte marked his 80th birthday with rallies in the Philippines and The Hague, despite his detention by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for alleged crimes against humanity. The celebrations included candle-lit rallies in Davao, a large gathering outside the ICC detention center, and over 200 birthday events across the country. Duterte's daughter, Vice President Sara Duterte, expressed that the support helped make the challenges her father faces more bearable.

In The Hague, Duterte’s supporters, including overseas Filipinos from across Europe and the UAE, gathered for a public "picnic," expressing belief in his innocence and calling for his release. The event, under light police surveillance, also saw Vice President Duterte use the platform to encourage support for PDP-Laban’s senatorial candidates ahead of the 2025 midterm elections. Senator Robin Padilla, a Duterte ally and chair of PDP-Laban, reiterated his support and urged the crowd to respect local regulations during the rally. [Al Jazeera] [Rappler 1]

Vice President Sara Duterte addressed the crowd, relaying her father's message to refrain from interfering with the judicial process and allow the legal proceedings to proceed through appropriate channels. She also used the platform to encourage support for PDP-Laban’s senatorial candidates ahead of the May 2025 midterm elections, emphasizing the need for electoral vigilance.

Senator Robin Padilla, a known Duterte ally and chair of PDP-Laban, was also present and reiterated his continued support for the former president. He engaged with attendees and appealed for compliance with local regulations during the gathering, underscoring the importance of discipline among Duterte’s supporters. [Rappler]

While Duterte’s supporters rallied, his legal team is challenging the ICC’s jurisdiction in his case, aiming to prevent the trial from proceeding. Duterte’s lawyer, Nicholas Kaufman, argued that jurisdictional issues could derail the case, citing the Philippines' withdrawal from the Rome Statute in 2019. However, experts contend that the ICC retains jurisdiction over crimes committed before the country’s withdrawal, as the investigation began during that period. [Inquirer.net]

The ICC prosecutor, Karim Khan, is preparing to present additional evidence against Duterte, with 181 items already disclosed to the defense. The case centers on Duterte's anti-drug campaign, which has been linked to extrajudicial killings, with estimates of the death toll ranging from 12,000 to 30,000. [Al Jazeera] [Philstar]

As the legal battle intensifies, Senator Imee Marcos, sister of President Marcos, raised concerns about conflicting directives from the Palace regarding Cabinet officials' participation in the Senate's investigation into Duterte's arrest. Marcos pointed out that Executive Secretary Lucas Bersamin's refusal to allow officials to attend the inquiry contradicted President Marcos' statement that officials would not be prevented from participating. She emphasized the confusion within the administration about transparency and accountability, particularly as she noted "glaring violations" of Duterte's constitutional rights during his arrest, including the lack of a warrant issued by a Philippine court. [Daily Tribune]

Philippines: Petition urges Supreme Court to compel Congress to pass anti-dynasty bill

(lm) On March 31, a renewed petition was filed with the Philippine Supreme Court, urging it to compel Congress to pass an anti-dynasty bill as mandated by the 1987 Constitution. The petition, led by former Supreme Court justices Antonio Carpio and Conchita Carpio-Morales, along with former election chairman Christian Monsod and other groups, calls for legislative action on the explicit constitutional provision that states, "The State shall guarantee equal access to opportunities for public service and prohibit political dynasties as may be defined by law."

Despite the constitutional mandate, Congress has never passed a law defining and prohibiting political dynasties, primarily due to the self-interest of lawmakers. Nearly four decades after the establishment of the current republic, political dynasties dominate the legislature, with eight out of every ten district seats in the House of Representatives belonging to political families.

The petitioners argue that Congress has failed in its duty, effectively repealing this provision through inaction. They request the Court to issue a mandamus, directing Congress to enact the necessary anti-dynasty law. The petition emphasizes that the Constitution mandates this as a ministerial duty, and Congress'

failure to comply undermines the democratic process, perpetuating economic inequality and stagnation in the areas controlled by political dynasties.

Petitioners further criticize political dynasties for fostering corruption, prioritizing self-interest over broader community development. They point to families such as the Tulfo family, which exemplifies the concentration of political power, as a primary example of the negative impact of such dynasties.

This is not the first attempt to address the issue; previous petitions filed in 2012 and 2013 were dismissed on the grounds of the separation of powers. The petitioners now argue that the issue is no longer a political question but a constitutional obligation that must be fulfilled by Congress. [Rappler]

Philippines: OVP liquidation reports include bogus names resembling grocery items, lawmakers allege

(lm) Lawmakers in the Philippines have raised alarms over an expanding list of dubious names in the Office of the Vice President's (OVP) liquidation reports for PHP 500 million (USD 8.5 million) in confidential funds under Sara Duterte. The latest names—including "Beverly Claire Pampano" and "Ralph Josh Bacon"—resemble food staples and grocery items, with no corresponding birth, marriage, or death records in the Philippine Statistics Authority database.

House Deputy Majority Leader Francisco Paolo Ortega V, who is reviewing the documents, likened the list to a "grocery list" and suggested it was deliberately fabricated to expedite the release of funds and conceal their true destination. Previous names flagged included those resembling snack brands and tech products. The issue mirrors similar irregularities found in confidential fund records linked to the Department of Education, which Duterte headed until July 2024. Lawmakers continue to call for accountability amid mounting suspicions over the misuse of public money. [Philstar] [Inquirer.net]

Philippines: Sandiganbayan rules PCGG not liable for interest on sequestered Palm Companies' funds

(lm) The Sandiganbayan, a special anti-graft court in the Philippines, has ruled that the Presidential

Commission on Good Government (PCGG) is not required to pay 6 percent annual interest on PHP 110.8 million (USD 1.93 million) sequestered from Palm Avenue Holding Co. Inc. and Palm Avenue Realty Development Corp., firms owned by the family of the late ambassador Benjamin “Kokoy” Romualdez.

In a resolution released on March 28, the court reversed its earlier directive after finding that the Palm Companies failed to prove a legal right to interest. The funds, placed under government custody in 1986 through a sequestration order, were later transferred to the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP) Fund.

Although the companies argued that the funds could have earned more if not transferred and sought interest, the Sandiganbayan ruled that no contract or damages supported such a claim. It emphasized that the PCGG’s role was to preserve and safeguard the assets while ownership remained under dispute. [Rappler]

Philippines: Senate urged to pass new building act after Myanmar, Thailand quake

(jto) In the wake of the devastating 7.7-magnitude earthquake that struck Myanmar and Thailand, Rep. Luis Raymund Villafuerte of Camarines Sur has called on the Philippine Senate to prioritize House Bill 8500, known as the proposed "New Philippine Building Act." This bill aims to enhance the country's infrastructure resilience against natural disasters, particularly earthquakes, and prepare for the anticipated "Big One" that could devastate at least 10 percent of structures in Metro Manila and neighboring provinces.

Villafuerte, who co-authored the bill, emphasized the importance of updating the 47-year-old building code to reflect modern climate-proofing measures. The bill retains the authority of local government units (LGUs) to enforce their own building regulations, provided these are consistent with the new law.

The recent earthquake in Myanmar and Thailand has left at least 2,000 people dead and more than 3,000 injured. Villafuerte hopes that the tragedy will spur Senate action to pass the law, which would significantly strengthen the country's disaster preparedness. The Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) reported that four Filipino professionals are among the missing in Myanmar. [Manila Standard]

Philippines: Hunger rate rises to 27.2 percent, highest since COVID-19 pandemic peak

(lm) Hunger among Filipino families has surged to 27.2 percent in March 2025, according to a Stratbase-Social Weather Stations survey, marking the highest level since the COVID-19 pandemic peak of 30.7 percent in September 2020. This figure reflects a 6-point increase from February 2025 and a 7-point rise above the 2024 annual average of 20.2 percent.

The data shows that 6.2 percent experienced severe hunger, while 21 percent faced moderate hunger. The Visayas recorded the steepest increase, rising to 33.7 percent. Mindanao and Balance Luzon also reported notable increases, while Metro Manila was the only region to see no rise.

The hunger spike comes amid food supply challenges. In February, the Philippine government declared a food emergency to stabilize rice prices, and in March, a price cap on pork in Metro Manila was introduced but saw low compliance. These developments followed a brief drop in inflation to 2.1 percent in February, driven by falling rice and vegetable prices.

The survey was conducted with 1,800 registered voters, with a margin of error of ±2.31 percent nationwide. [Rappler]

Philippines: Environmental groups, bishop warn of Tanon Strait pollution from Cebu power plant

(lm) Environmental advocates, including San Carlos Diocese Bishop Gerardo Alminaza, have raised alarms about pollution from the 340-megawatt coal-fired power plant in Toledo City, Cebu. The plant, operated by Therma Visayas Incorporated (TVI), a subsidiary of Aboitiz Power, has been accused of contaminating the Tanon Strait, a vital waterway between Cebu and Negros islands.

The environmental watchdog Center for Energy, Ecology, and Development (CEED) reported that water samples taken near the facility in February 2025 showed boron levels four times higher than normal, along with elevated sulfate and nickel concentrations. Boron, when found in high concentrations, is toxic to marine life and poses risks to human health,

potentially damaging vital organs and even causing fatalities in severe cases.

Bishop Alminaza called for intervention from the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), Department of Energy, and Department of Health. He also criticized Energy Secretary Raphael Perpetuo Lotilla for his ties to Aboitiz, urging him to act on the issue.

CEED's Krishna Ariola emphasized the need for Tañon Strait to be designated as a “non-attainment area” under the Philippine Clean Water Act. The pollution could affect around 43,000 fisherfolk in the region, threatening their livelihoods. [Rappler]

Philippines: Election officer and husband killed in Maguindanao del Norte ambush

(jto) An election officer and her husband were killed in an ambush in Datu Odin Sinsuat, Maguindanao del Norte, on March 26. Gunmen opened fire on their vehicle in Barangay Makir while they were traveling to the town center, fatally wounding both. Authorities have condemned the attack and called for cooperation in identifying those responsible. The incident follows a separate shooting the previous day in a nearby barangay, where gunfire struck a vehicle owned by a local official, though no injuries were reported in that case.[Philstar]

Philippines: Navy to restructure key maritime commands amid rising tensions in West Philippine Sea

(lm) The Philippine Navy is set to reorganize and expand its naval commands in the West Philippine Sea (WPS) and near Taiwan as part of a strategic shift toward territorial defense. The Department of National Defense has approved upgrading the Naval Forces West to the Western Naval Command and the Naval Forces Northern Luzon to the Northern Luzon Naval Command.

These expanded commands, based in Palawan and La Union respectively, are at the forefront of the Philippines’ response to China’s growing assertiveness in the region. The restructuring aligns with the military’s 2024 archipelagic defense strategy, which shifts focus from internal security to external defense, and will involve increasing personnel, upgrading

command ranks, and deploying more naval assets. [Inquirer.net]

Philippines: New radar system tracks vessel movement in Misamis Oriental

(lm) The Philippine Coast Guard installed a radar system at the Phividec Industrial Estate in Tagoloan, Misamis Oriental, on March 28, 2025, aimed at monitoring vessel movement in Macajalar Bay. The system, designed to track ships via the Automatic Identification System (AIS), will monitor up to 36 nautical miles of the bay, aiding in collision prevention, search and rescue coordination, and smuggling deterrence.

Phividec, a 3,000-hectare industrial estate, has been under scrutiny for alleged smuggling activities during the Duterte administration. The new Vessel Tracking Monitoring System (VTMS) replaces an earlier radar system, donated by Japan, which ceased operating in 2008. The system will enhance real-time monitoring of vessels at the estate's 15 ports, particularly with the addition of a new berth.

The radar system comes amidst growing concerns about the estate's role in future defense operations. Phividec is being considered for a future naval base to support the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) and reinforce military operations in Mindanao. The planned naval base, expected to function as a logistics hub, was discussed by Defense Secretary Gilbert Teodoro in November 2024.

Environmental concerns are also intertwined with Phividec's role, as the estate is linked to controversial businesses, including the Philippine Sanjia Steel Corporation, which faced allegations of smuggling and illegal activities. [Rappler]

Philippines: PNP promotes 4 police brigadier generals, 28 colonels

(lm) The Philippine National Police (PNP) has promoted four police brigadier generals and 28 colonels to higher ranks. The four promoted to major general include Brig. Gen. Jerico Orillo Baldeo (Director for Information and Communications Technology Management), Brig. Gen. Lex Ephraim Corpuz Gurat (Director for Plans), Brig. Gen. Neri Vincent Diego Ignacio (Director for Logistics), and Brig. Gen. Anthony Abellada Aberin

(National Capital Region Police Office Regional Director).

Meanwhile, 28 colonels were promoted to brigadier generals, including Colonel Primitivo Bayongan Jr. (Legislative Affairs Center), Colonel Moises Onatas Villaceran Jr. (Police Attaché in Washington D.C.), and national operational support unit chiefs like Colonels Elmer Ragay (Anti-Kidnapping Group), Bonard Briton (Integrity Monitoring and Enforcement Group), Frankie Candelario (Intelligence Group), and Marvin Saro (Police Community Affairs and Development Group).

Additionally, various other colonels, including heads of police districts and directors of specialized units, were also promoted. These include Colonels Josefino Ligan, Villamor Tuliao, Melecio Buslig Jr., and several others from different police units and regions. [Inquirer.net]

Philippines: No imminent uprising in Mindanao amid Duterte's arrest, says report

(lm) A report by the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ) has debunked rumors of an imminent uprising in Mindanao following the arrest of former president Rodrigo Duterte. The study, released on April 1, dismissed claims spread on social media that separatist groups were mobilizing in support of Duterte, using manipulated videos from unrest in Indonesia to create panic. These false narratives were seen as damaging the peace process in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM).

The Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), both signatories of peace agreements with the government, have strongly denied these allegations, with BARMM Interim Chief Minister Abdularaof Macacua stating that "war is not an option." He emphasized that the MILF was focused on progress in the region and continuing the decommissioning process of its armed wing, the Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces (BIAF).

Former Maguindanao del Sur Governor Esmael Mangudadatu also dismissed the uprising rumors, assuring that the MILF-led BARMM would continue its cooperation with the government. The PCIJ warned that such disinformation could be exploited by bad actors to incite violence, but these claims were refuted by local leaders, emphasizing stability and peace efforts. [Daily Tribune] [The Manila Times]

Singapore: Maximum spending in GE2025 election campaign raised to account for inflation

(rt) In preparation for the 2025 General Election (GE2025), the Elections Department (ELD) of Singapore announced a rise in the maximum election campaign spending limit from SGD 4 (USD 3) to SGD 5 (USD 3.70) per registered voter. This increase, the first since 2015, aims to account for inflation.

The revised limit applies to candidates in both Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs) and Single Member Constituencies (SMCs). For GRCs, the maximum spending limit is divided among the candidates in the group. The change ensures a level playing field, preventing "money politics," with candidates required to adhere to the cap.

In addition, ELD confirmed the public's ability to check electoral registers from March 28, following the publication of new electoral boundaries. This includes five new GRCs and six new SMCs due to population shifts. As for the GRCs, President Tharman Shanmugaratnam designated specific constituencies requiring candidates to represent either the Malay community or the Indian and other minority communities. Notably, this ensures continued multiracial representation in Parliament, with adjustments made to GRCs such as Marine Parade and Pasir Ris-Changi. [The Straits Times 1] [Channel NewsAsia 1]

However, some of these changes have drawn criticism, especially regarding the redrawing of electoral boundaries. Workers' Party (WP) chief Pritam Singh questioned the fairness of the changes, calling them “one of the most radical redrawing of boundaries Singapore has seen in recent memory.” He pointed out that many political observers were skeptical about the reasons given for the revisions, particularly citing population growth as a justification. Singh has called on the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) to release detailed voting data for individual precincts, especially those in Marine Parade GRC, which has been altered in the revisions. Singh argued that the transparency of the process was crucial for public trust, stating that “boundaries are important and the reasons that justify their changes matter.” [The Straits Times 2] [Channel NewsAsia 2]

Singapore: PAP prepares younger, more diverse slate as top public servants resign ahead of GE2025

(vsq/lm) As Singapore gears up for its next General Election expected by mid-2025, the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) is finalizing a new slate of candidates that reflects a strong focus on leadership renewal, diversity, and alignment with the priorities of Prime Minister Lawrence Wong. Around 30 new faces are expected, and political observers anticipate formal introductions to accelerate in April, following early appearances at community events across the island.

The upcoming slate is likely to be the PAP's youngest since 2011, with an average age of approximately 40.5 years. Nearly 40 percent of the potential candidates are women—up from 37 percent in the previous election—signaling a continued push for gender diversity in Parliament. The party's intention to broaden its appeal to younger voters is also evident in the mix of candidates drawn from both the public and private sectors.

Several new faces have already been introduced informally in key constituencies such as Marine Parade–Braddell Heights GRC and Sembawang GRC. Among them are figures like former Make-A-Wish Singapore CEO Hazlina Abdul Halim, and business professionals Gabriel Lam and Ng Shi Xuan. These early introductions are being closely watched, though the final deployment of candidates may remain fluid until Nomination Day. [The Straits Times 1] [The Straits Times 2]

Since the release of new electoral boundaries on March 11, six senior public servants have resigned—among them officials from the health, finance, transport, and digital development ministries—fueling speculation about their political roles. While their profiles vary, they share backgrounds in high-level policy work and strategic national initiatives, and several are seen as potential political office-holders if elected. [The Straits Times 3]

The new slate is expected to reflect Prime Minister Wong's vision for the next generation of leadership. In his first speech as party secretary-general in November 2024, he emphasized the importance of renewal and inclusivity, and has since affirmed plans to increase female representation and strengthen ties with younger and more diverse segments of the population.

The PAP appears to be blending past introduction strategies by showcasing candidates at the local level while keeping final slates unconfirmed. This approach

allows the party to gauge public reception and adjust accordingly, while also addressing past feedback about last-minute introductions. With Parliament set to expand to 97 elected members, the party is expected to refresh between a quarter and a third of its slate, consistent with previous electoral cycles.

Singapore: Leong Mun Wai returns as Progress Singapore Party chief ahead of general election

(rt) Progress Singapore Party (PSP) Non-Constituency Member of Parliament (NCMP) Leong Mun Wai has resumed his role as party chief, taking over from fellow NCMP Hazel Poa just months before Singapore's expected general election. The leadership transition, confirmed on March 26 following a central executive committee (CEC) meeting, places Leong at the helm to coordinate the party's campaign strategy and ground operations.

Leong had stepped down as secretary-general in early 2024 after receiving a correction direction under Singapore's Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA). With his return, he becomes the PSP's fifth leader since its founding in 2019. Poa, who served as party chief in his absence, will now assume the role of vice-chair, citing new personal responsibilities as a foster parent.

The leadership change came after the party elected a renewed CEC on March 20, with six new members joining and eight incumbents—including several 2020 general election candidates—not returning. The refreshed 12-member CEC will serve until March 2027.

The PSP is expected to contest multiple constituencies, including the newly redrawn West Coast–Jurong West GRC and Chua Chu Kang GRC. Both Leong and Poa contested in West Coast GRC in 2020, narrowly losing to the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) but securing their NCMP seats as a result. [The Straits Times] [Channel NewsAsia 1] [Channel NewsAsia 2]

Singapore: New civil society dialogues to address race, religion, and social cohesion

(lm) Prime Minister Lawrence Wong announced on March 29 that Singapore will launch new people-to-people conversations among civil society leaders to tackle sensitive issues such as race, religion, social

mobility, and the impact of technological change. Speaking at the 40th anniversary event of REACH, the government's feedback unit, Wong emphasized that fostering national unity requires more than government-led initiatives—it needs active, inclusive dialogue among citizens themselves. [Channel NewsAsia]

Singapore: Ministers' defamation suits against The Online Citizen editor move to pre-trial stage

(rt) Law and Home Affairs Minister K. Shanmugam and Manpower Minister Tan See Leng have escalated their defamation suits against Terry Xu, chief editor of socio-political site *The Online Citizen* (TOC), with pre-trial conferences scheduled for April 1 in Singapore's Supreme Court. The lawsuits stem from a December 2024 TOC article referencing a Bloomberg report on Good Class Bungalow (GCB) transactions in Singapore, which the ministers argue falsely implied that they exploited legal mechanisms to obscure their property deals.

The ministers previously issued correction directions under the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA) against Bloomberg and its journalist over the same issue, and indicated they would take similar legal steps against other parties disseminating libelous content—naming TOC as one such outlet.

In their court filings, the ministers alleged that Xu, who resides in Taiwan, is waging a public sympathy campaign by accusing them of suppressing press freedom and targeting legitimate journalism. They claim Xu published and circulated the article widely across social media platforms, and that it was republished on forums like SG Talk and Reddit. Despite a legal demand issued in December 2024 to retract the article and apologize, Xu has not complied. The ministers are seeking damages, legal costs, and an injunction to prevent further dissemination of the alleged defamatory content. [The Straits Times] [Channel NewsAsia]

Singapore: Five key executives leave SingPost amid restructuring

(lm) Five key executives at Singapore Post (SingPost) have left the company as part of a restructuring

exercise. The departures include Noel Singgih, group chief information officer, and Sehr Ahmed, group chief people officer, along with Audrey Teoh, Michelle Lee, and Lee Eng Keat, who held senior roles in information security, sustainability, and strategy. All five executives were no longer listed on SingPost's website as of April 1.

The restructuring, which is expected to take several months, follows a previous announcement in February regarding the layoff of 45 employees in corporate support roles. SingPost clarified that the layoffs were unrelated to any previous whistleblower reports or incidents. The company remains focused on maintaining operational strength and sustainability during this transition.

This restructuring comes after the firing of three senior executives in December 2024 due to a probe into their "grossly negligent" handling of internal investigations. The fired executives, including group CEO Vincent Phang, group CFO Vincent Yik, and the CEO of SingPost's international business unit, Li Yu, have expressed their intention to contest the dismissals. [Channel NewsAsia]

Singapore: UOB dismisses allegations by former Yang Kee Logistics CEO as defamatory

(lm) United Overseas Bank (UOB) has rejected allegations made by Ken Koh, former CEO of Yang Kee Logistics, calling them "baseless and defamatory." Koh accused UOB and its executives of misconduct related to the sale of Yang Kee's properties to real estate firm Logos, including claims of mishandling confidential information. The allegations were published by The Online Citizen, which also shared a video and audio recordings of Koh's conversations, purportedly involving a UOB executive.

In response, UOB confirmed it had issued a warning letter to Koh and intends to take legal action against him and any parties that publish the claims. Meanwhile, the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS) stated that it had responded to Koh's complaints on February 28 and March 17 and is actively reviewing the matter. MAS clarified that any assertion suggesting it had not replied or was ignoring the issue is false.

Yang Kee Logistics, founded in 1990, expanded across Asia and Australia but went into receivership in May 2022. A sale process for its assets began in July of that year. [Channel NewsAsia]

Singapore: Minister declines to press charges against sisters who disrupted Meet-The-People Session

(lm) Singapore's Minister for Law and Home Affairs K. Shanmugam has announced that he will not file a police report against two sisters who disrupted his Meet-The-People Session (MPS) in Chong Pang on March 12. The incident, which became confrontational over a discussion on the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA), ended with the sisters shouting at the minister. A video of the encounter was later posted by Shanmugam on social media.

Although the behavior could amount to a criminal offense, the minister stated on March 27 that he prefers to move on and hopes the young women learn from the experience. He emphasized the importance of engaging the community constructively, especially during Ramadan.

Shanmugam also confirmed that the two women are already under investigation for unrelated earlier incidents. Addressing speculation that the video was staged, he explained that he had been miked up for a community event prior to the MPS and dismissed the suggestion as a "conspiracy theory."

The disruption is part of a broader trend noted by the ruling People's Action Party, which has alleged that the activist group “Monday of Palestine Solidarity” has disrupted over ten MPS events in recent months. [Channel NewsAsia]

Singapore: Ministry of Law committed to task force supporting disabilities in the legal system

(rt) At the inaugural Access to Justice (A2J) Symposium, Singapore’s Second Minister for Law, Edwin Tong, reaffirmed the Ministry of Law’s (MinLaw) commitment to a multi-agency task force focused on supporting individuals with invisible disabilities in the justice system. These disabilities, including mental health conditions, were a central topic at the symposium. Tong, who also serves as Minister for Culture, Community and Youth, highlighted the long-overdue need for such a platform to foster dialogue on this issue.

Around 400 participants from the judiciary, law enforcement, legal, medical, and social service sectors attended the event. Discussions centered on how the criminal justice system can better accommodate individuals with hidden disabilities and re-evaluate rehabilitation, treatment, and punishment strategies. Former President Halimah Yacob, who also attended, called for enhanced collaboration between law enforcement and community partners, such as the Community Foundation of Singapore. [The Straits Times] [Channel NewsAsia]

Singapore: Share of job vacancies for PMETs rises as economy shifts toward high-skilled roles

(lm) Singapore's labor market continued to tilt toward high-skilled employment in 2024, with 57.7 percent of all job vacancies designated for professionals, managers, executives, and technicians (PMETs), up from 57.2 percent in 2023, according to the Ministry of Manpower's (MOM) annual job vacancies report released on March 28.

The rise reflects sustained demand in key growth sectors including information and communications, financial and insurance services, and professional services. Notably, software, web and multimedia developers, along with investment advisers and digital infrastructure professionals, were among the most sought-after roles.

The report found that nearly 46 percent of vacancies in 2024 were newly created positions, indicating ongoing structural changes in the labor market. Over half of these new roles stemmed from business function expansion, while others emerged from business diversification or job redesign. MOM emphasized that such dynamism underscores a continued shift toward higher-skilled employment.

The report also highlighted improvements in job matching efficiency. Hard-to-fill vacancies, defined as positions unfilled for at least six months, dropped to 19.4 percent in 2024 from 23.5 percent in 2023 and 41.4 percent a decade ago. This decline was attributed to job redesign, increased use of technology, skills upgrading, and Singapore's Progressive Wage Model.

MOM also observed a growing shift to skills-based hiring, with 78.8 percent of vacancies in 2024 not prioritizing academic qualifications. Employers increasingly favored relevant experience and practical abilities, especially in a tight labor market. For over half

of all job listings, employers indicated openness to hiring candidates with lower-than-stated academic credentials.

As of December 2024, there were 1.64 job vacancies per unemployed person in Singapore, signaling a continued tight labor market. [Channel NewsAsia]

Singapore: Home Team agency forms USD 7.4 million joint venture with ST Engineering

(rt) (rt) ST Engineering, a global technology, defense, and engineering solutions provider, has announced the formation of a joint venture with the Home Team Science and Technology Agency (HTX), a government agency responsible for driving innovation and technological advancements in Singapore's Home Team departments.

The joint venture, called Codex Solutions, will focus on developing and maintaining software capabilities for the Home Team, a term referring to Singapore's public safety and security agencies, including the Singapore Police Force, the Singapore Civil Defence Force, and other related organizations.

The venture has an initial paid-up capital of SGD 10 million (USD 7.4 million), with HTX holding a 40 percent stake and the remaining 60 percent held by ST Engineering Mission Software & Services, a subsidiary of ST Engineering. [The Straits Times]

Singapore: Training facility launched to upgrade defense against cyberattacks targeting maritime sector

(rt) Singapore has launched the world's first cyber-physical training platform to enhance defense against cybersecurity challenges in the maritime sector. Developed jointly by the Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore (MPA) and the Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD), the facility, named Maritime Testbed of Shipboard Operational Technology (MariOT), simulates a real-life ship environment. It allows students to experience various cyberattack scenarios and respond to them in real time.

Over the next three years, more than 300 students and professionals, including ship crew, cybersecurity

experts, and port operators, are expected to participate in the training and gain valuable experience. [Channel NewsAsia]

Singapore: Man charged for hosting preacher with alleged terror links at migrant workers' dorm

(vsq) A Singaporean has been charged for organizing an unauthorized religious gathering at a migrant workers' dormitory in Tuas, where a foreign preacher with alleged links to terrorism delivered a sermon. Authorities said the event, held on August 9, 2024, promoted extremist and segregationist views, endangering Singapore's communal harmony.

The preacher, a Bangladeshi national previously arrested in his home country for terror-related activities, was invited to the gathering without the necessary permits, including a Miscellaneous Work Pass. The event also featured live performances without a public entertainment license.

The organizer, who was a director at the dormitory's operating company, allegedly facilitated the preacher's travel and promoted the event, violating multiple laws. Charges include holding a public assembly without a permit, providing public entertainment without a license, and abetting a foreigner to speak on religious matters without a valid work pass.

The dormitory operator, SBM Electrical & Automation, was also charged for allowing large numbers of non-residents to attend the event without maintaining mandatory visitor records. Violations could lead to fines of up to SGD 50,000 (USD 37,000) and up to one year in jail per offense. [Channel NewsAsia]

Singapore: More young people have been detained for involvement in secret societies

(rt) A 2024 report by the Singapore Prison Service (SPS) shows an increase in the number of young people detained under the Criminal Law (Temporary Provisions) Act (CLTPA) for involvement in secret society activities. As of December 31, 2024, 65 individuals aged 29 or younger were in detention under the Act, up from 46 in 2023 and 42 in 2022.

The CLTPA allows detention without trial for offenses such as unlicensed moneylending, drug trafficking, kidnapping, and organized crime. Detainees can be held for up to 12 months following a detention order issued by the Minister for Home Affairs.

The police have emphasized a rehabilitative approach for youth involved in gangs, including diversionary programs like the Streetwise Programme. However, serious criminal and gang-related offenses are met with firm legal action. The CLTPA was extended by Parliament in 2024 for another five years—its 15th extension since its introduction in 1955 to address gang-related violence.

SPS officials noted that young people often struggle to renounce gang affiliation due to peer pressure and the desire for social belonging. [The Straits Times]

Singapore: Nine people deported for illegal touting activities at Changi Airport

(rt) The Singapore Police Force, Immigration and Checkpoints Authority (ICA), Ministry of Manpower (MOM), and Changi Airport Group has released a joint statement that nine foreigners are set for deportations and barred from re-entering Singapore for illegal touting activities at Changi Airport. The individuals, aged between 30 and 48, approached travelers of the same nationality to help transport gold and mobile phones back to their home countries. The travelers were promised a cash reward for handing over the items to counterparts at their destinations. The genders and nationalities of the nine were not disclosed, nor when they would be deported. However, eight of them had their work permits or S Passes revoked by MOM, while one had his short-term visit pass cancelled by ICA. [Straits Times] [Channel NewsAsia]

Thailand: Prime minister survives censure vote as debate sparks scrutiny but no clear political shift

(msz) Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra survived a no-confidence motion in parliament on March 26, receiving 319 votes in support, with 162 opposed and 7 abstentions. Following her decisive win, she ruled out any cabinet reshuffle, asserting that the coalition government remained stable and united. She told reporters that while she is open to listening to

opinions, including those from her father and former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, she had already decided not to reorganize her cabinet. Thaksin, she said, supported her decision. [Bangkok Post 1]

The two-day censure debate, led by People's Party (PP) leader Natthaphong Ruengpanyawut, targeted Paetongtarn's leadership, accusing her of lacking the competence and political maturity to govern. The opposition claimed her administration had failed to address key issues such as high electricity costs, low farm prices, and the questionable effectiveness of the digital cash handout scheme. Although Thaksin's name was excluded by agreement, he was repeatedly alluded to as "a family member" or "an outsider" allegedly exerting influence over the government. [AiR No. 12, March/2025, 4]

The opposition also scrutinized Paetongtarn's economic remarks and financial dealings, particularly her past statements on currency policy, her family's land assets including the Alpine golf course and a resort in Khao Yai, and the use of promissory notes to acquire shares without triggering inheritance taxes. Natthaphong said the PP would submit evidence from the debate to independent agencies like the National Anti-Corruption Commission. [Bangkok Post 2]

Political commentators were divided in their assessments. Some argued that while the opposition's concerns were legitimate, the lack of concrete evidence meant that no significant political shift occurred. Others praised the opposition's focus on ethical questions, particularly surrounding Paetongtarn's political rise and her family's legacy, which remained central to the debate.

Despite these tensions, analysts suggested that the government performed satisfactorily overall, though with some notable mistakes by the prime minister. They also warned that future censure debates could have more serious consequences if the opposition broadens its scrutiny to other cabinet ministers, particularly those in underperforming ministries. In such a scenario, a cabinet reshuffle could be a potential outcome if the opposition presents more evidence of misconduct.

Although the political climate remains tense, experts argue that the opposition's calls for street protests are unlikely to gain significant traction. The public, weary from past political instability, views elections as the most practical way to address the country's issues. For now, Thailand's political landscape remains in flux, with unresolved concerns about corruption, land disputes,

and Thaksin's influence continuing to simmer beneath the surface. [Bangkok Post 3] [Bangkok Post 4]

The aftermath of the debate was also marked by controversy. PP MP Krit Silapachai alleged that he had been offered THB 10 million (USD 295,000) to vote in favor of the prime minister. He posted a screenshot of a Line chat as supposed evidence. Deputy Prime Minister Prasert Jantararuangtong rejected the claim as baseless, asserting that the coalition had already secured more than enough votes and had no need to buy support.

Public Health Minister Somsak Thepsutin also dismissed the allegation and criticized Natthaphong's conduct after the vote, accusing him of approaching the prime minister under the pretense of taking a photograph in order to confront her about unanswered debate questions. Somsak called the move unprofessional and unprecedented in his 40 years in politics. [Bangkok Post 5]

Thailand: Prime minister faces deepening scrutiny over family finances, share deal, and land ownership

(lm) Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra is under mounting pressure over her financial affairs and those of her family, as opposition legislators pursue multiple investigations following a recent no-confidence motion. These probes center on allegations of tax evasion, lack of financial disclosure, and questionable land acquisitions.

At the heart of the controversy is Paetongtarn's acquisition of shares worth THB 4.43 billion (USD 129.5 million) from family members through interest-free, undated promissory notes. During the censure debate, People's Party (PP) MP Wiroj Lakkhanaadisorn alleged this method may have been designed to avoid paying THB 218.7 million (USD 6.4 million) in gift tax. On March 29, the PP formally petitioned the Revenue Department to examine whether the transaction should be considered a disguised gift rather than a bona fide purchase. [Bangkok Post 1]

Revenue Department Director-General Pinsai Suraswadi clarified that tax obligations on such transactions are triggered only when the payment is made—in this case, reportedly scheduled for 2026, making the taxes due in 2027. He also stated this legal interpretation has been in place since before 1987. However, the opposition has urged a ruling from the department's tax arbitration committee to clarify the

matter and establish a broader precedent for public accountability. [Bangkok Post 1] [Bangkok Post 2]

In a related controversy, Paetongtarn is facing scrutiny over her husband Pitaka Suksawat's alleged failure to report the sale of 16,500 shares in MWP Co., a media and digital services firm, to the National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC). When questioned by the press, Paetongtarn noted the transaction may have occurred before she officially assumed office in August 2024 and declined further comment. [Bangkok Post 3]

Separately, the PP has lodged a petition with the Department of Lands challenging the legality of land title documents issued for "Thames Valley Khao Yai," a luxury hotel owned by the Shinawatra family. The property is located in a protected watershed zone under the Lam Takhong self-help settlement scheme—land originally designated for those displaced by dam construction in the 1970s. While the Department of Lands maintains the issuance complied with existing regulations, the opposition argues that such land cannot legally be titled for commercial use. [Bangkok Post 1] [Bangkok Post 3]

Prime Minister Paetongtarn has dismissed the accusations, stating that all transactions were legally compliant and above board. Nonetheless, the investigations have deepened public and political scrutiny of her administration's transparency, particularly in the wake of recent questions about regulatory oversight and the ethical conduct of political leaders.

Thailand: Paetongtarn tops poll for prime minister, but opposition outpaces Pheu Thai in party preference

(lm) A new nationwide survey conducted by Nida Poll shows that Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra remains the most popular choice for the country's top office, while the opposition People's Party continues to dominate overall party support. The poll was conducted from March 24 to 27 with 2,000 respondents across various regions, professions, and income levels.

Paetongtarn, who leads the ruling Pheu Thai Party, was backed by 30.90 percent of respondents as their preferred prime minister, reflecting support for her leadership and Pheu Thai's policies. Opposition leader Natthaphong Ruengpanyawut of the People's Party followed with 22.90 percent, praised by respondents for his transparency, honesty, and appeal to younger

voters. However, 23.50 percent said they had yet to find a suitable candidate.

Other candidates lagged far behind: Pirapan Salirathavibhaga of the United Thai Nation Party garnered 8.45 percent; Khunying Sudarat Keyuraphan of Thai Sang Thai received 3.90 percent; Bhumjaithai Party's Anutin Charnvirakul earned 2.85 percent; Chalermchai Sri-on of the Democrat Party 1.70 percent; and Gen Prawit Wongsuwon of Palang Pracharath Party 1.20 percent.

Despite Paetongtarn's lead in the prime ministerial race, her party trails the People's Party in party preference. The People's Party was the top choice of 37.10 percent of respondents, while Pheu Thai followed at 28.05 percent. Another 13.75 percent said no party was suitable. The United Thai Nation Party stood at 8.75 percent, followed by the Democrat Party (3.65 percent), Bhumjaithai Party (3.35 percent), Thai Sang Thai (2.00 percent), and Palang Pracharath (1.85 percent). Other smaller parties collectively accounted for 1.50 percent.

The results signal a growing gap between individual and party popularity, as Paetongtarn remains personally popular despite broader concerns about her party's standing. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Kla Dharma adviser dismisses cabinet reshuffle rumors, affirms coalition unity

(lm) Captain Thamanat Prompow, chief adviser to the coalition Kla Dharma Party, has dismissed speculation that his brother, Deputy Minister of Agriculture and Cooperatives Akara Prompow, is to be replaced in an impending cabinet reshuffle. Responding to rumors of a so-called "betrayal deal" that would see a Thai Sang Thai Party member take the position, Thamanat stated that he had not heard such plans and emphasized that any changes to the cabinet were solely at the discretion of Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra.

He reiterated that Kla Dharma, although part of the coalition, does not interfere in the internal affairs of the ruling Pheu Thai Party, which Akara belongs to. Thamanat also denied allegations of vote-buying during the recent no-confidence debate, insisting that the government has stable parliamentary backing and no need for such practices.

Regarding the upcoming by-election in Nakhon Si Thammarat's Constituency 8, Thamanat said that Kla

Dharma has already prepared a candidate but will wait for a final decision from the coalition. Should any coalition party choose to contest the seat, Kla Dharma will proceed accordingly. He expressed confidence in the party's readiness and emphasized that competition would not undermine the coalition's unity.

Looking ahead, Thamanat affirmed that Kla Dharma is laying groundwork for the 2025 general election by expanding its organizational footprint nationwide and recruiting candidates to strengthen its political presence. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Investigation intensifies into collapsed unfinished SAO building amid transparency concerns

(bk/lm) The collapse of an unfinished, 30-story building in Bangkok's Chatuchak district on March 28, following an earthquake, has raised serious concerns over construction quality, safety standards, and transparency in government infrastructure projects. The building, intended to house the State Audit Office (SAO), was the only major structure in Bangkok to completely collapse despite the city lying more than 1,000 kilometers from the quake's epicenter in Myanmar.

The building was being constructed by a joint venture between Italian-Thai Development Plc (ITD) and China Railway No. 10 (Thailand) Ltd. At the time of the collapse, about 400 workers were present, with around 75 still feared trapped beneath the rubble. The disaster killed at least 13 people, including migrant workers from Myanmar and Cambodia. [The Diplomat]

In response, the Thai government launched a formal investigation. Deputy Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul confirmed that both Thai and Chinese companies involved in the project would be held accountable. Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra has called for swift action and transparency, with a report expected within a week. The inquiry will examine the building's design, construction methods, and compliance with earthquake resistance standards. [Bangkok Post 1] [Thai Post, in Thai] [The Nation 1]

Notably, the Thai Industrial Standards Institute (TISI) found that two out of 28 steel samples taken from the site did not meet required standards. The steel in question was sourced from Sin Ker Yuan, which had been charged earlier in January 2025 for producing substandard steel. Sin Ker Yuan, located in Ban Khai District, Rayong, was found to have used raw materials

from unregistered suppliers and produced steel with an improper chemical composition. Testing revealed deficiencies in areas such as the height of the rib, which affects the bond between steel and concrete, and the boron content, which weakens the steel's toughness and tensile strength. [Thai Enquirer on X 1] [Thai Enquirer on X 2]

Transparency concerns have also come to the forefront. The Anti-Corruption Organization of Thailand (ACT), an independent civil society watchdog that monitors public projects, criticized the lack of oversight. Although the SAO had committed to an "Integrity Pact" to ensure transparency, ACT was excluded from the early bidding and design phases and only allowed to observe after contracts had been signed. ACT President Mana Nimitmongkol said the organization had raised repeated concerns about delays, labor shortages, and possible corner-cutting, leading the SAO to consider canceling the contract in early 2025. [Bangkok Post 2] [The Nation 2]

In a related development, five Chinese nationals and a Thai interpreter were detained after being seen removing documents from the site, including information on contractors and subcontractors. The individuals, employees of one of the involved companies, claimed they were gathering documents for insurance claims. [The Straits Times]

Thailand: Editorial urges probe into alleged army-run information operations

(lm) The Bangkok Post editorial has called on Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra to launch an investigation into allegations that military and police officers are involved in coordinated information operations (IOs) targeting pro-reform groups. The issue emerged during last week's no-confidence debate, which Paetongtarn survived with the support of 319 Members of Parliament, while 162 voted for her removal.

People's Party MP Chayaphol Satondee accused the military-led Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC) of orchestrating cyber campaigns to discredit academics, activists, and opposition politicians. Presenting what he described as leaked classified documents, he claimed these IOs involved disinformation, deep fakes, online harassment, and denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks, particularly ahead of the 2023 election.

Chayaphol also alleged the Prime Minister failed to supervise ISOC, allowing it to fuel polarization by portraying pro-reform figures as anti-establishment threats. Although government MPs challenged the authenticity of his documents and the debate was cut short, the editorial argues that the allegations echo earlier complaints during former Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha's administration.

The editorial concludes that after the censure debate, Paetongtarn's government can no longer ignore the issue. It calls for a transparent investigation, warning that failure to act will erode the pro-democracy credentials of the Pheu Thai-led government. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Casino bill advances despite growing backlash over transparency, social risks, and policy gaps

(msz) Thailand's Cabinet approved the controversial Casino and Entertainment Complex Bill on March 27, 2025, sparking widespread protest despite the government's assertion that the scheme will drive post-pandemic economic recovery. The bill aims to attract foreign investment and boost tourism, with casinos to be housed within larger entertainment zones. However, critics argue that it lacks sufficient public scrutiny, leaving significant concerns about social risks, transparency, and the policy's potential long-term impacts. [Bangkok Post 1]

The bill permits casinos to occupy no more than 10 percent of the total area in designated entertainment zones, which will also include concert halls, indoor arenas, water parks, and hotels. The government projects the complex could generate annual revenue of THB 119–283 billion (USD 3.5–8.2 billion) and increase international tourist arrivals by 5 to 10 percent.

The law would criminalize broadcasting gambling activities, encouraging gambling behavior, and organizing online gambling within casinos. Violators, including those admitting prohibited persons into casino premises, would face penalties. Oversight responsibilities would fall to the Entertainment Complex Policy Committee, which will also manage public consultations and advise the Cabinet on critical policy areas, including licensing, anti-money laundering safeguards, and investor participation.

However, it has been met with resistance from both public and political figures who argue that it was

rushed without adequate public hearings or a proper feasibility study. Critics have also raised concerns about the exclusivity of entry requirements, which include a THB 5,000 (USD 147.70) fee and a bank deposit of THB 50 million (USD 1.48 million) for Thai nationals. [Bangkok Post 2]

Moreover, as the initiative was notably absent from the ruling Pheu Thai Party's 2023 election manifesto, it has fueled accusations of bad faith. On the day of the bill's approval, around 80 protesters—including members of the Network of Students and People for Thailand's Reform and the Dharma Army—gathered outside Government House, accusing the government of sidelining public interest. [Bangkok Post 3]

Furthermore, a network of 100 civil society organizations has condemned the bill, threatening legal action and highlighting the vague language around casino zones, governance, and the potential for corruption and money laundering. These groups have urged the Senate to hold broader public hearings, arguing that the bill's ambiguities could open legal loopholes and undermine democratic oversight. [Bangkok Post 4]

Opposition voices in Parliament have also raised alarms. People's Party (PP) MP Parit Wacharasindhu questioned the urgency and lack of transparency, suggesting a hidden agenda. He and others warned that the legal change could backfire economically, especially if key countries like China discourage travel to gambling destinations.

Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra has emphasized that the bill's details are subject to parliamentary debate, and must still pass both Houses of Parliament and be endorsed by the King before becoming law. [Bangkok Post 5] [The Nation]

Thailand: Deputy prime minister unmoved by court probe into Senate election interference

(lm) The Constitutional Court has accepted a high-profile petition filed by 92 senators seeking to remove Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Phumtham Wechayachai and Justice Minister Tawee Sodsong from office for allegedly interfering in the 2024 Senate election process. The petition claims the two ministers violated Article 170, Paragraph 1(4) of the Constitution by using the Department of Special Investigation (DSI) to undermine the authority of the Election Commission (EC).

Despite the legal challenge, Phumtham has dismissed the allegations as unfounded and politically motivated. He said he has not even appointed legal counsel and expressed full confidence in the judicial process, affirming that both he and his colleagues have remained honest in their work. The court has given the ministers 15 days to submit a formal response but chose not to suspend them at this stage, citing insufficient evidence.

The case stems from complaints by losing Senate candidates who accused the EC of stalling its investigation into irregularities in the 2024 Senate poll. In response, the DSI—chaired by Phumtham in his capacity as head of its special cases board—began looking into potential money laundering related to the election. Meanwhile, the EC continued to probe alleged collusion that reportedly benefited dozens of senators aligned with the Bhumjaithai Party, the second-largest party in the ruling coalition.

The bloc of senators in question, known informally as the “blue” bloc, is believed to include at least 120 out of 200 senators, with strong ties to Buri Ram province, the political base of Bhumjaithai figurehead Newin Chidchob. The DSI’s involvement provoked backlash from this group, prompting accusations of executive interference in a constitutionally independent process.

While the DSI later narrowed its probe to money laundering allegations, the EC recently acknowledged identifying 27 promising cases of collusion. However, it has yet to decide whether to proceed with full investigations. The EC also stated that it welcomed DSI assistance due to the legal and procedural complexity of the matter. [Bangkok Post 1] [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: Two Bhumjaithai politicians disqualified over election fraud

(lm/hrs) The Constitutional Court and Supreme Court have disqualified two politicians from the Bhumjaithai Party (BJT) over election fraud committed during the 2023 general election, continuing a wave of legal setbacks for the coalition partner.

Senator Somchai Lenglak lost his Senate seat following a Constitutional Court ruling that enforced a prior Supreme Court decision banning him from elections for 10 years. Somchai had run as a BJT candidate in Songkhla’s District 9 and was found guilty of vote-buying. The court declared his Senate seat vacant, and Thanatphong Wongmulali, a businessman and reserve

candidate representing professionals and freelancers, was appointed as his replacement. [Bangkok Post 1]

In a separate case, the Supreme Court also imposed a 10-year political ban on Mukdawan Luengsinil, BJT's MP for Nakhon Si Thammarat's Constituency 8. She was found guilty of giving THB 500 (USD 14.50) each to voters, totaling THB 25,000 (USD 725), in violation of election laws. Suspended from duty since July 2024, she now also faces criminal prosecution. The Election Commission (EC) will request the cabinet to issue a royal decree for a by-election in Constituency 8 within 45 days, with costs—estimated at THB 8 million (USD 232,000)—to be borne by Mukdawan.

Mukdawan is the second BJT MP to face such a ban, following Suwanna Kumphiro's disqualification in February. The by-election in Nakhon Si Thammarat is expected to be highly competitive. The Democrat Party is likely to field former MP Chinnaworn Boonyakiat, while Kongkiat Ketsombat of Kla Dharma and Komdej Matchimwong of the United Thai Nation Party may also enter the race. Kla Dharma, now aligned with the Paetongtarn Shinawatra-led government, is viewed as increasingly influential in the province. [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: Ex-Bangkok MP sentenced to one-year prison term for election violation

(hrs) Former Bangkok MP Sira Jenjaka has been sentenced to one year in prison for running in the 2019 general election despite knowing he was ineligible due to a prior fraud conviction. The Criminal Court found Sira guilty of contesting the election in Bangkok's Constituency 9 while fully aware of his disqualification due to a fraud conviction in 1995. His prior conviction had led to an eight-month jail sentence, which, according to the Constitutional Court, made him ineligible to stand for election.

Sira registered as a candidate for the Palang Pracharath Party in February 2019, several weeks before the election, with knowledge that his past conviction barred him from running. The Election Commission pursued legal action after a petition from former national police chief Pol Gen Sereepisuth Temeeyaves, leading to the court's decision. Along with the prison sentence, Sira's right to contest elections has been revoked for 20 years. His lawyer has applied for bail. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Bhumjaithai MP Ekkarat Changlao faces expulsion over ties with rival party

(lm) Bhumjaithai Party (BJT) member and Khon Kaen MP Ekkarat Changlao is likely to face expulsion after attending a rival Kla Dharma Party event in his constituency, where his son was appointed a local branch chief. BJT leader Anutin Charnvirakul confirmed that party members had submitted a formal request to review Ekkarat's conduct and initiate his removal.

Ekkarat, who has close ties with Kla Dharma chief adviser Capt Thamanat Prompow, has publicly expressed willingness to join Kla Dharma if expelled, stating he would feel more comfortable in the new party. He also noted that both BJT and Kla Dharma are part of the ruling Pheu Thai-led coalition, suggesting his defection would not disrupt coalition unity.

The expulsion, if confirmed, would allow Ekkarat to retain his parliamentary seat by immediately aligning with another party—an option not available if he resigned voluntarily. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Wife of disqualified MP wins seat after by-election victory

(lm) Orn-uma Boonsiri, the wife of disqualified MP Suwanna Phumphiro, won a by-election in Bueng Kan's Constituency 2, securing 46,167 votes in an uncontested race. This victory followed the disqualification of her husband, who was found guilty of electoral fraud in connection with vote-buying activities. The Supreme Court had annulled his right to run or vote in elections for 10 years and ordered him to pay the cost of the by-election.

Orn-uma, a realtor and business owner, was the only candidate in the by-election, which saw a 52 percent voter turnout. Despite the lack of opposition, 8,779 voters cast no votes in the contest. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Transport minister denies secret deals in high-speed rail project amid contract revision concerns

(lm) Transport Minister Suriya Jungrungreangkit has rejected allegations from the opposition that the government is quietly negotiating two high-value deals to revise the concession contract for the long-delayed

high-speed rail project linking Suvarnabhumi, Don Mueang, and U-Tapao airports. The accusation, raised during a no-confidence debate, claims the changes would unfairly benefit the concessionaire—Asia Era One, a consortium led by Charoen Pokphand (CP) Group—at the expense of taxpayers.

People's Party MP Surachet Pravinvongvuth accused the government of planning to offer THB 159.8 billion (USD 4.67 billion) in support to the consortium and of granting it long-term rights—up to 50 years—to develop 141 rai (0.23 sq km) of State Railway of Thailand (SRT) land in Bangkok's Makkasan area and another 25 rai (0.04 sq km) in Si Racha, Chon Buri.

Suriya dismissed the allegations as speculative and misleading, stating that no final decision has been made. He clarified that contract revisions are still under review by state agencies including the Office of the Attorney General and the SRT, and denied having personal involvement in the contract's drafting. He noted that the project, originally signed in October 2019, had already been delayed due to expropriation issues and the COVID-19 pandemic, which reduced ridership on the Airport Rail Link and led Asia Era One to seek compensation.

The project, a key component of Thailand's Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) strategy, was initially slated to launch in 2024. Following years of setbacks, construction is now expected to begin in mid-2025, with operations projected to start by 2029 or 2030. Final cabinet approval of the revised contract is anticipated in the coming weeks. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Cybercrime law overhaul near completion amid rising online fraud cases

(hrs) Thailand is nearing the completion of a major amendment to its cybercrime legislation aimed at bolstering protections against online fraud and digital offenses, according to Digital Economy and Society (DES) Minister Prasert Jantararuangtong. The amendment to the executive decree on cybercrime prevention and suppression is currently under review by the Council of State, the government's legal advisory body. Prasert noted that the only remaining hurdle is a minor legal issue involving a potential overlap with regulations under the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC). Once resolved, the amendment can be enacted immediately through publication in the Royal Gazette, bypassing the need for additional cabinet approval.

Originally submitted to the cabinet on January 28, the DES Ministry's proposed changes come in response to a significant surge in cybercrime cases. Between October 2023 and November 2024, more than 400,000 incidents were reported, causing damages exceeding THB 42 billion (approximately USD 1.24 billion). The ministry emphasized the urgent need for more effective legal tools to protect the public and the broader economy.

Under the revised law, the National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission (NBTC) or telecommunications operators would be authorized to suspend phone numbers linked to suspected cybercrime. Peer-to-peer lending platforms would be banned from facilitating illegal digital asset trading, and service providers would be required to suspend e-wallets connected to fraudulent activity. A newly empowered financial transaction committee would be able to expedite the return of assets to fraud victims without waiting for a court verdict.

The amendment also introduces harsher penalties for cyber offenses. Using digital trading platforms for money laundering could result in up to one year in prison or a fine of THB 100,000 (USD 2,940). Engaging in illegal online gambling could lead to up to five years in prison or a THB 100,000 fine, while trading personal data illegally could be punished with a five-year prison term or a THB 5 million (USD 147,000) fine. Additionally, financial institutions and telecom providers would be held accountable for covering losses suffered by victims of cyber fraud. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Task force to investigate Social Security Fund investments after building purchase controversy

(lm) Thailand's Social Security Board (SSB) has announced the formation of a task force to review past investments made by the Social Security Fund (SSF), amid growing concerns over transparency and governance. The move follows revelations about the fund's THB 7 billion (USD 203 million) purchase of the SKYY9 Centre in Bangkok, which critics say was overvalued and potentially linked to political influence [see [AiR No. 12, March/2025, 4].

During a board meeting on March 26, employer and employee representatives raised concerns that neither the board nor its investment subcommittee had been properly informed of specific investment projects. According to employer representative Montree

Tirakothai, the board had only been briefed on broad asset categories—such as risk levels and investment regions—without access to details on individual projects or budgets.

The SKYY9 transaction has come under intense scrutiny after opposition People's Party MP Rukchanok Srinork revealed that the property was initially appraised at just THB 3 billion (USD 87 million), far below the final purchase price. The building was initially acquired in 2017 by Watergate Pavilion Co., whose executive Pattana Promphat is the son of former Deputy Public Health Minister and Palang Pracharath Party (PPRP) figure Santi Promphat. It was subsequently sold to AGRE 101 Co. in 2019 before being purchased by a private equity trust under the Social Security Office (SSO). While Santi has denied any connection to AGRE 101 or knowledge of the SSO's interest in the property, the deal has raised concerns about political interference.

Despite the SSO's insistence that the purchase followed procedures involving independent appraisals and Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC)-regulated investment channels, critics have questioned the office's lack of experience in property management and the valuation gap. Labour Minister Phiphat Ratchakitprakarn has supported a full inquiry, while Interior Minister Anutin Charnvirakul has promised that the investigation will be conducted independently.

The task force will begin its review with an initial meeting with the SSF's investment department on April 8, ahead of a full board session on April 10. The investigation is expected to examine whether other transactions involved similar irregularities.

Amid this controversy, concerns have also been raised about the SSO's broader strategy to expand off-market investments to THB 130 billion (USD 3.77 billion). Phiphat has denied any financial crisis within the SSF, noting that its investment returns rose from 3.1 percent in 2023 to 5.34 percent last year. He argued that sustaining a 5 percent return over the next three decades would extend the fund's viability for another 55 years and help support expanded benefits such as higher pensions and better healthcare services. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Drug scam at veterans' hospital widens as more arrests expected

(lm) Authorities are expanding a high-profile corruption probe into a THB 60 million (USD 1.74

million) medical fraud scheme at Bangkok's Veterans General Hospital (VGH), where a physician allegedly masterminded a long-running scam involving falsified prescriptions and the resale of overprescribed medication.

At the center of the case is Dr. Barinda Ujwatee, who, according to police, was responsible for nearly 29 percent of all drug orders at the hospital over a seven-year period. Working with a network of accomplices, Dr. Barinda allegedly issued prescriptions for individuals with falsified illnesses, while the medications—often for chronic conditions and including expensive, foreign-made drugs—were stockpiled and later resold through pharmacies across multiple provinces.

Among those arrested was Col. Kanyarat Jitprasong, a retired military officer accused of organizing patients in Lop Buri province to visit the hospital and receive fraudulent prescriptions from Dr. Barinda. The dispensed medications were stored in a building disguised as a laundry on Rama IV Road in Bangkok before being distributed.

In a coordinated operation on March 26, police raided 17 locations in Bangkok, Chon Buri, Lop Buri, and Prachin Buri, arresting eight suspects, including Dr. Barinda and Col. Kanyarat. Authorities also seized THB 10.9 million (USD 316,000) in cash, land deeds, controlled substances like Pradaxa blood thinners, and falsified pharmaceutical records. Six of the 11 pharmacies investigated were allegedly involved, including one unlicensed establishment.

Most suspects have been released on bail, except one who remains in custody. Police believe at least THB 40 million (USD 1.16 million) from the scheme was funneled into bank accounts held by Col. Kanyarat. [Bangkok Post 1] [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: Marine park chief transferred over suspected ticket scam involving inflated tourist prices

(lm) The head of Mu Ko Similan National Park in Phangnga province has been transferred following a National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC) probe into alleged illegal reselling of e-tickets. Officials suspect that tickets intended for Thai nationals—priced at THB 100 (USD 2.90) for adults and THB 50 (USD 1.45) for children—were sold to foreign tourists at marked-up "foreigner prices" of THB 500 (USD 14.50) and THB 250 (USD 7.25) respectively. This practice may

have significantly reduced park revenue while generating profits for those involved.

Park chief Ritthikorn Noonloy has been reassigned to the Forest Conservation Office 5 in Nakhon Si Thammarat pending investigation. Warawut Saengthong, a forestry expert and current deputy at the park, will serve as acting chief until September 30. The Department of National Parks emphasized that regular leadership rotations are essential to preventing long-term influence and potential corruption. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Government opens one-stop service center for investment and visas

(lm) Thailand has launched a new one-stop service center aimed at streamlining visa, work permit, and investment procedures for foreign investors and expatriates. The Thailand Investment and Expat Services Centre (TIESC), officially opened on March 31 by Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra, is located at One Bangkok in Pathum Wan, Bangkok.

TIESC brings together services from the Board of Investment, Immigration Bureau, and Department of Employment, offering centralized access to investment facilitation and legal documentation. The Prime Minister emphasized that the initiative is part of the government's broader strategy to promote investment through digital innovation and ease of doing business.

She noted that Thailand recorded investment applications for 3,100 projects worth THB 1.1 trillion (approximately USD 31.9 billion) in 2024, marking the highest level in a decade. TIESC, she said, not only serves as a practical hub but also symbolizes Thailand's commitment to international cooperation and economic growth. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Calls for transgender equality grow amid ongoing discrimination

(lm) During the 2nd Thailand Transgender Wellbeing Conference in Bangkok, advocates called for comprehensive legal protections and equality for the transgender community, highlighting ongoing discrimination, especially in rural areas. Despite Thailand's reputation for acceptance of transgender individuals, challenges persist, including workplace

exclusion, transphobia in healthcare settings, and societal marginalization.

Over 300 advocates from across Thailand attended the conference, discussing the need for safe spaces and inclusive policies that offer stable employment, welfare, and essential services. Panelists emphasized the unique challenges faced by different groups, including transgender individuals in nightlife, delivery riders, and those with disabilities. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Government expands iris scanning for migrant worker registration to improve healthcare access

(lm) The Ministry of Public Health is moving to expand the nationwide use of iris-recognition technology to register migrant workers, aiming to ensure accurate data collection, improve healthcare access, and strengthen disease control efforts. The system, known as the Red Cross Biometric Authentication System (TRCBAS), was co-developed in 2023 by the ministry and the National Electronics and Computer Technology Center (Nectec) and initially trialed in Ratchaburi.

Dr. Supachoke Vejjaphanphesat, inspector for Public Health Area 2, said the biometric system helps address inaccuracies caused by the frequent mobility of unregistered migrants. Recently, 7,616 migrant workers in Tak province registered under the system, enabling verification of their eligibility for medical welfare.

Authorities expect the TRCBAS system to provide a reliable database for managing human resources, allocating medical supplies, and planning healthcare education. The Public Health Ministry has submitted a proposal to the cabinet to expand the program nationwide. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Student sentenced to death over fatal shooting in Bangkok

(lm) A 22-year-old student from the Pathumwan Institute of Technology has been sentenced to death by the Bangkok South Criminal Court for the premeditated murder of two individuals during a gang-related shooting in Bangkok's Klong Toey district in November 2023. The court also ordered the convicted shooter, Anawin Kaewkeb, to pay THB 6,078,000 (approximately USD 176,000) in compensation to the

victims' families, along with five percent annual interest.

The court relied on CCTV footage and testimony from 59 witnesses, finding Anawin guilty of premeditated murder, criminal association, and firearms offenses. Of the 24 defendants, all but one received prison terms ranging from two years to life. After the verdict, tensions flared as friends of the victims and defendants clashed outside the courthouse, requiring police intervention to prevent violence. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Dental Council urges expansion of social security dental coverage

(lm) The Dental Council of Thailand has called on the Ministry of Labor to improve dental care access for members of the social security system by expanding treatment options and cost coverage. During a meeting on March 28 with Labor Minister Phiphat Ratchakitprakarn, the council proposed allowing social security subscribers to receive dental services at public hospitals—not just private dental clinics—without increasing monthly contributions.

Currently, dental benefits for social security members are capped at THB 900 (USD 26.57) annually and are limited to services at dental clinics. The Council argues that this ceiling restricts access for low-income earners and is significantly less generous than the coverage provided under Thailand's universal healthcare scheme (the "gold card"), which offers more extensive free dental services at public hospitals.

The Council emphasized that enabling treatment at public hospitals could help bridge the gap between social security subscribers and gold card holders. Discussions also touched on clarifying which dental services should be included and the possibility of introducing voluntary contributions for certain advanced procedures.

The social security scheme, managed by the Ministry of Labor, has recently faced growing scrutiny over disparities in coverage when compared with the Public Health Ministry's gold card scheme. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: State banks launch financial relief measures to support post-earthquake recovery

(bk) In response to the March 28 earthquake, Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Pichai Chunhavajira assured that Thailand's economy remains stable and announced financial relief measures from Thai state banks to support the recovery of citizens and businesses affected by the disaster.

EXIM Bank has extended repayment terms for short-term loans up to 180 days, increased credit limits by up to 20 percent, and offered principal payment holidays for up to 1 year on long-term loans, with a 0.5 percent interest rate reduction in the first year.

The Bank for Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives (BAAC) has introduced two loan programs: emergency loans up to THB 50,000 (USD 1,474) at zero percent interest for the first 6 months, and rehabilitation loans up to THB 500,000 (USD 14,737) at reduced rates for farmers to repair homes and agricultural machinery.

The Thai Credit Guarantee Corporation (TCG) is supporting SMEs with a 6-month suspension of guarantee fees and a 3-instalment payment holiday for businesses in debt restructuring.

SME D Bank is offering payment holidays and emergency funding (ranging from THB 30,000 (USD 884) to THB 200,000 (USD 5,895)) for repairs and business recovery, without collateral or fees.

The Government Housing Bank (GHB) is assisting with housing rehabilitation through reduced instalments, zero percent interest for initial periods, and additional loans of up to THB 2 million (USD 58,949) for home repairs, along with fast-tracked insurance claims processing.

Krungthai Bank has announced a 75 percent reduction in loan instalments for 1 year, zero percent interest for 3 months, and tailored assistance for SME loans and home repair financing. [The Nation]

Thailand: Earthquake to cut tourism revenue by 10-15 percent

(lm) The Thai Hotels Association (THA) has projected a 10-15 percent decline in Thailand's tourism revenue over the next two weeks due to the earthquake that struck on March 28. THA president Thienprasit Chaiyapatranun reported a surge in early hotel checkouts, particularly in Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, and Ayutthaya, with some tourists opting to change their destinations to Pattaya and Phuket

instead. This, he said, was due to safety concerns, with many tourists questioning the stability of the country's infrastructure.

Thienprasit noted that the incident could hurt foreign tourists' confidence in Thailand's safety, affecting both those who have already booked their trips and those still deciding on their travel plans. He expects this to dampen the atmosphere during the Songkran festival, with tourism revenues potentially taking up to a month to return to normal levels.

The recent collapse of the State Audit Office in Bangkok, which gained significant attention on social media, further heightened safety concerns. Thienprasit called on the government to implement stricter safety measures, particularly during the Songkran festival, to prevent further security-related issues. He also emphasized that if additional security incidents occur, it could have long-term negative impacts on the tourism sector.

Regarding the 2025 tourism target, Thienprasit expressed doubts about reaching the 39-40 million foreign tourist mark, as initially forecast. He anticipates foreign arrivals will be on par with last year's 35.54 million, which is below the target. To counterbalance this, he suggested boosting domestic tourism, possibly through government schemes like the "Tiew Thai Khon La Khrueng" co-payment initiative.

In response to safety concerns, the government has ordered an inspection of hotels to boost confidence among tourists. Over 4,000 engineers are being deployed to inspect buildings, with the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) planning to release a list of hotels that have passed the safety inspection. Large hotels are conducting their own inspections, but Thienprasit urged the government to support small hotels with the inspection costs.

He stressed that safety must be the priority to ensure sustainable tourism growth, noting that safety concerns have already caused Thailand to lose tourists, especially from China, where travelers have preferred destinations like Japan over Thailand due to perceived safety issues. He recommended that the government study Japan's safety measures to regain the confidence of international travelers. [The Nation]

Thailand: Property market faces challenges after earthquake, prolonged downturn expected

(lm) Thailand's property market is facing a significant downturn, compounded by the aftereffects of the March 28 earthquake. The sector, already struggling with high household debt, limited access to finance, and an oversupply of housing, now faces a further blow, especially in the high-rise condominium market. Consumer confidence has plummeted, with sales expected to drop to their lowest level in 15 years, particularly for condos in Greater Bangkok.

The earthquake has raised safety concerns, particularly among condo buyers. A significant number are likely to delay their purchases or cancel contracts, especially in the second quarter of 2025. The damage caused by the quake has prompted many buyers to reassess the safety of high-rise buildings, with repairs and certifications now seen as essential to restoring confidence.

Meanwhile, the low-rise housing market may fare better, as homes are perceived to be less vulnerable to seismic activity. Sales in this sector could either remain stable or see a slight increase, particularly as condo sales continue to decline. [Bangkok Post]

However, even before the earthquake, Thailand's real estate sector was already facing a prolonged slowdown, with analysts warning that without structural reforms, the downturn could resemble Japan's "lost decade." A mix of high household debt, limited financing options, weak economic growth, and persistent oversupply is putting pressure on both sales and property values.

The oversupply is especially acute in the low-rise housing market, where over 200,000 unsold units are expected to take up to six years to absorb. Developers have been slow to adjust, continuing to build despite declining demand. Economic concerns, with GDP growth projections ranging from 2.3 to 2.7 percent, are further dampening market sentiment. Although tourism has helped recovery post-pandemic, sectors like manufacturing have seen prolonged contraction, highlighting the fragility of the broader economy.

Household debt has now surpassed 90 percent of GDP, up from 60 percent before the 1997 Asian financial crisis. Real wages have stagnated, growing just 1.6 percent annually, despite moderate GDP growth. Tighter lending standards for middle- and lower-income buyers are exacerbating these challenges.

Government measures to stimulate the sector, such as easing loan-to-value (LTV) ratios, have primarily benefited high-end investors and second-home buyers, offering little relief for the broader market.

Analysts suggest that meaningful recovery will require policies aimed at increasing household incomes and attracting skilled foreign workers through controlled liberalization of foreign property ownership. Proposals include using taxes from foreign property purchases to fund affordable housing for Thai citizens.

In the short term, experts recommend reducing transfer and mortgage fees, lowering land taxes, and expanding access to home loans for middle-income groups. As real estate is a significant part of Thailand's GDP and employment, targeted reforms are crucial to reviving the sector and ensuring long-term economic resilience. [The Nation]

Thailand: Third-phase cash handout faces criticism amid economic concerns

(lm) The government's third-phase cash handout, aimed at stimulating the economy, has faced backlash from opposition figures, who argue that similar initiatives have failed to achieve their goals. The latest phase, targeting 2.7 million young people aged 16 to 20, is part of the government's push to digitalize finances and promote cashless transactions. However, critics, including opposition MP Sirikanya Tansakul, have expressed concerns about potential technical difficulties and the scheme's effectiveness in boosting the economy. The handout, set to cost THB 150 billion (USD 4.4 billion), may be delayed due to coordination issues between the Digital Government Development Agency (DGA) and the Digital Economy and Society Ministry (DES).

Finance Minister Pichai Chunhavajira defended the initiative, stressing that the digital wallet technology would help track spending and inform future policies. The government is also focusing on driving economic growth beyond 3 percent and reducing household debt, while encouraging public investment and export growth.[Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Labor minister targets nationwide THB 400 minimum wage by May 1

(hrs) Thailand's Labor Minister Phiphat Ratchakitprakarn has announced plans to raise the daily minimum wage to THB 400 (USD 11.76) nationwide by May 1, coinciding with Labor Day, while promising support for small and medium enterprises

(SMEs) that may be affected by the wage hike. The pledge comes amid criticism during the parliamentary censure debate that the government has failed to fully implement its election campaign promise of a THB 400 minimum wage, which was a key pledge of the ruling Pheu Thai Party during the 2023 election.

Opposition MP Sirikanya Tansakul from the People's Party accused the government of misleading the public for political gain. She noted that since the start of the Paetongtarn administration, business closures have risen by 11 percent while new business registrations have only grown by 4 percent. She also cited rising layoffs with insufficient compensation.

In response, Minister Phiphat said the national wage committee will meet before the Songkran festival in April to finalize plans for the wage adjustment. The THB 400 minimum wage has already been implemented in economically stronger areas such as Phuket, Chon Buri, Rayong, Chachoengsao, and Koh Samui, but other provinces currently have wage rates ranging from THB 337 (USD 9.91) to THB 380 (USD 11.17) depending on local economic conditions.

Phiphat acknowledged that a single national rate could present challenges, particularly for SMEs, which represent a major part of the Thai economy. The proposed increase could affect 5.8 million workers and 500,000 SME employers, prompting the government to consider tailored support measures and sector-specific adjustments. He also emphasized that the overall wage reform would be aligned with the government's economic growth target of 3 percent, with the possibility of differentiated wage adjustments across sectors to limit adverse economic impacts. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Government boosts pickup sales and commercial EV use through credit support and tax incentives

(bk/hrs) Thailand's government has unveiled a series of financial and tax measures to stimulate vehicle-related sectors, supporting both traditional pickup truck sales and accelerating the transition to electric commercial vehicles (EVs). These initiatives aim to address slowing market performance, enhance national competitiveness, and contribute to clean energy goals.

The newly launched "My Pickup, Government Credit" program offers loan guarantees to help Thai citizens buy pickup trucks, which are widely used in logistics and agriculture. The initiative, managed by the Thai

Credit Guarantee Corporation (TCG) under the Finance Ministry, features a THB 5 billion (USD 148.4 million) guarantee fund and is expected to inject at least THB 21 billion (USD 622 million) into the economy. Each eligible borrower can access guarantees of up to THB 1.5 million (USD 44,300). To reduce financial burdens, the government will fully cover guarantee fees for the first three years, and partially subsidize them for years four to seven, with the annual fee capped at 1.5 percent. The program runs until December 30, 2025. [Bangkok Post 1]

In parallel, the Cabinet on March 27 approved a draft emergency decree introducing new corporate income tax incentives for companies investing in large commercial EVs, such as electric buses and trucks. Under this scheme, businesses can deduct expenses for locally manufactured or assembled EVs at twice the actual cost, and 1.5 times the cost for imported fully assembled EVs. The measure applies from the approval date through December 31, 2025.

To qualify, firms must submit an investment plan and meet criteria set by the Revenue Department. Eligible EVs must be newly produced, comply with Department of Land Transport regulations, and must not overlap with projects already receiving tax incentives under other government programs. Vehicles must also align with national priorities, such as boosting the Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC) or supporting targeted industries. The Finance Ministry projects the measure will result in 10,000 commercial EVs—including 6,000 electric buses and 4,000 trucks—entering the market. [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: TikTok overtakes YouTube in digital ad market, Meta remains at top

(bk) Thailand's digital advertising market is expected to grow by 10 percent in 2025, reaching THB 34.5 billion (USD 1 billion). This growth is largely driven by the expanding skincare sector and the rise of TikTok, which has surpassed YouTube to become the second most popular platform for digital ads.

TikTok now holds 16 percent of the digital advertising market share, while YouTube has 15 percent, reflecting its growing popularity among Thai consumers, especially for short-form video content and influencer-driven marketing. Meta (Facebook and Instagram) remains the dominant platform with a 26 percent market share, although its share has slightly declined.

Despite concerns over household debt and a predicted economic slowdown, the skincare sector is forecasted to rise by 21 percent, reaching THB 6.13 billion (USD 181 million), driven by a rebound in personal care spending. Strong consumer spending in essential sectors like fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG), services, and tourism will further support ad spending. The increasing role of artificial intelligence (AI) in shaping brand marketing strategies is also expected to be a key trend in the future of the industry. [The Nation]

Thailand: Lack of AI skills may erode global competitiveness, experts warn

(lm) Thailand risks falling behind in the global artificial intelligence (AI) race due to a shortage of domestic AI talent, according to digital sector observers. While AI usage in daily life is widespread—with a recent survey showing nearly 74 percent of urban residents using AI tools—only 20 percent of Thai workers reportedly use AI in their workplaces, revealing a gap in professional integration.

At a recent seminar, officials highlighted the need for a complete overhaul of Thailand's education and workforce training systems. They proposed targeting three groups: the general public, the current workforce, and advanced specialists, with measures such as online learning platforms and tax incentives to encourage skills development.

Critics pointed to Thailand's rigid education system and lack of investment in science and technology fields, especially compared to regional peers like Malaysia. Drawing comparisons to countries like India, they called for Thailand to shift from being a technology consumer to becoming a technology producer.

Without urgent action to develop a self-reliant AI workforce, they warned, Thailand could remain dependent on foreign technology and lose ground to other ASEAN nations. [The Nation]

Thailand: Prime Minister backs Phuket's medical hub and sustainable tourism drive

(lm) Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra has voiced strong support for transforming Phuket into a global medical hub and premium sustainable tourism

destination. Speaking at the inaugural Thailand Sustainable Tourism Conference (TSTC) 2025 held in Phuket, she emphasized the island's role as a key driver of Thailand's tourism economy.

Highlighting Phuket's growing appeal to long-stay foreign visitors seeking medical care, the Prime Minister pledged the government's support to strengthen this emerging sector. She also underlined the importance of balancing economic development with environmental responsibility, aligning with global trends toward sustainable tourism.

Phuket is set to host the Global Sustainable Tourism Conference in 2026. The Prime Minister urged the local tourism industry to prepare for high-end international visitors and emphasized the importance of infrastructure readiness and sustainable practices.

The Phuket Tourist Association (PTA) echoed the Prime Minister's sentiments, unveiling plans to elevate industry standards by promoting certifications such as the "Green Hotel Plus," endorsed by the Global Sustainable Tourism Council. The PTA also called for government support in upgrading infrastructure and public transport to accommodate rising tourist arrivals. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: OIC warns against policy termination due to policyholder's default on unauthorized loans

(bk) The Office of Insurance Commission (OIC) has issued a warning to insurance brokers, condemning the practice of terminating policies due to loan defaults. The OIC expressed concern over reports of brokers acting beyond their legal remit, after certain non-life insurance brokers were found to be facilitating premium payments for policyholders through loan agreements. These agreements often grant brokers the power to recommend or facilitate the termination of policies if payments are missed. This practice, considered unauthorized lending, involves standardized contracts that leave little to no room for negotiation, potentially disadvantaging policyholders by imposing unfair contract terms.

The OIC emphasized that terminating policies under these conditions, resulting in the insurance company halting coverage and refunding premiums to the broker, is illegal. Brokers found guilty will face severe penalties, including the potential revocation of their license. Insurance companies are obligated to maintain

coverage until a policy's expiration, regardless of any loan defaults. [The Nation]

Thailand: Fine Arts Department urges halt to railway construction after discovery of ancient site in Phayao

(lm) Thailand's Fine Arts Department (FAD) has called on the State Railway of Thailand (SRT) to immediately suspend construction of the Den Chai–Chiang Rai–Chiang Khong dual-track railway after the discovery of an unregistered ancient site in Phayao province. The site, located in expropriated rice fields in Ban Chedi Ngam, Muang district, is estimated to be over 1,000 years old.

The FAD criticized the SRT for failing to report the finding as required under environmental impact mitigation protocols. It has formally instructed the SRT to suspend all construction at the site until urgent archaeological evaluations are completed and appropriate preservation measures are developed.

The appeal comes as the FAD marked its 114th anniversary by announcing a shift from preservation to inclusive development. Initiatives include modernizing the National Theatre, enhancing national museums, and integrating digital tools into archaeological work. The department also plans to foster local historical knowledge through education and cultural tourism programs aimed at youth engagement. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: SRT approves revised contract for long-delayed airport rail link project

The State Railway of Thailand (SRT) has approved a key contract amendment for the high-speed rail project connecting Don Mueang, Suvarnabhumi, and U-Tapao airports, aiming to fast-track the delayed infrastructure scheme. The revised agreement is expected to be signed by June 2025, with construction slated to begin shortly after and operations projected to start by 2029.

The amendments include a major shift in the public investment cost payment model. Instead of paying THB 149.65 billion in installments over ten years after the project becomes operational, the government will now make progress-based payments, capped at THB 120 billion (approximately USD 3.5 billion). The project's private partner, Asia Era One, must also provide

guarantees worth THB 152.16 billion (approximately USD 4.5 billion).

Other revisions include allowing the company to pay the THB 10.67 billion (approximately USD 316 million) investment fee for the Airport Rail Link in seven annual installments, starting on the date of contract signing. Additionally, if interest rates fall and the company's internal rate of return exceeds 5.52 percent, the SRT will be entitled to claim additional revenue sharing. The need for an investment promotion certificate from the Board of Investment has been waived.

The SRT has prioritized construction at U-Tapao airport, particularly in areas overlapping with the Sino-Thai high-speed rail project, to avoid further delays. Construction was originally planned to begin in 2021. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: First phase of M8 motorway to begin in 2027 as alternate southern route

(lm) The construction of the first phase of Motorway 8 (M8)—a new route linking central to southern Thailand—will begin in 2027, starting with the 61-kilometer stretch from Nakhon Pathom to Pak Tho district in Ratchaburi. The project, estimated at THB 61 billion (USD 1.78 billion), will proceed to bidding and land acquisition once approved by the cabinet, with completion targeted for 2031.

Transport Minister Suriya Jungrungreangkit said the second phase, from Pak Tho to Cha-Am in Phetchaburi, will undergo a new route study to reduce the impact of land expropriation, which has previously triggered local opposition. The study is expected to begin this year and take one year to complete.

The project forms part of Thailand's 20-year Master Plan for Expressway Development (2017–2036) and supports the North-South Economic Corridor. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: 72 arrested in raid on firm accused of using Thai nominees for foreign businesses

(lm) Police arrested 51 Thai and 21 Chinese nationals in a raid on an accounting firm in Samut Prakan's Bang Phli district, accusing it of illegally registering companies using Thai nominees to circumvent the

Foreign Business Act. The firm allegedly supported foreign nationals—mainly Chinese—in establishing businesses in Thailand while using Thai employees' names as front owners.

The investigation began after the arrest of a Chinese suspect wanted by Interpol, which led authorities to the firm. The suspected ringleader, a Chinese woman operating from abroad under the alias Venus, coordinated activities via WeChat. Police seized assets worth over THB 150 million (USD 4.35 million), including title deeds, hundreds of company stamps, and visa-related documents. Legal action is being pursued against 15 companies connected to the operation. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Police dismantle gambling network with over USD 29.4 million in circulation, arrest four suspects

(lm) Thai police have arrested four individuals connected to a major online gambling operation, uncovering a network with over THB 1 billion (USD 29.4 million) circulating through its bank accounts. The arrests followed raids at five locations in Bangkok and Prachin Buri, where police also seized assets worth THB 5 million (USD 147,000), including cash, electronic devices, a vehicle, and bank records.

The illegal operation was linked to the website Juad888H.com, according to the Cyber Crime Investigation Bureau (CCIB). Investigators discovered that the gambling funds had been funneled through two mule accounts—one registered to a legal entity and the other under a foreign national's name. The arrested suspects, one man and three women, have been charged with running an illegal gambling business and money laundering. Authorities are now pursuing three more suspects.

In a related operation, police also apprehended two individuals tied to another online gambling platform with over THB 20 million (USD 588,000) in circulation.

Separately, police in Tak province intercepted what they believe to be a call scam network involving nine Chinese nationals, who were caught near the Thai-Myanmar border after attempting to evade a highway checkpoint. Officers found 110 mobile phones and 200 SIM cards at the scene. A Thai driver was also taken into custody, while several others fled in vehicles. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Digital Ministry reports USD 97.6 million saved from online crime crackdown

(lm) Thailand's Ministry of Digital Economy and Society announced a significant reduction in financial losses from online crime, claiming it saved over THB 3.3 billion (USD 97.6 million) between October 2024 and February 2025. This follows intensified counter-cybercrime operations coordinated with the Royal Thai Police and other agencies under a new national strategy developed by the committee on technology crime prevention and suppression.

According to government data, losses from online crimes during the five-month period totaled THB 11.3 billion (USD 334 million)—a marked decline from the same period last year. Daily financial damages dropped to THB 65 million (USD 1.92 million) in February, down from THB 117 million (USD 3.46 million) earlier in 2024.

The Ministry credited the reduction to a range of enforcement actions including freezing mule bank accounts, blocking fraudulent SIM cards, disrupting telecom signals, and offering cash-on-delivery protections for online shoppers. Special focus has also been placed on cutting utilities and communication access near the Thai-Myanmar border, where many scam operations are reportedly based.

Further momentum is expected once a new decree on technological crime prevention takes effect, anticipated to be published in the Royal Gazette by April.

In a related move, the Central Investigation Bureau transferred THB 33 million (USD 976,000) to the Anti-Money Laundering Office (AMLO) to compensate victims of call center scams linked to the Crown 168 online gambling network. Investigations revealed financial fraud across 27 mule accounts tied to 22 entities, leading to the arrest of 64 suspects and the seizure of over THB 100 million (USD 2.96 million) in assets.

Victims have until June 23 to apply for compensation from AMLO, while authorities continue to encourage public reporting of suspected mule accounts and online gambling via the 1195 hotline. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Government investigates illegal import of radioactive waste disguised as

zinc concentrate

(lm) The Ministry of Industry has launched an investigation into the illegal import of approximately 10,262 tons of hazardous waste containing radioactive caesium-137, which was falsely declared as zinc concentrate. Industry Minister Akanat Promphan stated on March 25 that the importer, KMC 1953 Co, used 33 falsified documents between July 2024 and January 2025 to deceive customs authorities.

The contaminated waste was reportedly imported from Indonesia, Mexico, South Africa, Romania, Morocco, and Turkey. Caesium-137, a byproduct of iron smelting, is classified as Type 3 hazardous waste under Thai law and is subject to strict control in line with the Basel Convention on transboundary hazardous waste movements.

Authorities have also uncovered that falsified import certificates were issued by the Chon Buri Provincial Industrial Office, raising concerns about official collusion. The Ministry of Industry will conduct a deeper probe to determine whether provincial officials were complicit in bypassing legal safeguards.

The company had not received the mandatory clearance from the Department of Industrial Works, which is required for importing radioactive substances. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: LPG tanker runs aground off Koh Lan, no leak reported but reef damage under investigation

(lm) An unloaded LPG tanker, NP Bankpakong, ran aground on coral reef areas near Sangwan Beach on Koh Lan, off the coast of Pattaya, in the early hours of March 26. No gas leak or injuries have been reported, but environmental officials are surveying the site for potential reef damage. The company has acknowledged crew negligence as the cause and pledged full cooperation with the authorities, including compensation for any environmental damage. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Women urged to play key role in peacebuilding efforts

(lm) Activists in Thailand are emphasizing the need for greater female participation in peacebuilding,

highlighting that inclusive policies are essential for fostering long-term peace. The King Prajadhipok's Institute (KPI) recently hosted a forum, stressing that women's involvement in political and decision-making processes is crucial.

Research shows low public trust in the parliamentary system, which discourages women from engaging in politics. The forum also called for better representation of marginalized groups, including LGBTQ+ youth, and noted that women's roles in peace negotiations, especially in the southern region, need to be more meaningful and inclusive. [Bangkok Post]

Timor-Leste: Government intensifies justice sector reform with training, legal cooperation, and structural overhaul

Timor-Leste's 9th Constitutional Government continues to prioritize comprehensive reform of the justice sector, viewing it as essential for state-building and national development. The reform agenda includes establishing a Supreme Court, strengthening the judiciary, and improving legal training through domestic initiatives and international partnerships.

A key component is the Justice Sector Reform Working Group, formed in 2023, which published a national action plan and diagnostic report in 2024. The government has since signed agreements with Portuguese law schools to annually train 50 Timorese law students, aiming to prepare up to 300 lawyers by 2028 with a total investment of approximately USD 16 million.

Recent legislative efforts include modernizing judicial training frameworks and updating recruitment laws for non-Timorese legal professionals to meet current national needs. Authorities emphasize that the reforms aim to create a justice system that is fair, independent, accessible, and efficient, with strong emphasis on human capital and institutional modernization. [Government of Timor-Leste]

Timor-Leste: National economy grew by 4 percent in 2024, driven by public spending and export gains

(lm) Timor-Leste's economy grew by 4 percent in 2024, an improvement from 2.4 percent in 2023, reflecting increased public investment, macroeconomic stability,

and stronger private sector activity. Inflation remained controlled at 2.1 percent, while budget execution reached 78 percent, among the highest in recent years.

Non-oil exports rose by 21.7 percent, and credit to the private sector expanded by USD 143.2 million, signaling improved access to finance. Officials underscored the need to address structural weaknesses such as heavy import dependence and a still-developing private sector. Key priorities include fiscal consolidation and investment in agriculture, tourism, and infrastructure to support long-term growth. [Government of Timor-Leste]

Vietnam: Major administrative restructuring plans

(cmc) Vietnam is undergoing a significant reform of its administrative system aimed at improving efficiency and governance. As part of this effort, the country plans to reduce its 63 provinces and cities to 34. The proposed restructuring, which will be finalized in early April by the Central Party Committee, will dissolve district-level units and merge approximately 5,000 commune- and ward-level units. This initiative is expected to streamline the administrative apparatus and create a more effective governance structure.

According to Communist Party General Secretary To Lam, the reform is designed to eliminate overlapping responsibilities across different government tiers. Currently, Vietnam operates under a four-tier system, but the reform will reduce this to a more common three-tier system: the central government, provincial/municipal level, and commune/ward level. The central government will focus on national strategy, foreign affairs, defense, and security, while provinces will handle localized implementation, particularly at the grassroots level. The commune-level authorities, which Lam highlighted as the "foundation" of the system, will gain more decision-making power, especially in socio-economic, health, and education matters. [VN Express]

In line with these changes, National Assembly Chairman Tran Thanh Man announced that the government is also planning to merge 50 percent of provinces and cities, eliminate 696 district-level administrative units, and reduce 60-70 percent of the 10,035 commune-level units. This restructuring is part of a broader effort to build a streamlined, strong, and efficient political apparatus as outlined in Resolution 18. The reform aims to create a more efficient and effective governance system, ensuring that

responsibilities are clearly defined and reducing duplications of duties between different levels of government. [Vietnam.vn]

The National Assembly is currently reviewing various draft laws that will help implement these changes, including laws on taxation, employment, and the digital technology industry.

Vietnam: Party chief outlines plan to turn Quang Nam-Da Nang into economic and innovation hub

(lm) Party General Secretary To Lam has outlined an ambitious vision for transforming the proposed Quang Nam-Da Nang region into a leading socio-economic, cultural, and innovation center in central Vietnam. Speaking during a working session with the standing committees of Da Nang City and Quang Nam Province, Lam stressed the importance of a unified master plan to ensure balanced development and avoid overconcentration in Da Nang.

He called for rapid economic restructuring, with a focus on creating an international financial center, a free trade zone, a modern coastal city, and a world-class tourism destination that integrates cultural heritage with leisure. Key development zones include Chu Lai as a logistics and industrial hub, Hoi An–My Son as a cultural ecotourism zone, and a separate high-tech agricultural corridor.

To Lam envisions the new Quang Nam-Da Nang as a model for digital governance and smart urban administration, leading in green, marine, circular, and digital economies. This transformation would require significant investment in human capital, attraction of global talent, and development of capable leaders suited for new governance models.

He also emphasized improving living standards, eliminating poverty, promoting private sector growth, and strengthening national defense and regional integration. The merger, he said, is not just administrative but a strategic leap, positioning the region on the global stage.

The National Assembly and the Government have been tasked with supporting the integration through new planning and financial frameworks, and by enabling pilot projects in emerging fields.

Earlier in his visit, Lam toured Da Nang Software Park No. 2 and inspected Lien Chieu Port, which is expected

to become a major international logistics gateway. [Viet Nam News]

Vietnam: Health ministry proposes lowering age for live tissue donation to 16

(hn) The Ministry of Health in Vietnam has proposed lowering the age for live tissue donation to 16, allowing individuals aged 16 and older to donate tissues such as kidneys and parts of the liver with written consent from a legal guardian. This proposal is part of draft amendments to the law on the donation, removal, and transplantation of human tissues, organs, and cadavers.

Currently, the law permits only individuals aged 18 and older, with full civil capacity, to register for living tissue donation. The proposed changes also expand posthumous donation rights, allowing all individuals to donate organs after death, with parental consent required for those under 18.

The draft amendments introduce new provisions, including covering medical expenses for both donors and recipients, and offering benefits such as priority access to transfusions and leave from work without salary deductions for blood and stem cell donors.

These proposed changes aim to address the rising demand for organ transplants in Vietnam. While the country leads Southeast Asia in transplant numbers, the rates of posthumous donation remain low, largely due to a lack of awareness and supporting policies. [Viet Nam News]

Vietnam: Businesswoman on death row appeals sentence while seeking to repay embezzled billions

(lm) Real estate tycoon Truong My Lan, sentenced to death for orchestrating Vietnam's largest corporate fraud, appeared before the High People's Court in Ho Chi Minh City last week for a second appeal, aiming to reduce her separate life sentence. Lan, chairwoman of Van Thinh Phat Group, was convicted in April 2024 of embezzling approximately USD 11 billion from Saigon Commercial Bank. Vietnamese law allows a commutation of the death sentence to life imprisonment if three-quarters of the stolen amount is repaid.

As part of her efforts to mitigate the penalties, Lan has instructed her legal team to focus on recovering funds to repay defrauded bondholders. She has requested prosecutors to retrieve USD 585 million from bank-held bond proceeds and is preparing to liquidate assets.

In October 2024, Lan received a life sentence for illegal property appropriation, in addition to a 12-year sentence for money laundering and eight years for illicit cross-border money transfers. Her case is part of Vietnam's ongoing "blazing furnace" anti-corruption campaign, which has intensified under Communist Party leadership, targeting misconduct in property, banking, and healthcare sectors.

Twenty-seven co-defendants are also appealing their sentences in hearings expected to continue until April 21. [Radio Free Asia]

Vietnam: Politburo member holds rare dialogue with dissidents

(lm) In a rare meeting, Vietnamese Politburo member Nguyen Van Nen engaged in dialogue with a group of intellectuals and artists, including well-known dissidents, in Ho Chi Minh City on March 30. The meeting, which had been in the works for several months, was initiated by Nguyen, the city's Party Secretary, and aimed to hear from intellectuals whose opinions were critical of the ruling Communist Party.

Attendees included individuals who had previously left the Communist Party due to disagreements with its policies, such as Prof. Mac Van Trang and artist Kim Chi, as well as dissenting voices like poet Do Trung Quan. Politburo member Nguyen asked for feedback on issues like attracting talent to the city and implementing more academic freedom at universities.

One of the attendees, poet Hoang Thuy Hung, criticized the state's treatment of dissenting intellectuals, emphasizing the importance of independence for intellectuals in contributing to the country's development. However, while some attendees expressed cautious optimism about the dialogue, they warned it was too early to determine whether it signified a lasting shift in government policy.

This meeting, while unprecedented in recent years, raises questions about whether President To Lam's leadership marks a genuine openness to criticism or if it is merely a temporary gesture. Recent government actions, including the treatment of other famous

critics, have tempered any conclusions about a permanent change in approach. [Radio Free Asia]

Vietnam: Khmer Krom monk and two activists arrested under law often used to silence dissent

(lm) Vietnamese authorities have arrested a prominent Khmer Krom monk and two activists in Tra Vinh province, charging them under Article 331 of the Vietnamese Criminal Code—a vague provision frequently criticized for its use in suppressing dissent. The monk, Venerable Kim Som Rinh, along with activists Thach Nga and Thach Xuan Dong, now face up to three years in prison for allegedly "abusing democratic freedoms to infringe upon the interests of the State."

The arrests were denounced by the Khmers Kampuchea-Krom Federation (KKF), which described them as part of Vietnam's broader repression of the Khmer Krom minority. Nearly 1.3 million Khmer Krom people live in southern Vietnam, an area that was once part of Cambodia. The group has long reported restrictions on their freedom of expression, religion, and movement.

Kim Som Rinh, a respected spiritual leader, has been a peaceful advocate for Khmer Krom religious and indigenous rights. He was defrocked by the state-sanctioned Vietnam Buddhist Sangha in 2024—a move KKF calls politically motivated. The two activists arrested alongside him have also been involved in organizing peaceful human rights events marking international commemorations. [Radio Free Asia]

Vietnam: Former political prisoner alleges police installed surveillance cameras in his home without consent

(lm) Recently released Vietnamese pro-democracy activist Vu Quang Thuan claims police installed two surveillance cameras inside his home while he was hospitalized, in what he describes as a serious violation of his rights. Thuan, a former political prisoner and member of the Vietnam Restoration Movement, had been sentenced in 2018 to eight years in prison and five years' probation for "conducting propaganda against the state." He was released on February 22, slightly ahead of schedule due to health issues.

While hospitalized in a coma, Thuan says police coerced his elderly, paralyzed father and stepmother into allowing the cameras to be installed—one at the entrance and another in the living room. Photos of the devices have since circulated. Thuan told Radio Free Asia that the action, which he believes is illegal, is part of broader police harassment. He also accused authorities of previously searching his home without a warrant and detaining him under false pretenses. [Radio Free Asia]

Vietnam: Central Bank to consider proposals for Basel III application

(lm) Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh has directed the State Bank of Vietnam (SBV) to review proposals from commercial banks regarding the implementation of Basel III international banking standards, which are set to apply in Vietnam's financial centers starting January 1, 2026. This directive follows the release of Prime Minister's Directive 09/CT-TTg, aimed at supporting the government's goal of double-digit economic growth through financial sector reforms.

Basel III is an international regulatory framework established by the Basel Committee on Banking Supervision, designed to strengthen banks' capital requirements, improve risk management, and enhance the financial system's stability.

The SBV is tasked with reviewing banks' recommendations, including proposals for sandbox applications to encourage innovation while assessing their effectiveness. The SBV has also been instructed to promote cost reduction, improved technological integration, streamlined administrative processes, and restructuring within commercial banks. Additionally, banks are urged to lower lending interest rates in a spirit of "harmonized benefits and shared risks" and to enhance credit distribution, particularly for key growth sectors such as digital transformation and green growth.

As part of the Basel III application, the Ministry of Finance has drafted a resolution for establishing international financial centers and intends to implement the standards by January 2026. However, the SBV raised concerns about the feasibility of meeting this timeline and suggested aligning it with that of commercial banks. The SBV also proposed raising the minimum capital adequacy ratio to 10.5 percent, in line with Basel III, to improve capital quality and liquidity, thus enhancing the banking system's resilience. [Viet Nam News]

Vietnam: Airbnb investors face uncertainty after short-term rental ban

(lm) Vietnam's short-term rental market has been thrown into disarray following a citywide ban on Airbnb-style rentals in residential complexes in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam's largest city. The regulations, which will take effect under the new Housing Law in August, prohibit short-term rentals in regular residential apartments. This move has left many investors facing financial uncertainty.

As short-term rentals are phased out, the new laws also classify daily or hourly rentals as hotel operations, requiring proper licensing. The shift aims to address concerns over noise and misuse of shared facilities, with penalties for commercial misuse of residential apartments.

However, analysts are divided on the impact of the ban. While some suggest the market may shift toward long-term rentals, increasing supply and potentially lowering rents, others question the enforcement of the ban. In the past, many landlords have found ways to circumvent similar restrictions, continuing short-term rentals under the radar to avoid taxes. Furthermore, some analysts believe that the ban may not hurt tourism significantly, thanks to the abundance of hotels in the city. [Viet Nam News]

Vietnam: Government commits nearly 178 million USD to eliminate substandard housing

(cmc) The Vietnamese government has allocated over VND 4.55 trillion (nearly USD 178 million) to eliminate temporary and substandard housing for low-income households nationwide, according to a March 30 announcement from the Ministry of Ethnic and Religion Affairs.

The funding comes from a 5 percent savings in last year's regular expenditure, approved by the National Assembly. So far, ministries, sectors, local administrations, banks, and corporations have disbursed VND 2.83 trillion (nearly USD 110 million), representing nearly 82 percent of the assigned budget, with several entities achieving 100 percent financial transfer completion.

The initiative has already supported 168,027 homes across various programs: 15,491 houses for revolutionary contributors (individuals who have made significant contributions to Vietnam's national liberation struggles), 60,473 under two national target programs, and 92,063 under the specific program to eliminate temporary and substandard houses. [Vietnam Plus]

Vietnam: Bac Ninh province welcomes two high-tech component plants

(lm) Bac Ninh has welcomed two high-tech component manufacturing plants with a combined investment of USD 640 million. The Victory Giant Technology Vietnam Plant, with an investment of USD 520 million, will focus on producing high-precision multilayer PCB circuit boards, HDI, FPC, and Rigid-Flex flexible circuit boards. These components are used in AI, data centers, industrial Internet, green energy vehicles, communication technology, aerospace, and medical equipment. The project will be implemented in two phases.

Additionally, the Green Precision Manufacturing Vietnam project, with an investment of over USD 120 million, will manufacture precision structural components for consumer electronics like speakers, mobile phones, tablets, and payment devices.

Bac Ninh continues to be a key industrial hub, attracting investments due to its proximity to Hanoi, Hai Phong Port, and Noi Bai Airport. It hosts major technology companies, including Samsung, Foxconn, and Pegatron. The province has 2,459 FDI projects, totaling nearly USD 31.3 billion in registered capital. [Viet Nam News]

Vietnam: 96 percent of firms aware of greenhouse gas emissions regulations

(lm) A recent survey by Schneider Electric reveals that 96 percent of Vietnamese enterprises are aware of regulations aimed at reducing greenhouse gas emissions and protecting the ozone layer, such as Decree No. 06/2022/ND-CP.

The 'Green IMPACT Gap' 2024 survey, which surveyed 4,500 business leaders across nine countries, found that over half of Vietnamese firms face challenges in measuring and reporting emissions due to a lack of

technical expertise, and 46 percent struggle with insufficient funding or resources to meet required standards.

Despite these challenges, 58 percent of respondents believe these regulations push businesses toward more sustainable practices, even at the cost of short-term profits. The survey also highlighted corporate ethics, workplace health and safety, and waste management as top sustainability concerns. In terms of investment priorities, 53 percent of Vietnamese firms focus on supply chain sustainability and green solutions, while 49 percent invest in digitalization.

Vietnam is placing increasing emphasis on sustainability, with 73 percent of local enterprises prioritizing it—ranking second only to Thailand in Asia. [Viet Nam News]

Vietnam: Prime Minister demands Long Thanh Airport completion by 2025

(lm) Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh has ordered the completion of the Long Thanh International Airport by 2025, with commercial operations to begin in the first half of 2026. During an on-site inspection, he warned that agencies failing to meet their deadlines would face legal consequences.

The airport, located in Dong Nai Province, is one of Vietnam's largest infrastructure projects. The Prime Minister urged round-the-clock construction and emphasized strict accountability, particularly for delays in Component Project 1, which covers facilities for regulatory agencies. The Ministry of Agriculture and Environment was instructed to finish the plant and animal quarantine station by the end of 2025 and report on delays by March 30.

Component Project 2, managed by the Vietnam Air Traffic Management Corporation (VATM), must begin test runs by October. The Airports Corporation of Vietnam (ACV) was ordered to accelerate construction of the terminal under Component Project 3, the most labor-intensive section.

For Component Project 4, the Ministry of Construction is to identify investors for aircraft hangars, allowing Vietnam Airlines and Vietjet Air to build their respective facilities.

Connectivity to the airport is also a priority. The Bien Hoa–Vung Tàu Expressway must be partially completed by June and fully completed in 2025. A new

rail link between Long Thanh and Tan Son Nhat airports is under study, and Ho Chi Minh City is to submit a feasibility report by the end of March. A proposal to expand the HCM City–Long Thanh Expressway to eight and ten lanes, with an estimated investment of over VND 15.3 trillion (USD 620 million), is expected to break ground in the third quarter of 2025. [Viet Nam News]

Vietnam: Prime Minister urges completion of North-South expressway by year-end

(hn) Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh has urged the completion of the North-South Expressway from Cao Bang to Ca Mau by the end of this year. At a meeting in Hanoi on March 29, he emphasized that achieving an 8 percent growth rate by 2025 and double-digit growth afterward depends on public investment, particularly in transport infrastructure.

To reach over 3,000 km of expressways this year, he formed seven inspection teams led by Deputy Prime Ministers to address on-site issues effectively. He instructed localities to expedite land clearance, ensure material supply, and support affected residents.

The Government will prioritize funding for projects due for completion this year while also planning additional bridges and roads to enhance connectivity. [Viet Nam News]

International Relations, Geopolitics and Security in Asia

China counters international criticism with report on human rights progress in Tibet

(lb) China has released a white paper detailing what it describes as historic progress in human rights in the Xizang (Tibet) Autonomous Region. Titled *Human Rights in Xizang in the New Era*, the document was published by the [State Council Information Office] and presented in Lhasa. It outlines advancements in economic development, ethnic unity, and social welfare, attributing them to the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC). Officials claim that by the end of 2019, all 628,000 registered impoverished people in Tibet had been lifted out of poverty, and by 2024, their per capita net income increased by over 12 percent. [The State Council PRC]

The report highlights improvements in infrastructure, healthcare, and digital connectivity. The region's road network has nearly doubled in the past 12 years, while 5G wireless services now reach every town. Tibet also has a fully developed medical system, with over 7,000 healthcare facilities and nearly 30,000 medical professionals. Life expectancy has risen from 68 years in 2010 to 72 years in 2020. Religious rights are also discussed, with the report noting that Tibet has over 1,700 Tibetan Buddhist sites and 46,000 monks and nuns.

Chinese experts argue that the white paper helps correct international misconceptions about human rights in Xizang. The document pushes back against criticisms regarding boarding schools, stating that these institutions provide necessary education for children in remote areas. The CPC maintains that human rights in Xizang are protected through economic and social development rather than Western legal frameworks. The white paper also claims that attempts to portray Xizang as suffering from repression are politically motivated efforts to destabilize the region. [Global Times]

The white paper comes after during the 58th session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, 28 European countries issued a joint statement condemning China's human rights violations, particularly in Tibet and Xinjiang. Delivered by Miroslaw Broilo, Poland's Permanent Representative to the UN Office in Geneva, the statement underscored deep concerns over China's systematic repression of cultural, religious, and political freedoms.

The European nations specifically criticized China's forced boarding school system, suppression of

protests against hydropower projects, and the closure of Tibetan language and culture schools, which force students into state-run institutions where Tibetan is marginalized. The statement called on China to uphold its international human rights obligations.

Beyond the joint statement, countries including the Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Japan, Lithuania, the Netherlands, and Switzerland delivered individual oral statements reiterating their concerns. [The Tribune] [Central Tibetan Administration]

In a latest related development, the U.S. imposed on March 31 additional visa restrictions on Chinese officials involved in policies restricting foreign access to Tibetan areas, with U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio criticizing the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) for denying U.S. diplomats, journalists, and international observers entry to the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) while allowing broad access for Chinese diplomats and journalists in the U.S. [Department of State, USA]

China, which took control of Tibet in 1950, describes its actions as a "peaceful liberation," but international human rights groups and Tibetan exiles condemn Beijing's policies as oppressive. While Washington recognizes Tibet as part of China, the U.S. has repeatedly urged Beijing to respect religious freedoms and allow Tibetans to preserve their cultural and linguistic traditions. [Reuters]

China and European Union seek deeper trade ties amid U.S. tariff pressures

(yq) China has extended an invitation to the European Union (EU) to strengthen trade cooperation and jointly push back against rising U.S. tariff threats, Vice Premier He Lifeng told EU Trade Commissioner Maros Sefcovic during their meeting in Beijing on March 27.

During the meeting, He Lifeng reiterated China's willingness to strengthen dialogue, expand market openness, and ensure stable China-EU economic relations. Marking the 50th anniversary of diplomatic ties between the two sides, He emphasized the importance of resisting unilateralism and protectionism while reinforcing global trade frameworks. [Xinhua News Agency]

Sefcovic emphasized the need for mutual engagement, reaffirming the EU's willingness to deepen cooperation in trade and investment, according to a Chinese readout, and stating on social media that "we have mutual interest in addressing our bilateral and global

issues as well as our differences." The European Commission did not release an account of the meeting. [Reuters] [State Council, China]

The meeting came as both China and the EU are facing challenges in their economic relations with the U.S., particularly under President Donald Trump's trade policies. Since returning to office, Trump has imposed a 20 percent tariff on all Chinese imports (see AiR No. 9, March/2025, 1) and recently announced new tariffs on imported vehicles, a move that could severely impact European automakers. [CNN]

The EU's recent stance appears to reflect a softened approach toward China. Sefcovic's remarks align with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's shift in tone, signaling a willingness to enhance trade relations and explore new agreements with Beijing. During his visit, Sefcovic refrained from addressing China's support for Russia, instead focusing on economic concerns such as market access and industrial overcapacity. [South China Morning Post]

China deploys long-range H-6 bombers near Scarborough Shoal as U.S. defense secretary visits Philippines

(dql) Reuters reports that China deployed two long-range H-6 bombers near the Scarborough Shoal last week, reinforcing its territorial claims in the South China Sea, citing satellite images obtained which showed two aircraft east of the shoal, known in China as "Huangyan Dao."

The unpublicized deployment coincided with U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth's March 28 visit to the Philippines, which also claims the shoal within its 200-nautical-mile exclusive economic zone. During his visit to Manila, Hegseth reaffirmed the U.S. "ironclad commitment" to its mutual defense treaty with the Philippines, citing China's actions as justification for deterrence.

Analysts suggest the timing of the bomber deployment was deliberate, signaling China's military capabilities and strategic intent.

Since seizing de facto control of the shoal in 2012, China has frequently clashed with Philippine fishermen and faced accusations of aggressive maneuvers. An international tribunal in The Hague ruled in 2016 that China's claims lacked legal basis, but Beijing rejected the decision.

China has expanded H-6 bomber deployments in the region since 2018, using them in exercises over Taiwan and Scarborough Shoal. The H-6, based on a Soviet-era design, has been modernized to carry anti-ship and land-attack missiles, with some variants capable of launching nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles. The Pentagon's latest report suggests China is developing a stealthier long-range bomber.

The Chinese military's Southern Theatre Command, which oversees the South China Sea, operates two regiments of H-6 bombers. Its December exercises around Scarborough were publicized as efforts to safeguard national sovereignty, though satellite images of patrols remain rare. [Reuters]

Chinese President Xi Jinping set to visit Malaysia, Vietnam, and Cambodia

(dh) Chinese President Xi Jinping is set to visit Malaysia, Vietnam and Cambodia on a trip beginning in mid-April, according to diplomatic sources. The visit comes amid concerns over shifting U.S. foreign policy under Donald Trump's second administration, as regional countries reassess their alliances.

Malaysia, this year's chair of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), has fostered strong economic relations with China, with record-high trade volumes in recent years. Xi's visit is expected to last three days and to build on his previous discussions with Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and further boost investment ties.

Vietnam, China's largest ASEAN trading partner, has also maintained steady diplomatic exchanges with Beijing despite occasional tensions over the South China Sea. A recently approved $8 billion railway project, partly financed by China, is expected to enhance trade and connectivity between the two nations.

In Cambodia, China remains the country's leading trade partner, investor, and donor. Beijing has been involved in major infrastructure projects, including the expansion of the Ream Naval Base and the Funan Techo Canal, both of which have raised concerns among neighboring countries.

Xi's visit marks his first foreign tour of the year, reflecting China's continued focus on deepening regional ties. The trip is also part of a broader effort to reinforce Beijing's influence in Southeast Asia as competition with the U.S. intensifies. [SCMP]

South Korea, China, and Japan to boost regional trade amid Trump tariffs

(dh) South Korea, China and Japan, during their first economic dialogue in five years, agreed to improve trade cooperation. The March 30 meeting occurred in Seoul and was attended by South Korean Industry Minister Ahn Duk-geun, Japanese Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry Yoji Muto, and Chinese Commerce Minister Wang Wentao.

All three ministers agreed to hold further talks in securing a South Korea-Japan-China free trade agreement deal- which has had little progress since talks began in 2012. Talks have been hindered by tension between these countries, with territorial disputes being a key issue.

South Korea, China, and Japan are all major trading partners with the U.S. but have been forced to reconsider trade alliances since Trump's tariff increases, especially with a 25 percent import duty on cars and auto parts announced last week set to hurt Asian countries in particular.

With the threat of more tariffs looming, Ahn stressed the need for the three countries to strengthen their implementation of RCEP (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership), a trade network among 15 countries in the Asia-Pacific region, and to also implement a framework for expanding free trade negotiations.

All countries noted the need to foster a "predictable trade and investment environment" in a joint statement. Another set of economic talks is scheduled to take place in Japan. [Reuters] [DW] [Joint Statement]

China announces discovery of oilfield in South China Sea

(dh) On March 31, China's National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) announced the discovery of an oilfield in the South China Sea with oil reserves over 100 million tons. Test drilling yielded significant amounts of crude oil and natural gas.

This announcement came only a few days after U.S. Secretary of Defence, Pete Hegseth, visited the Philippines, in which he affirmed the U.S.'s commitment to countering Chinese aggression in the South China Sea. On the same day as this

announcement, the U.S., Japan, and the Philippines conducted joint naval exercises near the disputed Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea, whilst a Chinese vessel monitored from a distance.

hina continues to claim the vast majority of the South China Sea, which is rich in hydrocarbons but relatively unexplored due to territorial disputes. [RFA]

Chinese military conducts exercises near Taiwan

(dh) The Chinese military began joint army, navy, air force, and rocket exercises around Taiwan on April 1. Beijing stated the purpose of these exercises is to "serve as a stern warning and powerful deterrent against Taiwanese independence." They also referred to Taiwanese President Lai Ching-Te, who called China a hostile foreign force last month, as a "parasite."

China's major military drills included simulating attacks on maritime and ground targets as well as practicing maritime blockades on sea lanes and key areas. The military also released a poster- named "Closing In"- showing Chinese fighter jets circling Taiwan. China's eastern theatre command also showed animated footage of military vehicles patrolling Taipei whilst it was being aimed at from above when it announced the drills. [Sky News] [NPR]

The Taiwanese defense ministry announced that it identified 19 Chinese naval ships, including an aircraft carrier, around Taiwan. Taiwan responded by deploying naval ships, aircraft, and coastal missile systems.

These joint military drills come only two weeks after China's last military drills around Taiwan (see AiR No. 11, March/2025, 3). Additionally, these exercises come days after U.S. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth visited Asia, promising to counter China's aggression in the region.

Taiwanese Defense Minister Wellington Koo Li-Hsiung and Secretary-General of Taiwan's National Security Council Joseph Wu have condemned China's military exercises, referring to them China as a "troublemaker" and "reckless", respectively. Wu further called for other democracies to condemn China's actions for being unjustified and in breach of international law. [CNN] [RFA]

Japan unveils first-ever Taiwan contingency evacuation plan

(dql/ce) Japan has unveiled its first-ever evacuation plan for over 100,000 civilians from remote islands near Taiwan in case of regional conflict. The move comes amid heightened tensions between China and Taiwan, with Beijing having just launched a new tip-off channel urging the public to report alleged supporters of Taiwan independence, while Taipei expelled pro-Beijing Chinese influencers (see article in this edition).

The plan involves evacuating around 110,000 residents and 10,000 tourists from five islands in the Sakishima chain, Okinawa Prefecture, using ships and planes. Evacuees would be transported to Kyushu before relocating to accommodations in eight southwestern and western prefectures within six days. Tokyo intends to conduct evacuation drills starting in April 2025.

Japan is also bolstering its defenses, deploying surface-to-air missile units on inhabited westernmost Yonaguni island, located 100 km from Taiwan, and constructing underground shelters stocked with two weeks' worth of supplies. [NHK] [The Asahi Shimbun]

Concerns over a potential Chinese invasion of Taiwan have heightened since Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine and shifting US foreign policy under Donald Trump, with local officials questioning Washington's security commitments. [Radio Free Europe]

The plan has drawn attention in Taiwan, where media linked it to cross-strait tensions. Public comments reflect fears of war and skepticism about US protection. Meanwhile, Japan is reportedly planning to deploy long-range missiles on Kyushu, amid Trump's criticism of the US-Japan security treaty as one-sided (see AiR No. 11, March/2025, 3).

Okinawa, home to 50,000 US troops, would play a key role in any Taiwan conflict. Japan also remains at odds with China over the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea, further complicating regional security dynamics. [The Guardian]

Japan to debut as full-fledged participant in US-Philippine Balikatan 2025 exercise

(dql) Marking the culmination of years of defense and security cooperation between Tokyo and Manila. Balikatan 2025 will mark Japan's first full participation in the annual U.S.-Philippines military exercises, with

the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force joining joint patrols alongside U.S. and Philippine vessels in the South China Sea. The exercise will include a Multilateral Maritime Exercise off Luzon, extending beyond the 12-nautical-mile territorial limit.

Japan previously conducted its first joint patrol with the Philippines in April 2024. Most recently, the Mogami-class frigate JS Noshiro participated in a patrol near Scarborough Shoal alongside the USS Shoup and BRP Jose Rizal, under Chinese naval observation.

The 40th iteration of Balikatan will feature a Full Battle Test Simulation across Luzon, Palawan, and the Luzon Strait, with 15,000–16,000 troops from the Philippines, U.S., Australia, and Japan. Japan had previously sent observers but will now play an active role.

Philippines-Japan defense ties have strengthened amid rising tensions in the South China Sea, with Tokyo financing 17 coast guard patrol vessels frequently deployed in confrontations with China. The Philippines is also Japan's largest recipient of official security assistance, receiving USD 14 million in 2023–2024 for maritime domain awareness radars, rigid-hulled boats, and air defense sensor upgrades. [Naval News]

South Korea and Japan pledge cooperation on trade and economic security alongside talks with China

(mm) Last week South Korea, Japan and China held their first trilateral ministerial summit since 2019 to discuss global trade issues as protectionist policies continue to rise. South Korea Trade Minister Ahn Duk-geun and his Japanese counterpart Yoji Muto committed to enhancing information-sharing and jointly addressing economic challenges. Separately, Ahn met with China's Commerce Minister Wang Wentao to discuss bilateral cooperation, including engagement in multinational trade forums. [The Korea Times 1] [Reuters]

The summit took place just days before U.S. President Donald Trump is expected to announce reciprocal tariffs on April 2. All three nations face pressure from Washington to reduce trade surpluses, with China holding the largest U.S. trade deficit, while Japan and South Korea rank seventh and eighth, respectively. Trump has already imposed 20 percent tariffs on all Chinese imports, and South Korea anticipates further tariffs targeting key exports such as semiconductors

and electric vehicle batteries. Ahn warned that a 25 percent tariff on automobiles would pose "considerable difficulties" for South Korean Automakers. [The Korea Times 2] [Reuters]

During trilateral discussions the ministers emphasized the need to restore the role of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in addressing global economic challenges. Ahn urged closer regional cooperation between counter trade protectionism and bolster economic security. The ministers also committed to accelerating negotiations on a proposed trilateral free trade agreement (FTA) and advancing the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a major trade pact among 15 Asia-Pacific, including South Korea, Japan, and China.

Ahn and Muto further discussed strengthening bilateral cooperation in advanced industries, renewable energy, and critical mineral supply chains. As South Korea and Japan mark 60 years of normalized diplomatic ties, both sides stressed the importance of enhanced government and business sector communication. [The Korea Times 2]

The summit signals a united stance between the three nations against trade protectionism and reflects shifting global politics. China, once focused on aggressive security posturing against bordering countries allied with the U.S., not seems eager for trade cooperation with South Korea and Japan. As the Trump administration grows more unpredictable, it's no surprise South Kore and Japan are looking for economic alternatives beyond the U.S. [Asia Financial]

South Korea attendes decarbonization and trade policy talks at Climate Club Conference

(fn) South Korea attended the third Climate Club conference held in Berlin, concentrating on methods to assist industries in reaching carbon neutrality through international cooperation. The Climate Club, an initiative introduced by Germany during the 2022 G7 summit, seeks to hasten the global implementation of the Paris Agreement.

At the conference, South Korea addressed strategies to respond to the European Union's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), the first carbon tax in the world, along with other environment-related trade policies.

The South Korean government also expressed worries that these policies could act as trade barriers for domestic industries, stressing the necessity for measures that facilitate the green transition of heavy industries without harming economic interests. [Yonhap News Agency]

Taiwan welcomes US-Japan defense alliance amid China tensions

(ce) The United States and Japan have solidified their commitment to deterring potential Chinese aggression in the Indo-Pacific, as announced following a meeting between US. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth and Japanese Defense Minister Gen Nakatani (see article in this edition). Hegseth emphasized the US dedication to maintaining a credible deterrent across the US Indo-Pacific Command's area of operations, with a particular focus on the Taiwan Strait, aiming to dissuade any aggressive actions by China.

During the Tokyo meeting, the ministers jointly condemned unilateral attempts to alter the status quo in the East and South China Seas, reiterating the importance of peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait. They pledged to enhance their alliance's deterrence and response capabilities, acknowledging the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) activities around Taiwan as a point of concern. Discussions also centered on strengthening defense industrial collaboration, including the co-production of missiles like AMRAAMs and expanded maintenance cooperation for US military vessels and aircraft. [Focus Taiwan]

In a move to further solidify their joint operational capabilities, Hegseth announced the commencement of phase one for upgrading US Forces Japan to a joint force headquarters, granting it expanded combat and operational responsibilities. This development aligns with Japan's recent establishment of the Japan Self-Defense Forces (JSDF) Joint Operations Command, designed to unify its military branches and improve coordination with the US during regional contingencies. [Taiwan News]

Taiwan welcomed the strengthened bilateral meeting, expressing its commitment to collaborating with like-minded nations to safeguard democratic institutions and universal values. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Taiwan]

Gold surges past USD 3,100 as tariff fears and global uncertainty fuel safe-haven demand

(wyn) Gold prices soared above USD 3,100 per ounce on March 31, marking a historic high as mounting concerns over U.S. President Donald Trump's impending tariff announcements and broader geopolitical instability drove renewed investor interest in the precious metal. Spot gold briefly touched USD 3,106.50 per ounce, capping a year-to-date gain of over 18 percent.

The rally has been bolstered by gold's longstanding reputation as a safe haven during times of economic and political turbulence. Market analysts highlighted that the spike in gold prices reflects investor anxiety surrounding trade frictions, particularly Trump's proposed 25 percent tariffs on imported cars and a 10 percent levy on all Chinese imports, set to be unveiled on April 2.

Major financial institutions, including Goldman Sachs, Bank of America (BofA), and UBS, have revised their price forecasts upwards. Goldman now expects gold to reach USD 3,300 by year-end, while BofA projects an average of USD 3,063 in 2025 and USD 3,350 in 2026. This is a significant jump from previous estimates.

In addition to tariff-related uncertainty, analysts also point to continued central bank buying and strong inflows into gold-backed exchange-traded funds (ETFs) as critical drivers of the surge. OCBC Bank noted that gold's dual role as a hedge against both inflation and geopolitical risk is reinforcing bullish sentiment.

Analysts warn that gold prices are likely to remain elevated in the near term until there is clarity on the global trade environment, particularly as tit-for-tat tariff escalations remain a looming risk. [Reuters]

Bangladesh's interim leader urges Asian unity for Rohingya repatriation and regional cooperation

(lm) Bangladesh's interim leader, Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus, emphasized the importance of Asian unity at the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference 2025, particularly in addressing the ongoing Rohingya refugee crisis. Yunus urged Asian leaders to come together to ensure the safe and dignified repatriation of the over 1.2 million Rohingya refugees currently hosted in Bangladesh. He

highlighted the considerable social, economic, and environmental costs borne by Bangladesh, which has hosted the refugees for more than seven years. Yunus also stressed the diminishing global efforts to resolve the crisis and the urgent need for action.

In his address, Yunus raised several global challenges, including rising geopolitical tensions, climate change, and the growing debt crisis in Asia. He pointed out that only 24 percent of the targets for the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have been met, emphasizing the financial gap in SDG financing for developing Asia. To address these challenges, he called for stronger regional cooperation in key areas such as financial cooperation, trade, food security, and technology. He also advocated for a sustainable financing mechanism, enhanced trade integration, and tech-based solutions to address food insecurity and climate change. Yunus emphasized the need for energy security, sustainable energy investments, and improvements to healthcare and education systems to foster long-term economic growth and human capital development. [The Daily Star 1]

Additionally, Yunus sought support from former United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon for Bangladesh's ongoing transition to democracy. During a meeting at the Boao Forum for Asia, Yunus discussed the importance of international backing to help Bangladesh rebuild its political foundation. Ban Ki-moon expressed confidence in Yunus's leadership and the potential for improved democratic governance under his guidance. The two leaders also discussed economic cooperation, including the resolution of a land issue in the Korean Export Processing Zone (EPZ) in Chattogram, which is expected to boost Korean investment in Bangladesh. Yunus invited Ban Ki-moon to visit Bangladesh in the future to further explore opportunities for cooperation. [The Daily Star 2]

Deportation of Bhutanese nationals from U.S. creates diplomatic and legal crisis

(lm) Bhutan has refused to accept ten individuals deported by the United States for criminal activity, instead redirecting them to Nepal, raising serious concerns over their legal status and human rights. The group, composed of former Bhutanese refugees resettled in the U.S., was initially flown to Bhutan's Paro Airport on March 29. Bhutanese immigration authorities, however, denied them entry, declaring them non-citizens, and transported them to the Indian border town of Jaigaon before they were handed over

to Indian security forces and escorted to the Panitanki border crossing into Nepal.

The deportees entered Nepal through unofficial means, reportedly bribing middlemen and crossing the Mechi River at night. Three of the individuals were arrested in the Beldangi refugee camp in eastern Nepal and handed over to immigration authorities. The remaining seven are believed to be hiding in Nepal to avoid arrest.

The U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) began deporting resettled Bhutanese refugees found guilty of crimes dating back to 2012. Ten have already been sent, and up to 40 more deportations are expected. While the U.S. considers them Bhutanese nationals, Bhutan has denied their citizenship and effectively rendered them stateless.

Nepal, now caught in the middle, has no legal framework to absorb these individuals, prompting rights activists to warn of a looming human rights crisis. Activists argue that neither Bhutan nor Nepal is willing to take responsibility, and have called for immediate diplomatic dialogue to resolve the situation. With over 100,000 Bhutanese refugees living in the U.S. —70,000 of them in Pennsylvania—activists stress that unresolved legal status and rejections from both countries could lead to further humanitarian complications. [The Kathmandu Post]

India lauded as exemplar for reducing child mortality by UN

(rt) India's efforts and progress in reducing preventable child deaths has been lauded as "exemplar" by the United Nations (UN), which cited the example of health initiatives such as Ayushman Bharat and stated that the country has saved millions of young lives through strategic investments in its health system.

The UN Inter-Agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation report highlighted that since 2000, India achieved an under-five mortality reduction of 70 per cent and a neonatal mortality reduction of 61 per cent, which is "driven by overlapping measures to increase health coverage, enhance available interventions and develop health infrastructure and human resources".

The report cited the example of Ayushman Bharat, the world's largest health insurance scheme which provides annual coverage of nearly USD 5,500 per family per year. The report noted that every pregnant woman in India is entitled for free delivery (including

caesarean section) and infant care provides free transport, medications, diagnostics and dietary support in public health institutions. To ensure comprehensive coverage and equitable access to health services, India has also strengthened infrastructure via the establishment of maternity waiting homes, maternal and child health wings, newborn stabilization units, sick newborn care units, mother care units and a dedicated program for birth defect screening.

Additionally, the report also indicated that in 2000, the country with the highest burden of under-five measles mortality was India, with only 56 percent of infants vaccinated for measles and 189,00 deaths from measles. However, by 2023, the infant measles vaccination rate had increased to 3 percent and under-five deaths due to the disease decreased by 97 percent to 5,200 measles-related deaths. [NDTV] [Deccan Herald]

India overtakes Sri Lanka to become second largest tea exporter

(lm) India has surpassed Sri Lanka to become the world's second-largest tea exporter, according to new data released by the Tea Board of India. In 2024, India exported 254 million kilograms (Mkg) of tea, overtaking Sri Lanka's 231 Mkg. Kenya retained the top position, with exports exceeding 500 Mkg.

India's 2024 export volume marks its second-best performance after 2018, when it exported around 256 Mkg. The value of these exports reached INR 7,112 crore (approximately USD 853 million). The increase was driven largely by growth in the orthodox tea segment, which has been bolstered by central and state government schemes.

The Indian tea industry, which produces about 1,400 Mkg annually, now aims to reach the 300 Mkg export milestone by 2030. Officials credit supportive government policies and favorable export conditions for the recent gains. [Daily Mirror]

India's Reliance Industries to pause Venezuelan oil imports after new U.S. tariffs

(rt) India's Reliance Industries, operator of the world's largest refining complex, will suspend imports of

Venezuelan crude oil following a new executive order by U.S. President Donald Trump imposing a 25 percent tariff on countries purchasing oil from Venezuela. The tariff will come into effect on April 2, 2025.

Reliance, which had received special U.S. approval last year to import oil from the sanctioned country, currently brings in an average of 2 million barrels of Venezuelan crude per month. The company is still expected to take delivery of a cargo of Merey crude in early April, but all future purchases have been placed on hold in response to the new U.S. directive. [The Economic Times 1] [The Economic Times 2]

Pakistan urges UNSC for just Kashmir settlement, rejects India's claims

(tj) Pakistan has called on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to ensure the implementation of its resolutions on the Jammu and Kashmir dispute, emphasizing the right to self-determination for the Kashmiri people. Special Assistant to the Prime Minister (SAPM) and Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Tariq Fatemi, made the appeal during a high-level UNSC meeting on March 24. He reiterated that the Jammu and Kashmir issue remains on the UNSC agenda and urged the Council to promote a just and lasting settlement.

Fatemi also highlighted Pakistan's long-standing contribution to UN peacekeeping operations, pointing out the need for reforms to address new challenges in peace operations, including geopolitical rivalries and non-state actors. He further stressed the importance of a strong political commitment from UN member states and advocated for sustainable, inclusive solutions to conflicts worldwide.

In response to India's claims that Kashmir is an integral part of India, Pakistan reaffirmed that Jammu and Kashmir is a disputed territory, citing the numerous UNSC resolutions calling for a UN-supervised plebiscite to determine its future. Pakistan's delegate to the UN, Gul Qaiser Sarvani, rejected India's assertions, accusing India of committing gross human rights violations in Kashmir. Sarvani also accused India of supporting terrorism against Pakistan and highlighted the imbalance in military occupation, with over 900,000 Indian troops in the region. [DAWN]

Pakistan secures consensus at UN on funding to appoint Islamophobia envoy

Pakistan has secured consensus at the United Nations (UN) for funding the newly established Office of the Special Envoy on Combating Islamophobia. The resolution, passed during the first part of the 79th UNGA, approves the budget for the office, marking a key achievement in Pakistan's multilateral efforts.

The office will be operational starting April 1, with its mandate focused on monitoring Islamophobic trends and supporting global efforts against religious intolerance. This follows Pakistan's successful campaign in 2022 to designate March 15 as the International Day to Combat Islamophobia.

Pakistan's UN mission, led by Jibran Khan Durrani, thanked the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Group of 77 (G77), and China for their support. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif also stressed the urgency of combating Islamophobia and called for stronger legislative measures to protect religious freedoms. [Arab News]

Pakistan finance chief calls for coalition of developing nations to push for fair trade, financial reform

(sn) Pakistan's Federal Minister for Finance and Revenue, Muhammad Aurangzeb, has proposed forming a global coalition of developing nations to advocate for fair trade and better representation in international financial institutions. He made these remarks during the Boao Forum for Asia Annual Conference 2025 in China, emphasizing the need for reforms in the global sovereign debt system and financial justice.

Aurangzeb criticized the global economy as unequal, benefiting developed nations while overlooking the Global South. He highlighted challenges such as high tariffs, discriminatory trade practices, and barriers to market access faced by developing countries. He called on the G20 and IMF to play a more constructive role in debt relief.

The finance chief also stressed the importance of multilateral cooperation, advocating for stronger regional connectivity and equitable market access. He further recommended creating international AI and fintech funds to support digital inclusion and

emphasized integrating sustainability and climate financing into globalization policies. [Arab News]

Tripartite agreement aims to deepen capital market cooperation between Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka

(lm) Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh have signed a tripartite Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to enhance regional cooperation in capital markets. The agreement, signed on March 27 in Colombo by the Pakistan Stock Exchange (PSX), Colombo Stock Exchange (CSE), and Dhaka Stock Exchange (DSE), establishes a formal platform for cross-border collaboration aimed at improving market standards, regulatory alignment, and investment flows.

The MoU will facilitate joint initiatives in areas such as technology development, human resource sharing, product innovation, and regulatory cooperation. The agreement also aims to promote investor protection, encourage cross-border listings, and enhance knowledge-sharing between the three exchanges.

Key objectives include the development of digital infrastructure, collaborative financial instruments, harmonized oversight frameworks, and institutional connectivity to foster deeper integration of South Asia's capital markets. The MoU also establishes working groups to implement the cooperation framework and facilitate ongoing dialogue. [Arab News]

Russia states 'no evidence' of Pakistan supplying weapons to Ukraine

(sn) Russia's Ambassador to Pakistan, Albert P. Khorev, has dismissed reports suggesting that Pakistan supplied weapons to Ukraine in its war against Russia, stating that no evidence has been found so far. Despite media reports from the UK, the US, and India suggesting that Pakistan sold arms to Ukraine, Khorev emphasized that there is no concrete proof to support these claims at this stage.

Khorev also praised Pakistan for maintaining a neutral stance in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, especially amid pressure from Western nations. He acknowledged Pakistan's balanced position and expressed gratitude for the country's decision to avoid taking sides.

In the interview, Khorev also addressed the possibility of Russia mediating between Pakistan and India on their long-standing issues, particularly over Kashmir. He stated that Russia would consider mediation if both countries agreed, citing the principle of Eurasian conflict resolution within the context of Russia's new Eurasian security concept, which emphasizes resolving conflicts without external influence from other continents. [Arab News]

Seychelles celebrates historic milestone as first FiTI-compliant country

(lm) Seychelles has made history by becoming the first country to achieve a compliant rating in the Fisheries Transparency Initiative (FiTI) validation process in February 2025. A ceremony to commemorate this achievement was held, with Minister for Fisheries and Blue Economy, Jean-François Ferrari, receiving the compliance certificate from Sven Biermann, the executive director of the FiTI International Secretariat.

FiTI is an international initiative that promotes transparency and good governance in fisheries management. It aims to ensure that countries make fisheries management information accessible to the public, thus improving accountability, sustainability, and stakeholder cooperation. [Seychelles Nation]

High-level delegation from Comoros and Madagascar visits Seychelles to learn from SMA transformation

(lm) A high-level delegation from Comoros and Madagascar visited Seychelles from March 24 to 26 to learn about the institutional transformation of the Seychelles Meteorological Authority (SMA).

Seychelles is the only country in the Southwest Indian Ocean (SWIO) that has transformed its National Meteorological Service into the SMA, aligning with international standards such as ISO 9001:2015 for aeronautical meteorological services. This transformation includes strategic and operational plans, a new organizational structure, and cost recovery measures. [Seychelles Nation]

Indonesia seeks to join OECD Anti-Bribery Convention

(th) Indonesia seeks to accede to the OECD Anti-Bribery Convention, which criminalizes the bribery of foreign public officials in international business dealings and establishes legally binding standards, including the criminalization of such bribery.

“We reaffirm our commitment to global anti-corruption cooperation by expressing our willingness to accede to the OECD Anti-Bribery Convention, which we will subsequently ratify to integrate into our national system,” Senior Minister Yusril Ihza Mahendra stated at an OECD forum in Paris on March 26, 2025. Yusril did not specify a timeline for the convention’s implementation within Indonesia.

He also acknowledged Indonesia’s limited progress in enhancing its Corruption Perceptions Index. Indonesia scored a 37 in the 2024 index, a marginal increase of 3 points from 2023. Indonesia’s highest recorded score was 40 in 2019.

Indonesia anticipates that OECD membership and the organization’s rigorous standards will stimulate national growth, potentially elevating the country to a high-income economy by 2045. [Jakarta Globe]

Indonesia to join BRICS New Development Bank

(th) Indonesia has decided to join the BRICS-sponsored New Development Bank (NDB), a move President Prabowo Subianto views pivotal to accelerating economic development. The decision follows a meeting with NDB President Dilma Rousseff in Jakarta on March 25. Rousseff welcomed Indonesia’s membership, noting that securing Jakarta’s participation was a priority for the NDB due to Indonesia’s regional influence.

Established in 2015 by the original BRICS members – Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa – the NDB focuses on funding sustainable development and infrastructure projects, particularly for South-South cooperation. With an initial capital of USD 100 billion, the NDB has been expanding, admitting Bangladesh, UAE, Egypt and Uruguay in recent years. The bank aims to issue green and social bonds by 2030 and has already financed USD 39 billion in projects, primarily in transportation infrastructure. [The Star] [Jakarta Globe]

Indonesia yet to receive request for peacekeepers at Russia-Ukraine border

(th) Indonesia has not been formally asked to deploy its peacekeeping forces to the Russia-Ukraine region under a UN mandate, as confirmed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated on 26 March.

This came in response to reports regarding a suggestion that Indonesia contribute to a UN peacekeeping mission to uphold security along the border, should a ceasefire agreement be achieved between Russia and Ukraine.

Citing Italian newspaper *La Repubblica*, Ukrainian media reported that their allies have proposed the deployment of an UN-mandated peacekeeping contingent, comprising of soldiers from Indonesia, India, Brazil, and Saudi Arabia. It is presumed that the peacekeeping group would operate in conjunction with a coalition of forces from European nations and would be assigned the responsibility of securing Ukraine's border with the European union. [Antara]

France, EU partner to make Indonesian ports safer

(th) France and the European Union (EU) are collaborating to enhance the safety of two of Indonesia's major ports – Tanjung Priok Port in Jakarta and Tanjung Perak Port in Surabaya – through a multi-year capacity-building program.

Expertise France, the French public agency for international cooperation, and the EU announced their joint Global Ports Safety project in Jakarta on March 26, during French Foreign Affairs Minister Jean-Noël Barrot's visit to Indonesia (see article in this edition).

Barrot stated that the project will focus on improving safety and resilience at 12 ports across eight selected South and Southeast Asian countries. Barrot added that the project aims to equip the ports with capabilities to deal with security issues, including boat fires and accidents, sustainability and durability issues.

The initiative's total budget is USD 9.2 million) over four years, funded by both France and the EU. These funds will support capacity-building activities in risk prevention and incident management, involve expert facilitation of best practice exchanges, and provide equipment to the targeted ports. [Jakarta Globe]

Laos discusses efforts to exit FATF Grey List

(tas) The Lao government has set its commitment to enhancing anti-money laundering and counter-terrorism financing (AML/CFT) measures as part of efforts to exit the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) grey list. A two-day conference in Vientiane, supported by international partners, gathered government officials, law enforcement agencies, and financial institutions to discuss strategies for meeting FATF standards.

Deputy Prime Minister Saleumxay Kommasith emphasized the national security threats posed by money laundering and related crimes, highlighting Laos' legal and institutional frameworks to combat financial crime. International experts and regional delegates shared insights on FATF compliance, stressing the risks of non-compliance, such as financial restrictions and reduced investment. [Vientiane Times]

US defense chief reaffirms 'ironclad' alliance with Philippines, plans military build-up amid China tensions

(jm/lm) U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth reaffirmed Washington's "ironclad" commitment to the Philippines during his visit to Manila on March 28, marking his first official trip to Asia under the second Trump administration. Meeting with President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and Defense Secretary Gilberto Teodoro, Hegseth underscored the enduring value of the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty and pledged deeper defense cooperation to counter growing Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea. He announced new initiatives including the deployment of advanced U.S. capabilities such as a mobile anti-ship missile system (NMESIS) and unmanned surface vessels as part of the upcoming Balikatan exercises.

Hegseth emphasized the strategic importance of deterrence in the Indo-Pacific, calling the Philippines a key partner and highlighting that "peace through strength is a very real thing." Marcos, in turn, called the United States "the greatest force for peace in this part of the world," and welcomed the visit as a reaffirmation of both countries' shared vision for regional stability. Amid ongoing maritime standoffs between Chinese and Philippine vessels, Hegseth said Manila had "stood very firm" in defending its territorial rights, adding that the U.S. would stand "shoulder to

shoulder" with the Philippines. [Al Jazeera] [CNN] [Deutsche Welle] [Radio Free Asia] [Reuters]

Soon after his visit, the Philippines, the United States, and Japan conducted joint naval drills off Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea as part of a Multilateral Maritime Cooperative Activity. The BRP Jose Rizal, USS Shoup, and JS Noshiro carried out coordinated maneuvers, supported by helicopters and ship-to-ship exchanges. The exercise, aimed at boosting crisis readiness and interoperability, took place under close observation by a Chinese frigate, which was warned by a Philippine vessel and kept at a distance. The drills marked an expansion of trilateral maritime coordination in a region where tensions have sharply escalated. [Associated Press]

Additionally, the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) is taking action regarding the presence of floating barriers installed by the Chinese maritime militia at Panatag Shoal, which were discovered during a maritime domain awareness flight by the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources. The PCG, with military support, is poised to remove these barriers if necessary, though specific details of the operation have not been disclosed. [Philippine News Agency 1] [Philippine News Agency 2]

Separately, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) welcomed reports that a second U.S. Typhon mid-range missile system is en route to the country. The first Typhon system arrived in April 2024 and has remained in Ilocos Norte near Taiwan. AFP officials said the additional system would boost training and operational readiness, and Chief of Staff Gen. Romeo Brawner Jr. reiterated interest in acquiring the technology permanently. [Inquirer.net 1]

China has sharply criticized these developments, accusing the U.S. of stoking regional instability and warning against "Cold War mentality." Chinese defense officials stated that military cooperation between Washington and Manila should not harm third parties or provoke confrontation. [Global Times] [South China Morning Post]

Echoing Beijing's concerns, the Center for People Empowerment in Governance (CenPEG), a Filipino independent foreign policy think tank, raised concerns over the growing presence of foreign military forces in the Philippines. CenPEG warned that Hegseth's visit, along with an upcoming visit by U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio, could entangle the country further in geopolitical rivalries. Roland Simbulan, chairperson of CenPEG, argued that the Philippines is risking both its national security and diplomatic autonomy. The think

tank urged Manila to restore an independent foreign policy and reduce reliance on external security arrangements. [GMA News]

Defense Secretary Gilbert Teodoro Jr. dismissed such criticism, asserting that the Philippines will not act as a "mouthpiece" for any nation. Teodoro underscored the significance of the U.S.-Philippines alliance, calling it a "lynchpin" for ensuring stability in the Indo-Pacific. [Inquirer.net 2] [Philippine News Agency]

Thailand's Uyghur deportations spark parliamentary clash and raise fears over EU trade deal fallout

(lm) Thailand's controversial deportation of 48 Uyghur detainees to China has triggered both a fierce political debate at home and growing concerns over its international trade relationships, particularly ongoing free trade agreement (FTA) negotiations with the European Union (EU).

In parliament, Deputy Prime Minister Phumtham Wechayachai faced strong criticism from opposition MP Kannavee Suebsaeng of the FAIR Party, who accused the government of lacking transparency and capitulating to Chinese interests. He called the government's recent visit to Xinjiang "staged" and accused officials of undermining Thailand's foreign policy credibility.

Phumtham, who also serves as Defense Minister, responded angrily, branding Kannavee "a big liar" and defending the deportation decision as legally grounded. He explained that Thailand had three options: to continue detaining the Uyghurs for illegal entry, to resettle them in a third country, or to deport them to China. Since no country granted them formal refugee status over the 11 years they were detained, the government chose repatriation, which he claimed was supported by evidence showing they were Chinese citizens. He also stated that Thailand had secured Beijing's assurance that Thai officials would be allowed to monitor the group's welfare.

However, leaked diplomatic reports contradict the government's position. The United States, Canada, and Australia had all reportedly offered to resettle the Uyghurs, according to multiple sources, including the U.S. State Department, which said it had "consistently and repeatedly" made offers over the years. Thailand allegedly declined these options for fear of jeopardizing ties with China, its largest trading partner. [Bangkok Post 1]

The deportations—carried out covertly in late February or early March—also drew condemnation from the United Nations, which warned of the risk of torture and irreparable harm if the detainees were returned to China. The UN refugee agency said it had been denied access to the Uyghurs, preventing them from being processed as asylum seekers.

Amid international backlash, Thailand is now scrambling to manage the diplomatic and economic fallout. On March 28, the Committee on Economic Development met with representatives from the foreign and commerce ministries, private sector bodies, and the Thai Chamber of Commerce (TCC) to assess the potential consequences for the FTA with the EU, which was expected to be signed within 2025. Officials fear the deportations could delay the deal or damage Thailand's efforts to join the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

Committee chair Sittiphol Viboonthanakul, a People's Party MP, warned that the incident may also influence U.S. trade policies, including the possibility of higher tariffs on Thai exports. In response, TCC representatives defended Thailand's record, pointing to past progress on illegal fishing reforms and asserting that deportations are practiced globally, including in Western countries. They urged that the Uyghur case not be allowed to derail economic diplomacy.

Foreign Affairs Minister Maris Sangiampongsa echoed this position in parliament, asserting that Thailand aims to maintain strategic balance in its foreign policy and insisted the government acted in the national interest. He confirmed that further engagement with European diplomats is planned to mitigate any trade repercussions, and Phumtham announced that a follow-up trip to Xinjiang by the Foreign Ministry is forthcoming to demonstrate transparency. [Bangkok Post 2]

Meanwhile, human rights activists continue to urge the Thai government to prevent the deportation of five remaining Uyghur detainees, who face persecution if sent back to China. These individuals, who were detained after escaping a detention center in 2020, are currently being held at Klongprem Central Prison and are at risk of being repatriated. Activists have raised concerns over the psychological distress experienced by the detainees, with one individual hospitalized due to fear of repatriation. [Bangkok Post 3]

Vietnam’s seafood industry faces regulatory challenges amid EU and US pressure

(cmc/lm) Vietnam's seafood industry is facing significant regulatory hurdles as it adapts to stricter international standards. The country is actively adjusting to new European Union (EU) regulations on maximum residue levels (MRLs) for inorganic arsenic in seafood, while also grappling with the United States' threat to ban imports of key seafood products under the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA). These challenges come despite record growth in tuna exports and strong efforts to maintain market access.

The EU’s new regulations, set to take effect in July 2025, impose stringent MRLs for inorganic arsenic in fish, crustaceans, and mollusks. Vietnamese authorities are proactively enhancing quality control measures, with a focus on water quality monitoring in aquaculture areas where arsenic contamination is most likely. The Vietnamese seafood industry, which contributes USD 9 billion to USD 11 billion annually, is determined to meet these standards to retain its 3.7 percent share of EU seafood imports. The Vietnam Association of Seafood Exporters and Producers (VASEP) anticipates continued growth, aided by the EU-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement (EVFTA), which is expected to boost exports by approximately two percent annually through 2030. [Viet Nam News]

Meanwhile, Vietnam's seafood sector is also facing a looming risk from the U.S., which has preliminarily ruled that several of the country’s major fishing practices do not meet MMPA standards. This could lead to a ban on exports of tuna, squid, swordfish, and crustaceans to the U.S. starting January 1, 2026. Vietnam has requested an extension for submitting compliance data to the U.S., arguing that delays in the data submission portal and recent regulatory reforms hinder meeting the original deadline.

The compliance challenges arise despite Vietnam’s record tuna exports, which reached USD 73 million in February 2025—a 41 percent increase year-on-year and the highest February figure in five years. The first two months of 2025 brought cumulative tuna exports to USD 139 million. However, industry experts, including VASEP, warn that the MMPA and expanded U.S. Seafood Import Monitoring Program (SIMP) pose serious threats to the sector’s long-term viability, potentially triggering a domino effect of restrictions from other markets like the European Union, Japan, and Canada.

Vietnam's seafood industry, which generates between USD 9 billion and USD 11 billion annually, ranks third globally behind China and Norway. Still, its reputation and market access are under pressure, not only from the MMPA but also from the EU's longstanding "yellow card" warning over illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing. Domestic regulations, such as the requirement that tuna be at least 500 millimeters in length before harvest under Decree 37, further complicate supply chains for processors. [Saigon News] [Enternews] [VietnamPlus]

European Central Bank to host Vietnamese interns as Hanoi develops financial center framework

(hn) During a meeting with the European Central Bank (ECB) on March 24, Vietnamese Deputy Prime Minister Nguyen Hoa Binh confirmed that Vietnam is developing a legal framework to establish its own financial centers. The National Assembly is expected to pass a resolution this year supporting this initiative.

As part of cooperation efforts, the Deputy Prime Minister proposed that Vietnam send personnel to intern at the ECB for one year and invited ECB experts to train Vietnamese banking and financial center staff. In response, ECB President Christine Lagarde agreed to technical assistance, including legal framework development, supervision, and training. The ECB will initially host two to three Vietnamese interns, with conditions to be finalized in a forthcoming Memorandum of Understanding (MOU).

The financial centers in development—one international center in Ho Chi Minh City and a regional center in Da Nang—will focus on green finance, fintech, and infrastructure and energy project financing.

The Deputy Prime Minister also met with executives from major German financial companies, including DZ Bank and Mountain Alliance AG, urging them to promote Vietnam as an investment destination. German firms expressed strong support and pledged to provide expertise, capital access, and skilled workforce training to support Vietnam's financial sector development.

At a related forum, Nguyen Hoa Binh encouraged German experts and companies to become the first foreign investors in Vietnam's international financial center. Government officials reiterated their

commitment to welcoming and facilitating such investments. [Vnexpress, in Vietnamese]

Vietnam and Canada strengthen UN peacekeeping cooperation with 2025-2026 framework

(hn) Vietnam and Canada signed a 2025-2026 cooperation framework on UN peacekeeping, reinforcing their defense ties during a visit by a Vietnamese delegation to Canada. The agreement, signed by Major General Pham Manh Thang and Brigadier-General Carol Potvin, builds on a 2023 MoU and aligns with commitments made during the Vietnam-Canada Defence Policy Dialogue in February 2025.

The framework focuses on delegation exchanges, training, and Canadian support for Vietnam's peacekeeping training capabilities. Recent collaborations include language training, battlefield first-aid courses, and joint peacekeeping programs. Both countries plan to expand officer training, enhance gender equality in peacekeeping, and host international workshops.

This agreement reaffirms Vietnam and Canada's commitment to global peace and stability while opening new opportunities for future cooperation. [Viet Nam News]

Bilateral relations between Bangladesh and China strengthen during Yunus' visit

(lm) During his four-day visit to China, Bangladesh's interim leader Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus had a series of meetings with top Chinese officials, including President Xi Jinping and Executive Vice Premier Ding Xuexiang. These discussions covered a range of bilateral issues, with President President Xi saying Beijing is "willing to work with Bangladesh to push bilateral cooperation to a new level."

During the visit, Yunus secured over USD 2.1 billion in investments, loans, and grants. This included a USD 1 billion commitment from nearly 30 Chinese companies for a Chinese Industrial Economic Zone (CIEZ) in Bangladesh, reflecting Yunus's push for greater Chinese investment in Bangladesh's manufacturing sector. Additionally, China pledged a USD 400 million loan to modernize Bangladesh's second-largest port,

Mongla, and further discussed cooperation in water resource management and repatriation of over a million Rohingya refugees currently residing in Bangladesh. [The Daily Star 1] [The Daily Star 2] [The Daily Star 3]

In the broader context, Yunus's China visit also included discussions on future cooperation with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) to boost Bangladesh's agricultural exports to China, further emphasizing his focus on economic collaboration during the trip. [The Daily Star 4]

In addition to these discussions, Yunus's visit also included an important meeting with Wu Xiaoling, former deputy governor of the People's Bank of China, who commended Yunus for his work in poverty alleviation through microcredit programs and social business initiatives. Yunus and Xiaoling discussed potential collaboration between Tsinghua University and the Yunus Centre for social business, with Yunus being invited to speak at Tsinghua University. [Dhaka Tribune]

However, a major concern raised during the visit was the future of the Brahmaputra River, as China plans to construct a hydropower project upstream at Medog. Bangladesh expressed its concerns over the potential environmental and ecological impacts of the project, emphasizing the river's crucial role in the country's water and sediment flow. The government formally requested detailed technical information from China regarding the environmental, feasibility, and disaster impact assessments of the Medog Hydropower Station. [The Daily Star 5]

Moreover, the growing Bangladesh-China relationship is also met with trade concerns. Experts caution that Chinese investments typically lack stringent social and environmental standards, and the long-term benefits for Bangladesh's labor force and overall population remain uncertain. Furthermore, the associated infrastructure projects could entail serious environmental risks, raising concerns over sustainable development in Bangladesh. [Deutsche Welle]

As Bangladesh builds ties with China, relations with India remain deadlocked

(lm) Bangladesh is undergoing a noticeable shift in its foreign policy, with the interim government under Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus increasingly reorienting towards China.

This shift is exemplified by Yunus's recent visit to Beijing, where he secured over USD 2.1 billion in Chinese investments, loans, and grants, highlighting the growing economic collaboration between the two nations. The visit was marked by significant agreements, including the establishment of a USD 1 billion Chinese Industrial Economic Zone and plans to modernize Mongla Port, signaling China's expanding role in Bangladesh's infrastructure development. [see separate article in this edition]

This reorientation comes at a time when relations between Bangladesh and India, its traditional ally, are facing increasing strain. The rift between India and Bangladesh deepened following the ouster of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in 2024. Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar acknowledged in a recent session of the Consultative Committee for External Affairs that New Delhi was aware of the growing opposition to Hasina before her removal but lacked the leverage to intervene [see AiR No. 12, March/2025, 4].

As a result, during the same period as Yunus's visit to China, Dhaka's efforts to engage New Delhi diplomatically were met with cold shoulders. Despite Yunus initially expressing interest in visiting India before his trip to China, Bangladesh did not receive a positive response. This lack of engagement contrasted sharply with the warm messages exchanged on Bangladesh's Independence Day, where Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi reaffirmed India's commitment to bilateral relations, underscoring shared history and aspirations for mutual prosperity. [The Daily Star 1] [The Daily Star 2] [The Daily Star 3]

The deepening relationship between Bangladesh and China is not without regional implications. The modernization of Mongla Port and potential involvement in projects like the Teesta River have heightened India's concerns, as these developments align with China's Belt and Road Initiative—a project India has consistently opposed due to geopolitical and water management concerns. [Deutsche Welle]

More importantly, Yunus's remarks about India's northeastern states, which are landlocked, stirred controversy. In a video that surfaced after his return, Yunus suggested that China could "extend" its influence in the region by investing in Bangladesh, which could serve as a gateway to the seven sister states of India. Analysts have pointed out that such remarks, though diplomatically ambiguous, could exacerbate India's concerns about China's growing presence in the region, especially with Bangladesh's growing ties to Beijing. [NDTV]

As Bangladesh seeks to diversify its international alliances, its growing reliance on Chinese investments and economic support signals a clear pivot away from India, leaving New Delhi with diminished leverage in the evolving political landscape of its regional neighbor. Consequently, India's role has become largely limited to providing practical support, such as delivering 9,500 tons of rice under an international agreement, as tensions over political and diplomatic issues persist. [The Daily Star 4]

In a notable development, however, Indian conglomerate Adani has resumed full electricity supply to Bangladesh from its coal-fired power plant in Jharkhand, India, after a four-month reduction due to unpaid dues. The supply—amounting to 1,600 megawatts—was halved on October 31, 2024, after Bangladesh fell behind on payments amid an economic crisis. Although the Bangladesh Power Development Board confirms that regular payments are now being made, outstanding dues reportedly remain around USD 800 million and are expected to be settled within six months. [BBC]

U.S. general reaffirms security cooperation with Bangladesh Army

(lm) Lieutenant General Joel P. Vowell, Deputy Commanding General of the U.S. Army Pacific, has reaffirmed the United States' commitment to strengthening defense ties with the Bangladesh Army during his visit to Dhaka. Meeting with Army Chief General Waker-Uz-Zaman at Dhaka Cantonment, Vowell highlighted shared security priorities, ongoing collaboration, and the importance of regional stability.

The two sides discussed key military challenges, upcoming joint exercises—including Exercise TIGER LIGHTNING set for this summer—and potential acquisitions of U.S.-origin military equipment to improve interoperability. Vowell also praised the Bangladesh Army's professionalism and its role in domestic security and disaster response. [The Daily Star]

Russia expresses interest in boosting wheat and fertilizer exports to Bangladesh

(lm) Russia has signaled its readiness to increase exports of wheat and fertilizer to Bangladesh,

according to Deputy Prime Minister Alexey Overchuk during a meeting with Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus on the sidelines of the Boao Forum for Asia in Hainan, China. The two sides also discussed the status of the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant, energy cooperation, and gas exploration projects led by Russian energy company Gazprom.

Yunus confirmed that financial issues concerning the Rooppur plant have been resolved and that the project is expected to begin trial operations by the end of this year. Bangladesh, in turn, is planning to import additional wheat and fertilizer from Russia and has expressed interest in expanding Gazprom's offshore and onshore activities within the country.

Russia also emphasized the importance of strengthening people-to-people ties, particularly by encouraging more Bangladeshi students to pursue education in Russia. [The Daily Star]

Australia opens Home Affairs Office in Bangladesh to boost migration cooperation

(lm) Australia has established a new Home Affairs Office in Dhaka, signaling deepening bilateral ties with Bangladesh and a shared commitment to managing migration and border issues. The office aims to assist prospective Bangladeshi migrants by providing clearer access to visa information and serving as a key point of contact for the Bangladeshi government on immigration matters.

The announcement follows the signing of a Standard Operating Procedures agreement between the two countries to enable the safe and swift repatriation of Bangladeshis attempting irregular maritime migration to Australia. More than 65,000 Bangladeshi nationals currently live and work in Australia, contributing to both countries through labor and remittances. [The Daily Star]

Bhutan-India trade route awaiting New Delhi’s approval to boost regional trade

(hgk) The Samrang trade route in Bhutan, located in the Samdrupjongkhar district near the Indian border, is awaiting final approval from India and promises significant economic benefits for Samrang and neighboring subdsitricts. Currently, goods must pass

through the Samdrupjongkhar checkpoint, causing delays and increased costs. Once operational, the route will ease access to Indian markets, reducing transportation burdens on traders and farmers. Key exports include agricultural products like oranges, ginger, and areca nuts, along with coal and riverbed materials.

With an estimated 40 million metric tons of coal and 20 million metric tons of riverbed materials, Samrang has substantial export potential. The route is expected to foster regional growth, benefiting both Bhutan and towns in India, including Guwahati, a major commercial hub in Assam state located just 67 kilometers away. [Kuensel]

Bhutan-Israel to deepen cooperation in agriculture, cybersecurity, and tourism

(lm) Israel plans to expand bilateral cooperation with Bhutan across agriculture, cybersecurity, and tourism, following the establishment of formal diplomatic relations in December 2020. According to Israel's ambassador to Bhutan, the current focus includes agricultural training programs, educational exchanges, and boosting Israeli tourism to Bhutan. In 2024, Bhutan received 525 Israeli visitors—the highest from any Middle Eastern country.

Israel is also supporting Bhutan's agricultural sector by linking Bhutanese authorities with Israel's Kibbutz agro-industrial model. Future collaboration is expected in cybersecurity, especially in protecting digital infrastructure related to Bhutan's Bitcoin mining sector. Plans are also underway for Israeli participation in Bhutan's innovation events and startup ecosystem.

Israel has expressed interest in contributing to the Gelephu Mindfulness City initiative, a flagship project led by Bhutan's King. The ambassador praised Bhutan's National Service program, Gyalsuung, drawing parallels to Israel's own model of youth conscription and civic training. [Kuensel]

Brunei-China trade increases in 2024

(ga) Bilateral trade between Brunei Darussalam and China reached USD 2.809 billion in 2024, with Brunei's exports to China increasing by 7.8 percent to nearly USD 2.1 billion. China remains Brunei's second-largest foreign investor and one of its top three trading

partners, reinforcing economic ties between the two nations.

Chinese Ambassador to Brunei Darussalam Xiao Jianguo highlighted these developments during an annual media briefing on March 27, emphasizing the success of key Belt and Road Initiative projects. Hengyi Industries – a joint venture between China's Zhejiang Hengyi Group and Damai Holdings, a subsidiary of Brunei's Strategic Development Capital Fund company – contributes around 10 percent of Brunei's annual GDP and plays a crucial role in economic diversification. The expansion of its flagship project, the Muara Port, is progressing, strengthening the 'Port-Industry-Park' model and enhancing Brunei's role as a regional hub, according to Xiao. [Borneo Bulletin]

French Bruneian Business Association holds AGM, discusses key industry trends

(ga) The French Bruneian Business Association recently held its annual general meeting (AGM) at the residence of the French Ambassador to Brunei Darussalam Eve Lubin. The meeting focused on upcoming business talks and networking events aimed at strengthening collaboration between members and government agencies.

Key topics discussed included developments in artificial intelligence, insurance schemes, and working visas. The AGM also saw the election of a new executive committee. The French ambassador continues to serve as the association's patron, while Bruneian diplomat and businessman Haji Musa Adnin holds the position of honorary president. [Borneo Bulletin]

Cambodia, Japan sign agreement to support demining efforts

(dql) The Cambodian Ministry of Economy and Finance of Cambodia has signed a nearly USD 11 million grant agreement with the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) to enhance demining capacity. The agreement, signed by Ros Seilava, Secretary of State at the Ministry of Economy and Finance, and Sanui Kazumasa, JICA's Chief Representative in Cambodia, will support two key projects.

The first project, with a budget of about USD 8.4 million, will fund the purchase of demining machines,

trucks, and technical equipment to enhance Cambodia's Mine Action Centre (CMAC). This initiative will also support South-South Cooperation Training for mine action experts.

The second project, valued at approximately USD 2 million will contribute to the construction of a Training Complex and Outreach Facilities for CMAC, bringing the total funding for this project to around USD 20 million.

Since 1992, Cambodia has cleared over 3,297 square kilometers of land, repurposing it for agriculture, infrastructure, and other uses. The country has successfully destroyed over 1.1 million anti-personnel mines and declared 15 provinces and cities mine-free. In 2024, Cambodia cleared an additional 273 square kilometers and reduced mine-related casualties significantly, from 4,320 in 1996 to 49 in 2024. [Khmer Times]

Cambodia, Laos pledge to strengthen cooperation on crime suppression

(dql) Cambodia and Laos have pledged to extend bilateral cooperation in combating high-tech crimes and drug trafficking in 2025. The commitment was made during a meeting between Cambodian Interior Minister Sar Sokha and Laotian Public Security Minister Vilay Lakham Phong. The meeting was part of the Sokha's March 24–26 visit to Laos.

Following a review of the collaboration in 2024, a new agreement for 2025 was signed, covering security, border management, and crime prevention and outlining joint efforts against human trafficking, cybercrime, and telecommunications fraud, as well as cooperation in convict transfers, high-level exchanges, and training programs.

Cross-border drug trafficking remains a key concern, with recent seizures including over 400 kilograms of narcotics transported from Stung Treng to Phnom Penh. [The Phnom Penh Post]

CEO of National Bank of Canada meets National Bank of Cambodia Governor

(sal) A high-level delegation from the National Bank of Canada, accompanied by representatives of ABA Bank, paid a courtesy visit to the National Bank of Cambodia (NBC) to reaffirm its ongoing support for the country's

banking sector development. The National Bank of Canada, one of Canada's largest financial institutions, is a major shareholder in ABA Bank, Cambodia's leading commercial bank.

The meeting saw discussions on multiple topics such as digital transformation, green finance, investment opportunities, and ABA Bank's pivotal role in driving economic growth and attracting investors to Cambodia. [The Phnom Penh Post]

Cambodia, Luxembourg to deepen cooperation

(dql) Cambodia and Luxembourg have discussed strengthening their cooperation in key areas, including the economy, trade, tourism, and people-to-people exchange. During a meeting on March 31, Cambodian Deputy Prime Minister Prak Sokhonn and Crown Prince Guillaume of Luxembourg emphasized the importance of enhancing bilateral ties.

They also exchanged views on regional and international issues. Following the meeting, the General Cooperation Agreement between Cambodia and Luxembourg was signed by Deputy Prime Minister Prak Sokhonn and Luxembourg's Deputy Prime Minister Xavier Bettel. [Khmer Times]

U.S. blacklists additional Chinese tech firms

(yq) The United States has intensified its restrictions on Chinese technology companies, adding dozens of firms to its export blacklist in a move aimed at curbing China's access to high-performance computing, artificial intelligence (AI), and quantum technologies.

Among the newly listed entities are six subsidiaries of Inspur Group, China's major cloud computing provider, alongside over 50 other Chinese firms. The U.S. Department of Commerce's Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) announced that these companies were blacklisted due to national security and foreign policy concerns. [Reuters] [BIS]

The Trump administration's decision aligns with broader efforts to counter China's military advancements, particularly in hypersonic weapons and AI-driven defense capabilities. The Commerce Department stated that many of the blacklisted firms contributed to developing supercomputers for the

Chinese military, a justification that has been previously used to place restrictions on other tech giants like Huawei.

The new sanctions extend beyond China, targeting entities in Taiwan, Iran, Pakistan, South Africa, and the United Arab Emirates, signaling Washington's intent to curb technological proliferation beyond Beijing. [CNBC]

China strongly condemned the latest U.S. actions, describing them as politically motivated and an abuse of economic and technological tools. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs asserted that the U.S. was weaponizing trade and technology issues under the pretext of national security. The Chinese embassy in Washington echoed these concerns, urging the U.S. to halt what it described as "unjustified suppression" of Chinese enterprises. Beijing vowed to take necessary measures to protect the legitimate interests of its companies, though specific retaliatory actions were not immediately outlined. [Global Times 1][Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China]

As Washington and Beijing continue their technological standoff, the effectiveness of U.S. restrictions remains a subject of debate. While limiting access to critical semiconductor technologies may slow China's progress in the short term, industry analysts caution that prolonged restrictions could drive China to develop alternative supply chains, potentially diminishing U.S. leverage in the long run.

U.S. Air Force nominee urges drone development in combating China

(dh) During his nomination hearing on March 27, Troy Meink, who is U.S. President Donald Trump's nomination for Secretary of the Air Force, stated the need for the U.S. to take a holistic approach to developing unmanned systems, such as drones, to deter conflict in the Taiwan Strait.

Meink cited China as the biggest military threat to the U.S. and its allies in the Indo-Pacific, noting that China's modernized equipment and capabilities, as well as their aggressive behavior in the South China Sea, justified the need for the U.S. to develop drones to discourage China taking military action in its bid for Taiwan reunification or influence in the South China Sea.

In deterring China's People Liberation Army (PLA) from using force in the Taiwan Strait, Meink notes the need for the U.S. to develop its drone technology, improve

cybersecurity, and integrate unmanned systems, such as drones, with other warfighting capabilities. Meink further noted the need for developing and integrating air and space defense systems to provide a credible deterrent to the PLA and to ensure stability in the region.

Meink ended his hearing also stating the need for a nuclear capability as well as conventional warfare means, such as the Air Force, to combat the threat of China using military force to achieve its national security aims in the South China Sea. [SCMP] [Focus Taiwan]

Chinese officials sanctioned by US over human rights abuses in Hong Kong

(dh) The U.S. State Department announced on March 31 that it had sanctioned six officials from Beijing and Hong Kong based on human rights abuses in Hong Kong and the U.S. Five of these individuals are being sanctioned for engaging in "actions or policies that have degraded the autonomy of Hong Kong, including in connection with transnational repression targeting individuals residing in the United States" and one individual "for their role in implementing the National Security Law." [U.S. Department of State]

One of the individuals sanctioned includes China's former top spy catcher, Dong Jingwei, who is currently the director of Beijing's Office for Safeguarding National Security in Hong Kong, as well as Paul Lam, a justice secretary in Hong Kong. The sanctions put a block on any property Dong, Lam, or the other officials may own in the United States.

These sanctions mark the first action taken by the new Trump administration to penalize Chinese individuals for what is deemed to be an erosion of political rights by officials cracking down on democracy advocates in Hong Kong. Western countries have continuously been critical of the Chinese imposition of the national security law-which criminalizes anything considered to be secession from China- as it allows them to jail pro-democracy advocates. [BBC]

The US argues these sanctions were necessary as officials used the national security law "extraterritorially to intimidate, silence, and harass 19 pro-democracy activists." All individuals were forced to flee overseas, including a U.S. citizen and four U.S. residents. Hong Kong advocates for democracy and freedom have welcomed these sanctions, seeing U.S. Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, as a key figure in

furthering their cause in holding officials who silence dissent in Hong Kong accountable. [Reuters]

China has condemned these sanctions and promised to respond. A spokesperson for the Hong Kong government stated these U.S sanctions are part of a deliberate attempt to spread misinformation designed to misguide the public. The spokesperson further stated that the 19 individuals with arrest warrants issued were not due to them exercising their freedom of speech but rather because they threatened the national security of Hong Kong.

Thus, China and Hong Kong officials have argued that the national security law is necessary to maintain stability in Hong Kong, particularly since widespread unrest in 2019, and have vowed to continue implementing the Beijing-imposed national security law. [SCMP]

These sanctions by the U.S. are the second such sanctions for rights abuses in Hong Kong, with 11 Chinese officials being subject to economic sanctions five years ago. China's rights abuses in Hong Kong continue to be a controversial issue and these sanctions come amid rising tensions between the U.S. and China. [Reuters] [SCMP]

China, France agree on three comprehensive high-level dialogues in 2025

(yq) China and France have reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening strategic, economic, and cultural ties through three high-level dialogues this year, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi announced after meeting with his French counterpart, Jean-Noël Barrot, in Beijing. The discussions also emphasized China-EU relations amid increasing global trade tensions.

Wang and Barrot underscored the need for multilateralism and strategic coordination, especially as geopolitical uncertainties grow. China views France as a key partner in high-quality development, aiming to deepen cooperation in agriculture, nuclear energy, aviation, and emerging industries such as artificial intelligence and green hydrogen.

At the same time, France has reiterated its stance against trade wars and protectionist policies, advocating for constructive dialogue between China and the European Union, according to the Chinese foreign ministry's readout of the meeting.

The trade relationship between China and France remains a focal point, with concerns over tariffs on European brandy and Chinese electric vehicles. Barrot highlighted France's commitment to resolving trade disputes swiftly to focus on long-term investment and collaboration. Additionally, he urged China to leverage its influence in encouraging Russia to engage in meaningful negotiations regarding the Ukraine conflict.

Climate cooperation emerged as a key pillar of China-France relations, with both nations issuing a joint statement on the 10th anniversary of the Paris Agreement. The statement reaffirmed their shared responsibility in addressing climate challenges and strengthening global governance. France also called for China's high-level participation in marine conservation efforts. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China 1]

Beyond bilateral ties, China and France discussed broader China-EU relations, with both sides recognizing more areas of cooperation than competition. The visit coincided with EU Trade Commissioner Maros Sefcovic's trip to China, signaling potential shifts in economic ties as Europe copes with trade tensions with the U.S. (see article in this edition). [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China 2][Reuters][Global Times][Xinhua News Agency]

China and Portugal deepen strategic ties amid global trade shifts

(yq) China and Portugal reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening bilateral and European relations during a high-level meeting in Beijing, as both sides are facing growing global trade tensions. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with his Portuguese counterpart, Paulo Rangel, on March 25, emphasizing the need for closer cooperation between China and Europe.

Wang highlighted China's economic growth target of 5 percent, reaffirming the country's commitment to expanding openness, presenting opportunities for Portugal, a leading EU recipient of Chinese investment. He underscored bilateral cooperation in energy, finance, and health, advocating for expanded collaboration in green transformation, digital economy, research, and cultural exchanges, with Macao playing a key role.

Addressing global challenges, Wang reaffirmed China's commitment to multilateralism, fair international governance, and a strong EU-China partnership, recognizing Portugal's role within the EU. He stated

that China views Europe as an essential pillar in a multipolar world and supports its strategic autonomy.

Rangel, for his part, reaffirmed Portugal's commitment to the one-China policy and welcomed further Chinese investment in various sectors, including infrastructure and green transformation, according to a readout of Chinese foreign ministry. He emphasized cultural and educational exchanges to foster mutual understanding and called for stronger EU-China cooperation to uphold multilateralism and oppose protectionism. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China] [Reuters 1]

Rangel's visit marked the first high-level Portuguese government delegation to China in over five years. His trip coincides with visits from other European leaders, including France's Foreign Minister and Italy's Senate President, signaling a renewed engagement between China and Europe (see articles in this edition). This diplomatic push comes as the EU grapples with the prospect of a trade war with both Washington and Beijing, exacerbated by U.S. President Donald Trump's threats of tariffs on European and Chinese goods. [TRT Global]

Portugal remains the only Western European nation still formally involved in Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative. The country has also maintained an open-door policy toward Chinese investment, including last year's abstention from an EU vote to impose tariffs on Chinese-built electric vehicles. Chinese investments in Portugal have been significant, with direct investments exceeding USD 12.94 billion euros by the end of 2023. Notably, China's EV battery manufacturer CALB recently announced a USD 2.16 billion investment in a Portuguese gigafactory, set to begin production in 2028. [Reuters 2]

China briefs German diplomats and businesses on revised anti-espionage law amid foreign concerns

(dql) China's Ministry of State Security has held its first briefing for foreign audiences, informing German diplomats and business representatives about the country's revised anti-espionage law and aimed at clarifying the law and assuring of the government's efforts to promote a business environment based on market principles, legal certainty, and international cooperation.

The revised law, effective since July 2023, broadens the definition of espionage and expands national security agencies' investigative powers.

During the briefing the ministry emphasized that the amendments are necessary for safeguarding national security, which, in turn, supports economic stability.

The briefing occurred amid heightened geopolitical tensions, particularly with Western nations seeking to reduce their economic reliance on China. Foreign businesses and critics have raised concerns over the law's vague definitions of espionage and state secrets, warning of potential arbitrary enforcement. Since 2023, Beijing has intensified its anti-espionage efforts, including public calls for intelligence tip-offs and raids on foreign consulting firms. [South China Morning Post]

China confirms citizens still missing after kidnapping in Ghanaian waters

(dql) The Chinese foreign ministry confirmed that all crew members aboard a Ghanaian-registered fishing vessel targeted in a suspected pirate attack are safe. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China]

However, three Chinese nationals went missing from Ghanaian waters and are believed to have been kidnapped after seven armed individuals boarded the ship and fired warning shots on March 27. [Reuters 1] [Reuters 2]

Diplomatic momentum builds in India-China relations amid border talks and cautious optimism

(rt/lm) India and China are cautiously advancing toward a more stable bilateral relationship, marked by a recent uptick in diplomatic engagement and a growing emphasis on managing longstanding border tensions.

In the latest development, the two countries held the 33rd round of the Working Mechanism for Consultation and Coordination (WMCC) on Border Affairs in Beijing, where talks were described as "positive and constructive." The Indian delegation, led by Joint Secretary (East Asia) Gourangalal Das, and the Chinese side, led by Director General Hong Liang, comprehensively reviewed the situation along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), affirming that peace along the frontier is essential to broader bilateral ties.

This meeting followed a spate of high-level discussions in recent months and reflects both countries' intent to rebuild trust after the 2020 Galwan Valley clash, which severely damaged diplomatic relations. During the talks, both sides agreed to maintain and strengthen existing diplomatic and military mechanisms. They also explored confidence-building measures, including proposals for the early resumption of cross-border cooperation such as information-sharing on trans-border rivers and restarting the Kailash Mansarovar Yatra, a key religious pilgrimage. [Times of India] [India Today] [The Hindu]

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi recently expressed optimism about the trajectory of relations, stating that “trust, enthusiasm, and energy” are returning to the bilateral equation. Chinese officials welcomed Modi’s conciliatory remarks, with the foreign ministry stating that China and India “should be partners that contribute to each other’s success.” Similarly, Indian External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar acknowledged persistent issues but emphasized that they can be addressed through dialogue rather than conflict. “What we are trying, step by step, is to undo some of the damage from 2020,” he said. [BBC] [Reuters]

The two countries are preparing for another meeting of the Special Representatives—India’s National Security Adviser Ajit Doval and China’s top diplomat Wang Yi—later this year. This follows their last session in December 2024 and is expected to further the process of resolving the boundary question and implementing border management decisions.

While India-China ties remain under strain due to broader geopolitical rivalries—ranging from China’s ties with Pakistan to India’s involvement in the Indo-Pacific Quad—the recent steps indicate a mutual interest in de-escalation. India is also watching regional and global developments closely, including shifts in U.S.-China relations under President Donald Trump and increasing pro-China leanings among neighboring South Asian governments.

Looking ahead, key indicators of progress will include further military disengagement along the LAC, resumption of direct flights, renewed investment flows, and high-level meetings between Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping at upcoming summits such as BRICS, G20, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. As the two countries mark 75 years of diplomatic relations, both seem to be testing the waters for a fragile but potentially stabilizing reset. [The Hindu]

India to supply 600MW of electricity to Nepal at night to reduce industrial power cuts

(lm) India has approved the export of an additional 600 megawatts (MW) of electricity to Nepal during nighttime hours, addressing concerns over possible load-shedding due to falling domestic hydropower output during the winter dry season. Under the new arrangement, Nepal can now import electricity through the Muzaffarpur-Dhalkebar transmission line from 11 p.m. to 4 a.m., as well as from 6 a.m. to 5 p.m., extending the import window to 16 hours per day.

Nepali officials, including Energy Minister Dipak Khadka, confirmed that the decision followed repeated requests from Kathmandu, including a recent appeal by Foreign Minister Arzu Rana Deuba during her visit to India. Industrial firms in Nepal have faced power outages of up to 12 hours a day due to reduced hydropower generation, which has fallen from a national capacity of over 3,300 MW to around 700–800 MW in winter.

The additional imports are expected to significantly ease power cuts for both households and industries. Authorities noted that the nighttime imports would allow the country to store water in its peaking run-of-the-river and reservoir-based projects, including the Kulekhani-1, to better manage peak demand.

The energy ministry also stated that Nepal has requested an additional 230 MW under a previous agreement reached in October, which India has yet to approve. Officials emphasized that the deal reflects India's continued engagement with Nepal under its "Neighborhood First" policy, despite earlier speculation of political tensions impacting power cooperation. [The Kathmandu Post]

India-US trade deal talks make headway amid looming tariff concerns

(lm/wyn/hjn) India is intensifying its efforts to engage the United States in trade negotiations, aiming to avoid being included in Washington's upcoming reciprocal tariffs. These talks, which focus on expanding trade between the two nations, are expected to help elevate bilateral trade to USD 500 billion by 2030 and finalize the first phase of the trade deal by autumn 2025. A key component of these negotiations is India's campaign to

win favor with U.S. President Donald Trump, which includes offering policy concessions to boost U.S. exports and investment. [Reuters 1]

At the center of these developments, India is considering scrapping its import tax on U.S. liquefied natural gas (LNG) to expand energy imports and reduce the country's trade surplus with the United States, which stood at USD 45.4 billion last year. U.S. LNG currently accounts for around 20 to 25 percent of India's imports of 27 to 28 million metric tons annually, driven by long-term agreements with state-owned GAIL. Indian firms including GAIL, Indian Oil, and Bharat Petroleum are now in talks with U.S. suppliers for additional long-term LNG sourcing. Officials say that tax-free access for U.S. LNG—similar to deals India has with the UAE and Australia—would make American energy more price-competitive and help rebalance trade.

Beyond energy, India has pledged to raise defense purchases from Washington, potentially making the U.S. its top supplier of oil, gas, and defense equipment. President Trump also indicated plans to pave the way for India's acquisition of F-35 stealth fighter jets. These commitments build on agreements made during recent meetings between Trump and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

India is also rolling back barriers for U.S. companies in the digital and consumer goods sectors. From April 1, New Delhi will eliminate its six percent digital services tax, which had applied to firms like Google, Amazon, and Meta. Tariffs on bourbon whiskey were reduced from 150 percent to 100 percent, and duties on luxury cars, solar cells, and machinery were cut in the February budget. Although the effective rate remains unchanged due to a domestic surcharge called the Agriculture Infrastructure Development Cess (AIDC), India has signaled a willingness to phase it out as trade talks progress. [Mint] [Hindustan Times] [Reuters 1] [Reuters 2]

Despite these advances in cooperation, India faces challenges in the trade talks. Bilateral farm trade, which is relatively modest at just USD 8 billion, remains a sticking point. U.S. officials have repeatedly urged India to open its agricultural market, including pushing for greater access to products like wheat, cotton, corn, and maize. However, India has fiercely protected its agricultural sector, citing food security concerns and the livelihoods of millions of small farmers

Experts point out that U.S. agricultural practices, which are heavily subsidized, create an uneven playing field for Indian farmers, who rely on intensive, subsistence

farming. India's agriculture sector faces its own internal challenges, such as underfunded infrastructure and low productivity due to small landholdings. These issues complicate any efforts to open up the sector to increased imports from the U.S., which provides significant subsidies to its own agricultural sector, often exceeding 100 percent of production costs. [BBC]

Even as India seeks to balance its domestic agricultural policies with U.S. trade demands, the Global Trade Research Initiative (GTRI) has cautioned that the absence of U.S. Fast Track Trade Authority could expose any finalized deal to congressional scrutiny and potential amendments. The mechanism, which once allowed U.S. presidents to present trade agreements for a simple up-or-down vote, lapsed in 2021 and has not been renewed. Moreover, GTRI raised concerns about the U.S. certification process, under which agreements only take effect once the U.S. unilaterally certifies that its partner has fulfilled all obligations. Historically, this has been used to pressure countries into making additional legal and policy changes, posing a risk to India's policy autonomy. [Outlook Business]

India accused of interference in Canada's Conservative Party leadership race

(lm) India has been accused of meddling in Canada's 2022 Conservative Party leadership race by supporting Pierre Poilievre through covert involvement in fundraising and mobilization within South Asian communities, according to a report by The Globe and Mail citing a top-level security source. There is no evidence that Poilievre or his team were aware of the alleged interference, and Canadian intelligence agents found no indication that the outcome—Poilievre's victory with 68 percent of the vote—was influenced.

The allegations are part of a broader pattern of suspected attempts by Indian agents to influence Canadian politicians across party lines. Poilievre, who has refused to receive security clearance, argued that the secrecy involved would prevent him from speaking openly about national issues. He described the process as politicized and defended his right to transparency.

Simultaneously, the Liberal Party has faced scrutiny for blocking the leadership bid of MP Chandra Arya over alleged foreign-interference concerns linked to India. Arya, who denies the allegations, attributes the decision to his vocal opposition to Khalistani extremism and advocacy for Hindu Canadian issues.

Foreign interference, including from India, China, and Russia, has emerged as a growing issue in Canadian politics. A 2023 public inquiry concluded that while such interference attempts in Canada's recent elections were troubling, they had minimal impact on results. However, the report warned of an existential threat posed by AI-driven disinformation and influence campaigns targeting diaspora communities. With Canada's federal election approaching in April, officials have cautioned that the government will likely respond more actively to potential foreign meddling. [BBC]

Indian state firms seek USD 600 million stake in Chilean SQM's Australian lithium projects

(wyn) India's state-backed Khanij Bidesh India Ltd (KABIL) and three major public-sector enterprises—Coal India, Oil India, and ONGC Videsh—are in advanced talks to acquire a 20 percent stake in two lithium projects operated by Chilean mining giant SQM in Australia, according to unnamed sources. The proposed investment, valued at USD 600 million, would mark India's most ambitious attempt to secure overseas lithium supplies critical for electric vehicle (EV) battery production.

The projects under consideration are SQM's Mount Holland and Andover lithium ventures in Western Australia. Due diligence is reportedly ongoing, and the Indian consortium is in the process of appointing a mergers and acquisitions adviser. SQM is the world's second-largest lithium producer.

India, the world's fastest-growing major economy and the third-largest carbon emitter, has intensified its efforts to secure critical minerals from abroad to support its transition to clean energy. KABIL, a joint venture formed by National Aluminium Company, Hindustan Copper, and Mineral Exploration Corporation Limited, was established specifically to acquire and process strategic minerals abroad.

The bid comes amid growing demand for lithium in India, driven by the government's push to scale up EV production. Although EVs comprised only 2.5 percent of total car sales in 2024, their growth far outpaced the broader automotive market. Sales are projected to double in 2025 from 100,000 units last year due to expanded model offerings.

In parallel efforts, KABIL recently signed an agreement with a state-run firm in Argentina to explore five

lithium blocks and is also eyeing deals in cobalt-rich Congo. [Reuters]

Indonesia seeks China's assistance in sea wall project

(th) During a visit to China on March 26, Senior Minister Agus Harimurti Yudhoyono requested Chinese Vice Premier Ding Xuesxiang's assistance in funding Indonesia's giant sea wall project, aimed at protecting Jakarta from flooding.

The project entails the construction of a 700 kilometer sea wall extending from Banten to Gresik in East Java. This initiative has been identified as one of the 77 "national strategic projects" for the period 2025-2029.

Yudhoyono suggested that China's expertise in large-scale engineering projects, such as Shanghai's flood control system and Tianjin's coastal management initiative could enhance Indonesia's understanding of flood management systems. He expressed hope for China's provision of technical assistance and financial support for the project's implementation.

Yudhoyono also acknowledged the significant cost of constructing the sea wall, indicating that the Indonesian government would consider both state funding and private investments, domestic and foreign, for its realization. [Jakarta Globe]

Indonesia repatriates citizens deported from Philippines over online scam allegations

(dql) Indonesian police facilitated the return of 29 citizens deported from the Philippines for alleged involvement in an online scam and gambling syndicate. The individuals were linked to a criminal network operating from Kanlaon Tower in Pasay City, Manila, according to Brig. Gen. Untung Widyatmoko of the Indonesian NCB Interpol.

Philippine authorities arrested them for crimes related to online gambling and scams. Indonesian officials, in coordination with the country's embassy in Manila, repatriated them just before midnight on March 29.

This follows Indonesia's recent repatriation of hundreds of citizens trafficked into online scam operations in Myanmar, with assistance from Chinese

and Thai authorities. Between 2020 and 2023, over 4,700 Indonesians were rescued from transnational cybercrime syndicates in Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. [Jakarta Globe]

French President Macron to visit Indonesia in May

(th) Foreign Affairs Minister Sugiono and French Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs Jean-Noel Barrot confirmed that French President Emmanuel Macron will make a state visit to Indonesia in May 2025.

Macron's planned visit was discussed during the bilateral meeting in Jakarta on March 26. According to a joint press statement by Sugiono, the two ministers discussed preparations for the visit and priority steps to enhance relations between the two countries.

Macron conveyed his intention to visit Indonesia during his meeting with Indonesia's Minister of Communication and Digital Affairs Meutya Hafid at the AI Action Summit in Paris back in February 2024. [Antara] [Jakarta Globe 1] [Kementerian Luar Negeri Republik Indonesia]

Macron to announce French investments in Indonesia

French President Emmanuel Macron is set to announce several investment deals during his May 2025 visit to Indonesia.

According to Barrot, French companies will invest in food production, transportation, digital technology, and critical minerals. Sugiono, for his part, stated that the parties agreed to increase investment in various sectors, including renewable energy, creative economy, green infrastructure, among others.

Mining giant Eramet and food company Danone are currently some of the major French investors in Indonesia. Amid these investments, Indonesia's trade with France has been slowing down, according to official figures. In 2023, Indonesia-France trade totaled nearly USD 2.6 billion. This fell to USD 182.1 million in the first month of 2025. [Jakarta Globe 2]

Enhance defense ties

Furthermore, Sugiono and Barrot reached an agreement to further enhance bilateral ties in the defense sector.

At a joint press conference on March 26, Sugiono said that this vision is reflected in the recent decision of the National Assembly of France to ratify a defense cooperation agreement with Indonesia. The minister emphasized the need for Indonesia to collaborate with France in maritime security-related activities, as it would bring stability, peace, and prosperity to the Indo-Pacific region.

Sugiono added that the governments of Indonesia and France agree on the need to organize dialogues on regional and global issues between their foreign affairs and defense ministers.

Earlier on March 21, French Minister of the Armed Forces, Sebastien Lecornu, confirmed on social media platform X that the French National Assembly ratified France's defense cooperation agreement with Indonesia. He also expressed confidence that France will elevate its bilateral defense relations with Indonesia, aligning with its commitment to contributing to efforts aimed at maintaining stability and security in the Indo-Pacific region. [Antara]

Indonesia, UK discuss transport, education cooperation success

(th) Jakarta Governor Pramono Anung hosted United Kingdom Ambassador to Indonesia, Dominic Jermey at Jakarta Town Hall on March 26 to discuss potential cooperation in transportation and education.

During their discussion, Pramono acknowledged the substantial contributions of British stakeholders in aiding Jakarta's transportation advancements, encompassing both investments and technology transfers. He detailed ongoing plans for the introduction of electric buses and initiatives to improve the Mass Rapid Transit and Light Rail Transit train networks.

Pramono also discussed the education sector, noting the UK's continued popularity as a destination for Indonesian students. He conveyed his administration's strong desire to collaborate with the UK government to facilitate more Jakarta residents studying in the UK, with a specific focus on developing skills crucial for the digital economy. He voiced his anticipation for increased involvement from UK educational institutions and organizations in programs aimed at enhancing Jakarta's human resources, as the city increases it student placements in the country. [Antara]

Japan demands exemption from U.S. auto tariffs

(dql) Japan has formally requested an exemption from the U.S. auto tariffs, calling the decision to impose a 25 percent levy on imported vehicles "extremely regrettable." Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshimasa Hayashi stated on March 27 that Tokyo had strongly urged Washington to reconsider, emphasizing the potential negative impact on bilateral economic ties, the global economy, and the multilateral trading system.

Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba instructed relevant ministers to coordinate efforts in response. Industry Minister Yoji Muto reiterated Japan's opposition, following a similar appeal made during his visit to the U.S. earlier in the month (see AiR No. 11, March/2025, 3).

U.S. President Donald Trump announced the tariff hike on March 26, set to take effect on April 3, without exemptions. [The White House, USA]

The move is expected to disrupt global supply chains and significantly impact Japanese automakers, whose exports to the U.S. constitute a major portion of Japan's trade with its largest economic partner. Hayashi highlighted the substantial contributions of Japanese automakers to the U.S. economy, citing USD 61.6 billion in direct investment and the creation of approximately 2.3 million jobs. Despite these efforts, Japan's bid for preferential treatment has so far been unsuccessful.

In response, ruling Liberal Democratic Party policy chief Itsunori Onodera urged U.S. Charge d'Affaires Joseph Young to convey Japan's concerns to Washington. Meanwhile, Vice Foreign Minister Takehiro Funakoshi told his U.S. counterpart, Christopher Landau, that Japan intends to continue negotiations over the issue. [Kyodo News]

Japanese, U.S. defense chiefs reaffirm alliance amid security and trade strains

(adi) Japanese Defense Minister Gen Nakatani held bilateral talks with visiting U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth in Tokyo on March 30, with both sides reaffirming their commitment to reinforcing defense capabilities of their respective countries and further

strengthening the Alliance capabilities amid an "increasingly severe and complex security environment." [Ministry of Defense, Japan] [Kyodo News]

Hegseth emphasized Japan's role as an "indispensable partner" in the Indo-Pacific and confirmed the launch of the "phase one" realignment of U.S. military command in Japan. The upgrade is intended to bolster coordination with Japan's Self-Defense Forces, allowing for a more integrated response to China's growing military assertiveness.

Hegseth added that plans are underway to transform the current U.S. Forces Japan into "war-fighting" headquarters, in line with broader security cooperation objectives, welcoming the recent establishment of Japan's Joint Operations Command, responsible for commanding branches of the Japan Self-Defense Forces (see AiR No. 12, March/2025, 4). [Department of Defense, USA]

"We are going to put America first," Hegseth stated during a joint press event. "But 'America First' does not mean America alone." The remark sought to assuage concerns about Washington's commitment to regional security under President Donald Trump's administration.

The defense chiefs also discussed broader regional issues, including North Korea's missile program and maritime security in the East and South China Seas. [The Japan Times] [Financial Times]

The meeting took place days after Trump's announcement of imposing a 25 percent tariff on auto imports, a move expected to significantly affect Japan's export-driven economy, with nearly one-third of the country's exports being autos or in related sectors. [DW]

Business sentiment among Japan's major manufacturers fell to a one-year low in the first quarter of 2025, reflecting the impact of escalating trade tensions on the export-driven economy, according to the Bank of Japan's quarterly *tankan* survey. In contrast, sentiment among large non-manufacturers reached its highest level since 1991, buoyed by strong inbound tourism and successful cost pass-through via price hikes.

Despite this divergence, both manufacturers and service-sector firms anticipate stagnation or deterioration in the coming months due to weak global demand, rising costs, and uncertainty over U.S. tariffs. The survey, conducted before U.S. President Donald

Trump's recent tariff announcement on auto imports, underscores the external pressures complicating the Bank of Japan's interest rate decisions. [CNA]

Neither the Japanese defense ministry's nor the U.S. Department of Defense's readout of the meeting mentioned the trade issue.

Italy likely to purchase Japanese maritime patrol aircraft

(dql) Italian Air Force chief Luca Goretti confirmed that Italy is considering acquiring Japan's Kawasaki P-1 maritime patrol aircraft to enhance its anti-submarine warfare capabilities in the Mediterranean. This reflects a departure from Rome's traditional reliance on U.S. aircraft and growing ties with Japan.

Designed specifically for maritime patrol, the four-engine P-1 has been in service in Japan since 2013, with 33 aircraft currently operated by the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force.

Since retiring its Atlantique patrol planes in 2017, Italy has relied on ATR 72s built by Airbus and Leonardo, which, while equipped with electronically scanned radar, lack anti-submarine warfare capabilities and were only intended as an interim solution. A new purchase comes amid increased naval activity in the Mediterranean.

Choosing the P-1 over the U.S. P-8 would continue Italy's recent shift toward greater defense cooperation with Japan. The two nations, along with the U.K., are collaborating on the GCAP sixth-generation fighter program. In 2023, Leonardo also pitched its M-346 jet trainer to replace Japan's Kawasaki T-4, following Japanese pilot training on the M-346 in Italy. [IAI]

On March 13, Goretti told the Italian parliament that cooperation on the GCAP program had spurred discussions on further joint projects, including a trainer for Japan and a potential joint patrol aircraft. His remarks suggest a possible reciprocal deal, similar to Italy's 2012 agreement with Israel, in which it sold M-346 trainers in exchange for Israeli surveillance aircraft and a satellite. [Defense News]

Japan provides medical treatment of injured Palestinians from Gaza

(dql) Japanese Defense Minister Gen Nakatani has announced that Japan has begun accepting injured Palestinians from Gaza for medical treatment in coordination with the World Health Organization and Egypt. This marks Japan's first such initiative since Israel's large-scale attacks began in October 2023.

Two women, previously hospitalized in Egypt, will receive care in Japan. The first arrived at the Self-Defense Forces Central Hospital in Tokyo on March 26. The second is expected to arrive soon.

Japan's foreign ministry emphasized that the initiative is strictly for medical treatment, not relocation, with Nakatani reaffirming Japan's commitment to both urgent humanitarian aid and long-term reconstruction efforts in Gaza. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan] [Kyodo News]

Japan, Brazil launch five-year action plan to deepen bilateral ties

(adi) Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba and Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva agreed to strengthen bilateral relations through a new five-year action plan, pledging cooperation in trade, economic security, and diplomacy. The agreement was reached during Lula's visit to Tokyo, marking the first trip to Japan by a foreign leader since 2019. [Prime Minister's Office, Japan]

The action plan includes commitments to hold regular summits, develop resilient supply chains, and institutionalize foreign and defense policy dialogues. The two leaders also witnessed the signing of 84 memorandums of understanding between government agencies and businesses. [CNBC]

Ishiba noted that Japanese investment in Brazil is projected to reach JPY 1.3 trillion (approximately USD 8.65 billion) since 2024, underscoring growing economic ties. Lula, accompanied by around 80 Brazilian business leaders called for launching negotiations on a trade agreement between Japan and Mercosur in the second half of 2025, coinciding with Brazil's chairmanship of the South American bloc. [Prime Minister's Office, Japan]

The visit, held during the 130th anniversary of diplomatic ties between the two countries, reflects mutual efforts to diversify trade amid shifting global dynamics. Brazil, seeking to reduce reliance on the United States and China, aims to expand ties with Japan to balance its international trade portfolio. Brazil

has the world's largest Japanese diaspora, a legacy of mass migration in the early 20th century. In the 2024, Lula's government issued a historic apology for its persecution of Japanese immigrants during and after World War II. [France 24]

Japan, meanwhile, views Brazil as a key partner in the Global South, citing shared commitments to democracy, multilateralism, and free trade. Lula's role as host of this year's United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP30) further elevates Brazil's position in global governance, reinforcing its strategic importance to Tokyo. [Asahi Shimbun]

Laos and China strengthen strategic partnership at Boao Forum

(tas) Lao Prime Minister Sonexay Siphandone and Chinese Vice Premier Ding Xuexiang reaffirmed their commitment to deepening political, economic, and security cooperation during their meeting at the Boao Forum for Asia 2025 in Hainan, China.

The leaders praised the progress of the 2025 Action Plan for the Laos-China Community of Shared Future, particularly in trade, investment, and infrastructure, with a focus on further developing the Laos-China Railway. Prime Minister Sonexay acknowledged China's support in addressing Laos' economic challenges and its role in ASEAN, while Vice Premier Ding emphasized continued collaboration under the strategic partnership framework. Both sides also highlighted the significance of the Global Security Initiative in promoting regional stability and development. [Vientiane Times]

Laos and Vietnam deepen ties ahead of Vietnamese president's visit

(tas) Laos' Minister of Foreign Affairs, Thongsavanh Phomvihane, welcomed Nguyen Manh Cuong, Vietnam's newly appointed Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, during a visit to Laos to prepare for the official state visit of Vietnamese President Luong Cuong on April 8-9, 2025.

Both sides praised the special solidarity and comprehensive cooperation between Laos and Vietnam, highlighting recent high-level exchanges and annual Politburo meetings that reinforce their unique diplomatic relationship. Discussions also focused on

future collaboration and strengthening coordination between their foreign ministries. [Lao News Agency]

Laos and Vietnam strengthen defense cooperation at Policy Dialogue

(tas) Vietnamese Deputy Defence Minister Senior Lieutenant General Hoang Xuan Chien and his Lao counterpart, Senior Lieutenant General Vongkham Phommakone, co-chaired the 5th Vietnam–Laos Defense Policy Dialogue in Luang Prabang on March 28. The two sides discussed regional security, reaffirmed their commitment to ASEAN-led mechanisms, and emphasized the need for cooperation on border security, military training, and UN peacekeeping. [Lao News Agency]

Also, during a working session in Hanoi on March 31, Lieutenant General Vanthong Bouttavong, Deputy Chief of the General Staff of the Lao People's Army, expressed Laos' interest in learning from Vietnam's expertise in operating within international environments and UN missions. Major General Pham Manh Thang, Director of Vietnam's Department of Peacekeeping Operations, affirmed Vietnam's readiness to share its knowledge and support Laos in building a capable peacekeeping force. [Lao News Agency]

France extends support for gender equality projects in Laos

(dql) 11 Lao civil society organizations will receive funding under the French small grants program Equipe France Fund – Civil Society Organizations (FEF-OSC) for 2025 after French Ambassador to Laos Siv-Leng Chhuor signed related grant agreements on March 27. This marks the second and final phase of the 2024-2025 program, which has allocated over USD 500,000 to support 19 projects promoting gender equality. Since 2010, the French Embassy has funded 82 projects in Laos, totaling more than USD 3 million.

The 11 selected projects for 2025 will be implemented across eight provinces: Bokeo, Salavanh, Vientiane, Savannakhet, Phongsaly, Champasack, Luang Prabang, and Khammouane. [The Laotian Times]

Malaysia deploys disaster response teams to aid Myanmar earthquake relief

(tl) Malaysia will contribute MYR 10 million (USD 2.25 million) in humanitarian aid to support those impacted by the earthquake in Myanmar, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim announced on March 30. Malaysian Foreign Minister Mohamad Hasan will also soon embark on a humanitarian mission to Myanmar following the devastating 7.7-magnitude earthquake. His visit aims to coordinate further aid efforts based on urgent needs on the ground.

As the 2025 ASEAN Chair, Malaysia convened a special emergency ASEAN Foreign Ministers' meeting to address the crisis. During the meeting, Mohamad reaffirmed ASEAN's commitment to providing immediate humanitarian assistance and called on the international community to collaborate through the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre) to ensure efficient aid delivery.

Malaysia has already dispatched two Royal Malaysian Air Force aircraft carrying 50 SMART personnel and essential equipment to assist search and rescue efforts in Myanmar. ASEAN's Emergency Response and Assessment Team (ERAT) is also prepared for deployment.

Mohamad urged all parties in Myanmar to cease hostilities to allow humanitarian aid to reach those in need safely. He also emphasized ASEAN's commitment to supporting Myanmar's recovery and called for unity in rebuilding efforts. [Malaymail 1] [Malaymail 2]

Chinese President Xi Jinping to visit Malaysia in mid-April

(tl) Chinese President Xi Jinping is set to visit Malaysia in mid-April as part of a three-country Southeast Asian tour, following a meeting with Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim last November. The visit is expected to strengthen bilateral ties between the two nations, with Malaysia aiming to attract more Chinese investment.

This marks Xi's first foreign trip of 2025, as part of China's efforts to reinforce its role as a regional partner amidst growing US influence in Southeast Asia. [Malaymail]

Malaysia, Thailand strengthen agricultural trade and food security cooperation

(ga) Malaysia and Thailand are strengthening cooperation in agricultural trade and food security, focusing on market access and trade facilitation. Thai Trade Representative Chai Wacharonke reaffirmed this commitment during a courtesy call on Malaysia's Agriculture and Food Security Minister Mohamad Sabu on March 24 in Putrajaya, Malaysia. Discussions included Malaysia's request for market access to Thailand for white shrimp, chilled sea bass, chicken feet, and offal, with Thailand set to review the applications.

Malaysia also sought information on transit conditions for plant-based products transported to China via the ASEAN Express cargo train passing through Thailand, requesting facilitation from Thai authorities. Additionally, Malaysia confirmed its participation in the THAIFEX – Anuga Asia trade expo in Bangkok this May.

Thailand, a key trading partner, recorded an agricultural trade value of MYR 20.96 billion (USD 4.73 billion) with Malaysia in 2024. [Malaysia's Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security]

Maldivian population in Sri Lanka drops sharply amid visa restrictions and diplomatic concerns

(lm) The number of Maldivians residing in Sri Lanka has reportedly plummeted from over 8,000 in 2019 to just 1,280 in 2025, according to a Sri Lanka Guardian report. Maldivian officials attribute the decline to increasingly restrictive Sri Lankan visa policies, including the reduction of on-arrival visa validity to six months, and what they describe as growing institutional hostility.

The report highlights concerns over Sri Lanka's treatment of Maldivians, including the perception that Maldivians are viewed as a security concern. Maldivian officials argue that such policies strain longstanding diplomatic and economic ties, pointing to the Maldives' past support during crises, such as helping SriLankan Airlines retain its European routes. Many Maldivians are now relocating to India and Malaysia instead. [the edition]

Mongolian parliament ratifies cross-border railway project with China

(fs) Mongolia's Parliament has ratified an agreement with China to develop the Gashuunsukhait-Ganzmod cross-border railway, expand coal trade, and increase Tavan Tolgoi mine capacity. Construction is set to begin in May 2025, with completion expected in 2027.

Under the deal, Mongolia plans to export 27 million tons of coal to China from 2025 to 2029, increasing to 20 million tons annually from 2030 onward. [Bloomberg TV]

Once operational, the new railway is expected to double Mongolia's port capacity, increasing coal exports from 83 million to 165 million tons annually and boosting coal revenue by USD 1.5 billion per year. (see Asia in Review No. 7, February/2025, 3)

Mongolia, China discuss cooperation on desertification ahead of COP17

(fs) Mongolia's Minister of Environment and Climate Change Odontuya Saldan met with Chinese Ambassador to Mongolia Shen Minjuan on March 26 to discuss cooperation on desertification and preparations for the Conference of the Parties (COP) 17 of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), which Mongolia will host in 2026.

Saldan outlined Mongolia's preparation plan and proposed policies and initiatives for the conference. Shen emphasized China's experience from hosting COP13 in 2017 and expressed China's willingness to support Mongolia. [Montsame]

The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification is the only legally binding international treaty that focuses on addressing desertification, land degradation, and drought. It was adopted in 1994 and entered into force in 1996, aiming to promote sustainable land management and restore degraded ecosystems.

Mongolia, South Korea reaffirm commitment to strengthening strategic partnership

(fs) Mongolian Prime Minister Luvsannamsrai Oyun-Erdene met with South Korean Ambassador to Mongolia Choi Jin-won on March 26 to commemorate the 35th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two countries.

Oyun-Erdene highlighted the steady expansion of bilateral cooperation across various sectors since 1990, underscoring South Korea's role as Mongolia's key third neighbor.

He called for enhanced trade and investment, urging progress on major joint initiatives, including the Solongo Affordable Housing Complex and the Heating System Improvement Project. He also emphasized the need to strengthen protections for Mongolian citizens in South Korea and improve travel facilitation. [GoGo]

Jin-won reaffirmed South Korea's commitment to advance key projects in urban development, mining, and energy. He also welcomed progress in negotiations for an Economic Partnership Agreement and highlighted cooperation in rare earth metals research, for which a Joint Committe was held in March 12. (see Asia in Review No. 11, March/2025, 3) [Montsame 1]

In a separate development, Mongolia is set to implement the Youth Employment Promotion Project (YEPP) to enhance youth employment opportunities with support from the Government of South Korea.

The initiative aims to address challenges faced by young Mongolians in entering the labor market, focusing on human resource policies, productivity, and workplace management. The project will be piloted in the wool, cashmere, and hospitality sectors.

It will be carried out in collaboration with Mongolian ministries, industry associations, vocational institutions, and South Korean organizations, including the Korea Labor and Employment Service (KLES) and the Korea Employment Information Service (KEIS). [Montsame 2]

Mongolia, Japan discuss strengthening bilateral cooperation

(fs) Mongolia's Foreign Minister Battsetseg Batmunkh met with Japanese Ambassador Igawahara Masaru on March 25 to discuss bilateral relations.

Igawahara reaffirmed Japan's commitment to deepening high-level political dialogue, strengthening

economic and investment projects, and expanding cooperation in education, culture, public engagement, and local partnerships. [Montsame]

Batmunkh expressed appreciation for the Ambassador's support in facilitating her official visit to Japan that took place at the beginning of March, emphasizing its productive outcomes. (see Asia in Review No. 9, March/2025, 1)

Mongolia, Qatar discuss strengthening bilateral cooperation

(fs) Non-resident Ambassador of Mongolia to Qatar Sergelen Purev met with Minister of State at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Qatar Mohammed bin Abdulaziz bin Saleh Al Khulaifi on March 26.

During the meeting, both officials discussed bilateral cooperation and explored ways to enhance relations between the two countries. [Gulf Times]

Mongolia, Bulgaria to expand economic cooperation

(fs) Mongolia's Ambassador to Bulgaria Sayanaa Lkhagvasuren and Bulgaria's Economy and Industry Minister Petar Dilov discussed ways to enhance bilateral economic cooperation between the two countries on March 27.

Areas identified for strengthening trade and investment include mining, agriculture, food industry, transport, and small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) partnerships.

Dilov noted that current economic cooperation does not fully reflect the potential of the two nations' strong political ties and reaffirmed Bulgaria's commitment to fostering EU-Mongolia relations.

The meeting also emphasized the importance of the Mongolian-Bulgarian Intergovernmental Commission on Trade, Economic, and Scientific-Technical Cooperation as a key mechanism for advancing relations. Both sides discussed the possibility of holding the Commission's next session later this year to outline concrete steps for deeper collaboration. [Bulgarian News Agency]

Mongolia, Slovenia discuss strengthening parliamentary and economic cooperation

(fs) Mongolian Member of Parliament Tuvshin Banzragch, Head of the Mongolia-Slovenia Parliamentary Friendship Group, held a virtual meeting with Slovenian National Assembly Member Suzana Lep Simenko, Head of the Slovenia-Mongolia Parliamentary Friendship Group, on March 25.

The meeting was also attended by Mongolian MPs Soronzonbold Lkhagvasuren and Ochirbat Ganbat, along with Slovenian parliamentary representatives.

The two sides explored opportunities for economic and legal cooperation, particularly in agriculture, tourism, crop production, and forestry. They agreed to hold further discussions involving relevant parliamentary committees and ministries to ensure concrete outcomes. [Montsame]

Mongolia, Sweden strengthen inter-parliamentary cooperation

(fs) Member of Parliament of Mongolia and Head of the Mongolia-Sweden Parliamentary Friendship Group Uuriintuya Dorjsuren held a virtual meeting with Head of the Sweden-Mongolia Parliamentary Friendship Group and Swedish MP Markus Wiechel on March 28 to discuss strengthening bilateral relations.

Dorjsuren expressed appreciation for Sweden's efforts in establishing the parliamentary friendship group and emphasized the importance of expanding cooperation with Sweden, a key European partner for Mongolia, highlighting the need for closer inter-parliamentary collaboration.

Wiechel noted that the Sweden-Mongolia Parliamentary Friendship Group includes representatives from six of Sweden's eight political parties and expressed confidence in advancing joint initiatives to enhance cooperation. [Akipress]

DMD condemns Thailand's invitation of Myanmar junta leader to BIMSTEC summit

(anl) Defend Myanmar Democracy (DMD) has condemned the Thai government's reported decision to invite Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, leader of Myanmar's military junta, to the BIMSTEC (Bay of

Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation) summit on April 3–4 in Bangkok.

DMD criticized Thailand for legitimizing Min Aung Hlaing despite his role in war crimes, mass killings, airstrikes on civilians, and dismantling Myanmar's democratic system—actions widely condemned by both the Myanmar people and the international community.

While ASEAN has barred him from its summits, BIMSTEC has continued to engage with the junta, even allowing him to sign its Charter in 2022.

DMD called on Thailand to respect the Argentinian court's ruling under universal jurisdiction and arrest him for his role in the Rohingya genocide. DMD urges BIMSTEC and its member states to reject the junta and bar Min Aung Hlaing and his representatives from the summit. [Mizzima]

Myanmar junta releases four Thai fishermen ahead of BIMSTEC summit

(hw) Thailand's Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra confirmed that Myanmar's military had released four Thai fishermen who had been imprisoned in Myanmar. The release came just days before the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) summit, which will be held in Bangkok from April 3 to 4. Myanmar's military commander, Senior-General Min Aung Hlaing, is set to attend in his capacities as Acting President and Prime Minister of Myanmar.

The four fishermen were arrested on November 30, 2024, when Myanmar Navy vessels fired on two Thai fishing boats and detained 31 fishermen—four Thai nationals and 27 Myanmar nationals. They were initially sentenced to four to six years in prison for trespassing and illegal fishing in Myanmar's waters.

In addition to the Thai fishermen, three Philippine nationals were also released and subsequently exiled. [DVB, in Burmese]

U.S. Intelligence warns North Korea will not abandon nuclear ambitions

(mm) A U.S. intelligence threat report has determined that North Korean leader Kim Jong-un has no intention

of abandoning his nuclear weapons program, viewing it as essential for regime stability and diplomatic leverage. The report states that Pyongyang seeks at least "tacit" recognition as a nuclear power and is likely prepared to conduct another nuclear test on short notice. [Office, Director of National Intelligence, USA]

Both the U.S. and South Korea believe a seventh nuclear test is imminent, while the report highlights Russia's growing support for North Korea's nuclear ambitions in exchange for Pyongyang's military aid in Ukraine.

The assessment comes as U.S. President Donald Trump signals openness to resuming dialogue with Kim, with speculation that Trump's focus may be shifting from complete denuclearization of North Korea to reducing threats from Pyongyang. [The Korea Times]

Meanwhile, U.S. President Donald Trump stated March 31 that his administration maintained communication with North Korea, describing it as a "big nuclear nation" and suggesting he may engage with Pyongyang again. Responding to a question about reaching out to North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, Trump emphasized the importance of dialogue, noting, "We have a great relationship...He's a smart guy. I've got to know him very well."

Trump was the first U.S. president to meet with a North Korean leader, holding three summits with Kim between 2018 and 2019. However, negotiations ultimately stalled. Under the Biden administration, the U.S. made no significant progress in curbing North Korea's missile and nuclear programs, despite calls for unconditional dialogue. [Kyodo News]

As North Korea strengthens military ties with Russia (see article below), speculation grows that Trump, may seek to revive talks without insisting on the full dismantlement of Pyongyang's nuclear arsenal. However, North Korea has shown little interest in engaging with the U.S., and it remains unclear if Trump's remarks signal a shift in Washington's longstanding stance on North Korea's nuclear status.

North Korean leader Kim Jong-un prepares for upcoming visit to Russia as bilateral relationship intensifies

(fn/mm) Preparations are underway for North Korean leader Kim Jong-un's visit to Russia later this year, with discussions being spearheaded by Russian officials,

including Deputy Foreign Minister Andrey Rudenko. While the timing remains uncertain, the trip will mark Kim's third journey to Russia and comes after series of high-level exchanges, including the recent visit of Russian Security Council Secretary Sergei Shoigu to Pyongyang (see AiR No. 12, March/2025, 4). The trip is the latest development in deepening North Korea-Russia ties since Kim and Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a 2024 mutual defense treaty (see AiR No. 26, June/2024, 4), which has expanded military and economic cooperation and led to North Korean troop deployments to Russia. [Yonhap News Agency 1] [Yonhap News Agency 2] [KBS World]

Last week reinforced Moscow as Pyongyang's diplomatic priority. Reports revealed that between January and February, North Korea sent another 3,000 soldiers to support Russia's war in Ukraine, bringing total troop deployments to 14,000 since 2024. Diplomatic and technological cooperation also saw progress. Russia confirmed ongoing support for North Korean medical internships in Moscow and efforts to modernize Pyongyang's pharmaceutical industry, including the production of antibiotics. Talks have also included establishing new medical institutions in North Korea. [The Korea Times] [Korea JoongAng Daily 1]

Acting President and Prime Minister Han Duck-soo condemned North Korea's illegal arms trade with Russia, stating that the alliance has allowed the "degenerate regime" to plan new provocations on the Korean Peninsula. South Korea's Unification Ministry suggests that Russia is fuelling Pyongyang's recent acceleration of infrastructure projects, including hospitals and industrial factories. Officials estimate the alliance could bring North Korea up to USD 3 billion in economic benefits—roughly 30 percent of its annual budget. [The Korea Herald]

Despite international sanctions, North Korea's growing military, economic, and diplomatic ties with Russia are becoming increasingly significant. This week President Putin has named North Korea as one of the countries he is open to working with to resolve the war in Ukraine, alongside China, the United States, and BRICS nations. [Korea JoongAng Daily 2] [Yonhap News Agency]

In latest news, a delegation from Russia's Communist Party, led by Central Committee Secretary Kazbek Taysaev, arrived in North Korea on March 31, according to Pyongyang's state media. No further details on the visit's purpose were disclosed. [Yonhap News Agency 3]

Bangladesh, Pakistan look to strengthen trade and cultural relations

(sn) Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Bangladesh Chief Adviser Dr. Muhammad Yunus have resolved to strengthen trade and cultural relations between their countries. The resolution follows a recent telephonic conversation on Eid Al-Fitr, where they recalled productive discussions in New York and Cairo during the 2024 United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) and D-8 summits.

Sharif expressed satisfaction with the positive momentum in bilateral relations, particularly in trade and travel. The leaders reaffirmed their shared goal to further improve ties, with Sharif emphasizing the upcoming visit of Pakistan's Deputy Prime Minister/Foreign Minister to Dhaka in April, accompanied by a trade delegation.

Since Bangladesh's independence from Pakistan in 1971, the two nations have had a complex relationship, with Bangladesh maintaining closer ties with India, especially under former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. However, relations have improved since Hasina's ouster in August due to a student-led uprising. Pakistan's cargo ships have resumed docking at Bangladesh's Chittagong port for the first time since 1971, and cultural exchanges have been revitalized with Pakistani artists performing in Dhaka and Bangladeshi films screening in Pakistan.

Sharif and Yunus also discussed the exchange of cultural troupes to foster people-to-people contact, with Sharif inviting a Bangladeshi cultural troupe, including artists like the legendary Runa Laila, to visit Pakistan.[Arab News]

Islamabad denies reports of China deploying forces in Pakistan to protect its nationals

(lm/sn) Pakistan's government has refuted media claims about the deployment of Chinese security forces in the country to protect Chinese nationals working on development projects. The Foreign Ministry dismissed these reports as "totally false," clarifying that no such forces have been deployed. Pakistani officials acknowledged the ongoing discussions between the two nations concerning the safety of Chinese personnel, particularly in light of recent terrorist attacks on Chinese nationals. These discussions, which have been taking place for some time, are seen as part

of an effort to bolster security without involving Chinese personnel directly in the country's security operations.

Thousands of Chinese citizens are working on various infrastructure projects under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a key component of China's Belt and Road Initiative. Pakistani officials emphasized that the security of these workers remains a top priority, and that the two countries are working on a joint plan to ensure their safety. [Arab News 1]

In a related context, Pakistan's ambassador to China discussed ongoing measures to improve security and noted that Pakistan's defense capabilities were sufficient to handle these challenges independently, even as Beijing has requested the presence of its own security personnel. However, the ambassador clarified that no agreements had yet been finalized on this issue. [Arab News 2]

Additionally, Pakistan's Finance Minister reaffirmed the importance of investment and technical assistance from China, particularly in sectors such as agriculture, technology, and information. The country is looking to strengthen its economic ties with China through these initiatives, which align with long-standing strategic interests. In this regard, Pakistan also plans to issue Panda bonds in China to raise USD 200 million. These yuan-denominated bonds will be targeted at Chinese institutional investors, offering Pakistan an alternative to Western financing and helping to diversify its funding sources. [Arab News 3] [Arab News 4]

India, Pakistan exchange allegations of mistreatment of minorities

(lm) A recent exchange between Pakistan and India has highlighted ongoing tensions over the treatment of religious minorities in both countries.

The issue escalated when India's Minister of External Affairs, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, accused Pakistan of mistreating its Hindu community, citing 10 alleged cases of "atrocities" against Hindus in February. In response, Pakistan rejected these accusations, emphasizing that India itself has a history of violating minority rights. Islamabad stated that while it actively works to protect minorities, incidents targeting religious groups in India often occur with the approval or complicity of the ruling government. [Arab News 1]

This exchange coincided with the release of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom

(USCIRF) annual report, which evaluates religious freedom conditions in various countries. The commission's its recommendations are non-binding, meaning they do not have the force of law or require action by the U.S. government.

The USCIRF's latest report highlighted deteriorating conditions for religious minorities in both Pakistan and India, suggesting that the situation has worsened over the years. The USCIRF's findings included an appeal for sanctions against Pakistani officials responsible for religious freedom violations, alongside a call to impose sanctions on India's external intelligence agency, RAW, due to its alleged involvement in plots against Sikh separatists.

In Pakistan, religious minorities such as Christians, Hindus, and Shia Muslims continue to face persecution, particularly through the country's strict blasphemy laws. Incidents of mob violence and systemic harassment are frequently reported, but those responsible rarely face legal consequences. The USCIRF recommended that Pakistan be re-designated as a "Country of Particular Concern" (CPC) due to these ongoing violations.

In India, the report documented rising attacks and discrimination against religious minorities, particularly Muslims, citing discriminatory laws and actions by the ruling government. The USCIRF pointed out that Hindu nationalist rhetoric, propagated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), has contributed to an environment of intolerance and violence against minorities. Specific incidents such as the 2002 Gujarat massacre and the 2020 Delhi riots were cited as evidence of state failure to protect minority communities. The commission also criticized the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and anti-conversion laws as challenges to religious freedom. [Arab News 2] [Reuters]

US-Pakistan counter-terrorism cooperation strengthens but trade disputes deepen

(afk) Pakistan and the United States are reinforcing their counter-terrorism partnership while facing growing friction over trade and sanctions. During a high-level meeting in Islamabad, Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi and US Acting Ambassador Natalie Baker confirmed plans for a formal Counter-Terrorism Dialogue to be held in June 2025. The talks follow a recent surge in militant attacks, including the deadly

Jaffar Express train assault in Balochistan, which Baker strongly condemned.

Naqvi assured the US of Pakistan's determined efforts to combat terrorism and outlined the development of a comprehensive national counter-terrorism strategy. The two sides also discussed cooperation on the repatriation of undocumented Pakistani nationals from the US. In addition, preparations were finalized for the Pakistan-US Caucus conference in New York on April 30, aimed at boosting strategic ties. Baker praised Pakistan's development efforts, calling them a sign of growing security and economic cooperation between the two countries. [Arab News 1] [The Express Tribune] [The News International]

Despite these positive developments, relations have been strained by recent US decisions. Pakistan's Foreign Office condemned the US Commerce Department's imposition of export restrictions on 19 Pakistani firms, calling them politically motivated and lacking evidence. The move was part of broader sanctions on 70 companies across five countries. Islamabad warned that such unilateral actions obstruct global trade and hinder socio-economic growth, particularly in developing nations. [Arab News 2]

Separately, tensions were heightened after US Congressman Joe Wilson introduced a bill seeking sanctions on Pakistan's Army Chief General Asim Munir under the Global Magnitsky Act for allegedly undermining democracy and targeting political opponents. Pakistan's Foreign Office dismissed the initiative as unrepresentative of broader US policy, emphasizing that it was the action of a single legislator. Officials highlighted ongoing diplomatic engagement, including the visit of Special Assistant to the Prime Minister Tariq Fatemi to the US, where he met congressional leaders to discuss bilateral cooperation and economic priorities. [Arab News 3]

Azerbaijan economy minister to visit Pakistan to finalize key investment deals

Azerbaijan's Minister of Economy Mikayil Jabbarov is scheduled to visit Pakistan later this week to finalize significant investment agreements between the two countries, according to a statement from Pakistan's Prime Minister's Office. This announcement follows a telephone conversation between Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev on the occasion of Eid Al-Fitr. During their discussion, the two leaders emphasized their

commitment to further strengthening the fraternal ties between Azerbaijan and Pakistan.

The visit is expected to build on the momentum from Sharif's recent trip to Baku, where it was agreed that Azerbaijan would invest in Pakistan, with plans to boost bilateral investments to USD 2 billion. This visit will also lay the groundwork for President Aliyev's expected visit to Islamabad later in April.

Pakistan, which is currently navigating a difficult economic recovery under a USD 7 billion International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout program, is seeking to bolster its economy through increased trade and investment with friendly nations. During Sharif's visit to Baku in February, multiple agreements were signed, covering areas such as trade, energy, tourism, education, and more.

In a significant development last year, Azerbaijan also purchased JF-17 Block III fighter jets from Pakistan in a deal reportedly worth USD 1.6 billion. Both countries have continued to explore new areas of cooperation, having established a joint committee during President Aliyev's visit to Pakistan last year to advance projects in sectors like trade, IT, tourism, telecommunications, and mineral resources. [Arab News]

Denmark's investment in Pakistan's port sector moving forward; key sector collaborations discussed

(sn) Pakistan is making notable strides in enhancing its ports and mining sectors through growing collaboration with Denmark.

This partnership is underscored by Denmark's active involvement, with a USD 2 billion investment in Pakistan's port sector. In response, Pakistan has begun allocating land exclusively for industrial purposes, signaling its commitment to expanding the maritime and industrial landscape. The government has also announced that other existing land allotments will be canceled and sold to investors to streamline the process. [DAWN]

On the mining front, Denmark's FLSmidth has committed to training 100 Pakistani engineers as part of the Bradshaw Research Initiative for Minerals and Mining (BRIMM). The initiative will help Pakistan enhance the efficiency of its mining operations while reducing environmental impacts. FLSmidth has already entered into five agreements with Pakistan, marking the deepening ties between the two nations. During a

meeting with Danish Ambassador to Pakistan Jakob Linulf, Pakistan's Petroleum Minister Ali Pervaiz Malik emphasized the importance of leveraging Danish technology and investment to modernize Pakistan's mining industry.

Both Denmark and Pakistan are also preparing for the Pakistan Minerals Investment Forum, set to take place on April 8-9. Danish companies, including FLSmidth, are expected to explore further opportunities in Pakistan's resource-rich mining sector, aligning with Pakistan's broader goal of stabilizing its economy through foreign partnerships and investment. [Arab News] [The Express Tribune]

Pakistan's national airlines to remain on UK air safety list, decision delayed

(afk) The UK Department for Transport confirmed on March 25 that Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) will remain on the UK Air Safety List, meaning the airline cannot operate commercial flights to or from the UK. This decision follows an incident involving a PIA aircraft, which prompted an investigation by World Air Safety authorities and Airbus. The UK Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) is working closely with Pakistan's authorities on this matter.

The UK Air Safety List includes countries and airlines that are subject to operating bans due to safety concerns. PIA, alongside other Pakistani air carriers, remains on this list. A decision that was expected on March 20 has now been postponed until the investigation is completed.

This air safety restriction stems from a 2020 scandal involving fake pilot licenses, which led to the suspension of PIA flights to the UK, EU, and the US. The ban, which resulted in a loss of around PKR 40 billion (USD 144 million) annually, is still in effect despite progress made in Europe. PIA's resumption of flights to Paris in January 2025 raised hopes that restrictions could be lifted soon for UK operations.

Pakistan is optimistic that the UK authorities will soon clear PIA for flights to London, Manchester, and Birmingham once the investigations are concluded. [The Nation]

Pakistan expresses interest in Russian crude oil, proposes new steel mill

partnership

(sn) Pakistan has expressed interest in importing more discounted crude oil from Russia and pursuing joint efforts to establish a new steel mill, as part of efforts to reduce its energy import costs and revive its struggling industrial sector. The announcement followed a meeting between Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb and Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexei Overchuk on the sidelines of the Boao Forum for Asia (BFA) Conference 2025 in China.

According to the finance ministry, discussions centered on expanding energy cooperation, with Pakistan aiming to secure further shipments of Russian crude oil and attract investment in oil and gas exploration. Islamabad's first Russian oil shipment arrived in June 2023, marking a shift in bilateral ties between the two countries that were once Cold War rivals. The energy imports are critical to easing Pakistan's heavy import bill and shoring up its foreign reserves, which currently stand at USD 10.6 billion—enough to cover about two months of imports.

In parallel, Aurangzeb also proposed collaborating with Russia to construct a new steel mill in Pakistan. Technical assessments are already underway, following a visit by a Russian team in January to evaluate the state-owned Pakistan Steel Mills (PSM), a loss-making entity slated for privatization under the terms of a USD 7 billion International Monetary Fund bailout. The Russian ambassador to Pakistan has earlier confirmed intentions to support modernization projects in Pakistan's energy and industrial sectors.

The two sides agreed on the need for feasibility studies and cost evaluations to advance the steel mill project, signaling deeper economic and trade engagement between Moscow and Islamabad. [Arab News]

Pakistan intensifies Afghan repatriation drive, enforces March 31 deadlines

(afk/sn/lm) Pakistan has intensified its Afghan repatriation drive, enforcing a March 31 deadline for both documented and undocumented Afghan nationals, including those awaiting resettlement in Western countries, to leave the country. This move is part of a broader plan to address growing security concerns, as Islamabad accuses the Taliban of sheltering Pakistani militants, particularly the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), fueling tensions between the two countries.

The expulsion decision follows Pakistan's announcement of deportations that began on the second day of Eid al-Fitr, a significant Islamic holiday. Authorities initiated the removals of Afghan migrants living without legal documentation after the expiration of the deadline. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, a province with a large Afghan refugee population, has seen a notable increase in deportations. As of late March 2025, over 878,000 Afghans have voluntarily returned to their country since the repatriation drive began in 2023. [amu.tv]

Ahead of the March 31 deadline, strict security measures were implemented around detention facilities, including police surveillance and intelligence gathering. Rawalpindi has been designated as a "Red Zone," with police assigned to ensure the smooth transfer of detainees. Additionally, law enforcement agencies have been directed to deport not only individuals involved in illegal activities but also their families, a controversial measure that many view as collective punishment. [DAWN]

This crackdown and the deportation deadline coincide with a growing sense of fear and uncertainty within the Afghan refugee community. Refugee leaders and international organizations have called for a reassessment of Pakistan's decision, especially considering the humanitarian impact on individuals who have lived in Pakistan for decades. [Arab News]

The UNHCR has urged both Pakistan and Afghanistan to ensure that any repatriation is safe and voluntary, rather than forced. The situation is exacerbated by the March 31 deadline, which leaves refugees with little time to prepare for their return to Afghanistan—many of whom have no memories of the country and fear persecution upon their return. [Arab News]

Timor-Leste defends judicial independence amid Philippine frustration over extradition refusal

(jm) Timor-Leste has rejected claims that its refusal to extradite expelled Philippine lawmaker Arnolfo Teves Jr. should affect its bid to join the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Former Timor-Leste foreign and justice minister Dionisio Babo Soares argued that using the case as a basis to hinder Dili's ASEAN application contradicts the bloc's principles of noninterference and consensus-based decision-making. He emphasized that judicial independence is a cornerstone of democracy and said Timor-Leste's

courts are not obligated to act based on external expectations.

His remarks follow criticism from the Philippine government after Timor-Leste's Court of Appeals unanimously rejected Manila's request to extradite Teves, who faces charges related to the 2023 assassination of former Negros Oriental governor Roel Degamo and nine others. Teves, designated a terrorist in the Philippines, was arrested in March 2024 in Dili after evading prosecution.

Justice Secretary Jesus Crispin Remulla warned that Timor-Leste's ASEAN aspirations could be complicated by the refusal, especially given the Philippines' role as a founding member of the regional bloc. The Department of Foreign Affairs also expressed disappointment, citing a lack of trust in the Philippine judiciary despite its early support for Timor-Leste's ASEAN membership. [South China Morning Post] [Inquirer]

Philippines and France deepen maritime cooperation for blue economy and regional security

(cm) The Philippines and France are advancing a strategic maritime partnership grounded in sustainability, international law, and regional security. Senator Loren Legarda underscored this cooperation during the high-level dialogue held in Manila, where she reaffirmed both countries' commitment to protecting marine ecosystems, promoting sustainable fisheries, and supporting coastal communities.

Legarda, principal author of the proposed Blue Economy Act, highlighted the Philippines' 2.2 million square kilometer maritime domain, which supports over 2.2 million jobs and contributes more than PHP 787 billion (approximately USD 13.4 billion) annually. She praised existing joint initiatives like the Blue Nations Initiative and 100 Days for the Ocean campaign, and emphasized the shared goal of protecting 30 percent of land and water areas globally by 2030.

Complementing these efforts, a report by the French Institute of International Relations (IFRI) calls for broader institutional cooperation between France and the Philippines, particularly in maritime domain awareness and security. France, with the world's second-largest exclusive economic zone—90 percent of which lies in the Indo-Pacific—shares common ground with the Philippines in upholding the United

Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and countering coercive actions in the South China Sea.

Both countries have ramped up joint naval activities, including the February 2025 visit of a French carrier strike group to the Philippines. Experts propose expanding white shipping agreements to share commercial vessel data and enhance maritime situational awareness. Further collaboration in marine science, fisheries management, and the use of EU-backed platforms like Copernicus and the Indo-Pacific Regional Information Sharing platform are also seen as avenues for enhancing blue economy governance.

To institutionalize progress, analysts suggest establishing a joint maritime cooperation committee with dedicated working groups and continuing Track 1.5 dialogues to align strategic goals. Amid rising geopolitical tensions in the Indo-Pacific, the France-Philippines partnership offers a model of sustainability-driven security cooperation. [Daily Tribune] [East Asia Forum]

16 Filipinos face possible jail term for unauthorized Duterte rally in Qatar

(lm) Sixteen Filipinos, including three minors, were arrested in Qatar on March 28 for participating in an unauthorized political rally in support of former president Rodrigo Duterte. The protest coincided with Duterte's 80th birthday and his detention by the International Criminal Court (ICC) on charges of crimes against humanity. While some initially claimed the arrests were related to visa violations, the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) clarified that the group was detained for violating Qatar's strict laws on public gatherings. If convicted, the detainees could face up to three years in prison.

The Philippine embassy in Doha is coordinating with Qatari authorities to provide consular assistance, and the DFA is negotiating for the imposition of fines in lieu of criminal charges. While the three minors have been released, the rest remain in custody pending further investigation. [The Manila Times] [Rappler]

Singapore's deputy prime minister visits China ahead of diplomatic anniversary

(rt) Singapore's Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat concluded key engagements in Beijing on March 26 as part of a four-day working visit to China, which includes a focus on strengthening Singapore-China relations ahead of the 35th anniversary of diplomatic ties in 2025. A central highlight was his meeting with Chinese Vice President Han Zheng, who praised the steady and in-depth development of bilateral ties and reaffirmed China's commitment to high-quality opening-up.

Vice President Han expressed China's readiness to use the upcoming anniversary to deepen cooperation through established bilateral mechanisms and promote a future-oriented partnership that contributes to regional and global peace and development. In response, Heng underscored Singapore's commitment to openness and multilateralism, and affirmed the city-state's continued interest in participating in China's development.

Earlier, Heng had met Liu Jianchao, Minister of the International Department of the Communist Party of China (CPC), where both sides discussed party-to-party ties and regional issues. Heng also visited Peking Union Medical College Hospital to learn about China's health innovations. [The Straits Times] [Xinhua]

SAF and US Marines conclude Exercise Valiant Mark 2025 with urban assault training

(rt) The Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) and United States Marine Corps (USMC) concluded their annual bilateral military drill, Exercise Valiant Mark, on March 26 with an urban operations mission at Safti City in Lim Chu Kang. The exercise, which began on March 17, involved 600 SAF personnel from the 3rd Battalion Singapore Guards and 7th Singapore Infantry Brigade, along with 200 US Marines from the Marine Rotational Force-Southeast Asia (MRF-SEA).

The exercise concluded with a ceremony attended by senior officers from both militaries. First conducted in 1991, Exercise Valiant Mark is a testament to the longstanding and close defense relationship between Singapore and the United States. In addition to bilateral drills, the two militaries also engage in multilateral exercises and exchanges, with Singapore supporting US rotational deployments in the region. [The Straits Times]

Singapore's president makes first state visit to Luxembourg, marks 50 years of ties

(rt) President Tharman Shanmugaratnam made a two-day state visit to Luxembourg beginning March 27, the first by a Singaporean head of state. The visit marked the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations and included meetings with Grand Duke Henri, top officials, and business leaders.

Both sides discussed strengthening cooperation in finance, digitalization, and space technology. Two memorandums of understanding were signed—one on quantum communications and another on emergency services cooperation.

Singapore and Luxembourg, both members of the Forum of Small States, enjoy strong economic ties. Luxembourg is among Singapore's largest EU investors and hosts nearly 500 companies operating in Singapore. [The Straits Times]

Singapore and Australia select 8 projects to invest in reducing maritime emissions

(rt) Singapore and Australia have selected eight projects for joint funding to reduce emissions in maritime operations. The projects, expected to be completed within two years, were announced in a joint release on March 26 by the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), Australia's national science agency, and the Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore (MPA).

Singapore is committing USD 7.4 million and Australia USD 8.4 million under the Australia-Singapore Initiative on Low-Emissions Technologies (ASLET), which was launched to accelerate the adoption of zero- or near-zero-emission technologies in maritime and port operations. ASLET also supports the Singapore–Australia Green and Digital Shipping Corridor, established through a memorandum of understanding signed in March 2024 to decarbonize and digitize shipping routes between both countries.

The selected projects cover areas such as fuel supply chains for hydrogen, ammonia, and methanol, as well as vessel electrification and safety monitoring. The projects were selected from 32 proposals submitted by universities, research institutes, and industry stakeholders from both countries. [Business Times] [CSIRO]

Singapore inks carbon trading pact with Peru to boost climate goals

(vsq) Singapore has finalized a carbon trading agreement with Peru, marking its fourth such deal and its first with a Latin American nation. The agreement allows Singapore to purchase carbon credits from Peru, a country known for its vast biodiversity and crucial role in global climate stability. The pact also includes a voluntary contribution from Singapore, with 5 percent of proceeds from carbon credit purchases going to help Peru mitigate climate change.

Under the Paris Agreement, countries can buy carbon credits from other nations to offset their emissions. Singapore plans to use these credits to meet its climate goals, while carbon tax-liable companies in Singapore can also purchase credits from these partner countries. Peru, known for its Amazon and Andean forests, will benefit from sustainable development projects funded by the agreement, including job creation, improved water access, and reduced environmental pollution.

This agreement is part of Singapore's broader strategy to strengthen carbon markets and invest in nature-based projects. It follows similar agreements with Bhutan, Ghana, and Papua New Guinea, with Singapore working on additional deals with countries such as Malaysia and Colombia. While Singapore is still in the process of securing its first carbon credits, the ongoing negotiations aim to meet its 2030 climate targets. [The Straits Times]

South Korea sends USD 2 million in aid to Myanmar after earthquake

(kp) The South Korean government has pledged USD 2 million in humanitarian assistance to Myanmar in response to the devastating 7.7 magnitude earthquake and 6.4 aftershock that struck on March 28. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced on March 29 that the aid will be delivered via an international organization and is intended to support rapid relief efforts in areas that experienced the most devastation. Seoul has also indicated that it may consider additional support depending on the evolving situation. [Yonhap News Agency 1]

Despite the widespread damage, no South Korean casualties have been reported in either country,

according to the foreign ministry. South Korea has a significant expatriate presence in the region, with approximately 2,000 nationals in Myanmar and 20,200 in Thailand. [Yonhap News Agency 2] [Yonhap News Agency 3]

Trump's new auto tariffs set to hit South Korean carmakers

(kp) South Korean automakers are bracing for a potential blow as former U.S. President Donald Trump announced a 25 percent tariff on all imported vehicles and auto parts, set to take effect on April 3. The White House confirmed the sweeping measure would apply to fully assembled cars as well as parts such as engines, transmissions, and electrical components, and made clear that no exemptions or negotiations would be entertained.

The announcement came on the same day Hyundai Motor Group held the opening ceremony for its new facility in Georgia, marking its third production base in the United States. Despite Hyundai's multibillion-dollar investment in U.S. manufacturing, the company declined to comment, citing the sensitivity of the issue. Industry insiders noted that Hyundai had hoped the timing of the plant's launch would influence Washington's stance, but those hopes appear to have fallen short. [The Korea TImes]

South Korea's auto sector is heavily reliant on U.S. exports, with USD 34.74 billion worth of vehicles shipped to the U.S. last year which accounted for nearly half of Korea's global car exports. Hyundai and Kia exported around 970,000 vehicles to the U.S., while GM Korea sent approximately 410,000 units, making up 84 percent of its total exports. Analysts warned that GM Korea may reconsider its operations in South Korea, potentially seeking financial support or even threatening to exit the market.

Trade experts view the tariffs as a strategic move by Trump to reinforce his tough trade stance against economic rivals like China and India. While some expect the tariffs to remain in place for at least one to two months, others argue they are unsustainable in the long run, as they could disrupt U.S. supply chains and push up domestic car prices. The market reacted swiftly, with Hyundai and Kia's shares dropping over 4 and 3 percent respectively, and U.S. automakers like Tesla and GM also seeing stock declines. [The Korea Herald]

South Korean defense ministry confirms USKF on Korean Peninsula will remain unchanged

(mm) South Korea's defense ministry has reaffirmed the role of the U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) remains unchanged, following a media report suggesting the U.S. will shift its focus to homeland security and deterring Chinese threats. On March 30, *The Washington Post* reported that the White House plans to "assume risk in other theaters" and push allies to increase defense spending to counter threats from Russia, North Korea and Iran. The report, based on a leaked Pentagon memo signed by U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth in March, has raised concerns about potential changes to the USFK's role and troop presence on the Korean Peninsula. [The Korea Times]

The ministry stated that the Pentagon has not issued an official statement on the report and reiterated that the role of the USFK remains unchanged.

The report comes amid speculation that the Trump administration may consider reducing the 28,500 U.S. troops stationed in South Korea, despite North Korea's expanding nuclear weapons program. Hegseth's recent comments on "increased ally defense spending and burden sharing" have led experts to believe Washington may pressure Seoul to renegotiate its defense cost-sharing by leveraging U.S. troop levels.

Last week, Hegseth began his first multi-country trip to the Indo-Pacific but notably left South Korea off his itinerary. The move has heightened concerns in Seoul; however, Washington has repeatedly reaffirmed its "ironclad" commitment to the alliance. [The Korea Herald]

South Korean lawmakers challenge China's "fishing" justification for Yellow Sea structures

(mm) China's ambassador to South Korea Dai Bing has defended Beijing's installation of large steel structures in the Korea-China Provisional Measures Zone (PMZ) of the Yellow Sea, insisting they are for "aquaculture". Seoul, however, suspects broader strategic motives, given China's history of using artificial structures to reinforce territorial claims in the South and East China Seas.

On March 25, the South Korea government revealed that China had installed three steel structures in

disputed PMZ waters and, in late February, aggressively blocked a Korean research vessel attempting to inspect on the installations. Seoul consequently lodged a diplomatic protest and summoned Chinese embassy official for an explanation.

The Yellow Sea PMZ, jointly managed by South Korea and China due to overlapping exclusive economic zones, permits only fishing-related activities. Lawmakers across party lines have condemned Beijing's actions as "seed planting for maritime conflict", warning that this may be the first step to bolstering Chinese territorial claims in the Yellow Sea. They are calling for an immediate halt to construction, citing a "direct threat to Korea's maritime sovereignty".

Analysts have also raised concerns about the structure's location, suggesting they have the potential to restrict the operational range of U.S. forces during a Taiwan contingency. Moreover, they remain skeptical that international law can effectively curb China's actions and instead advocate for counter structures as a strategic response. [Korea JoongAng Daily]

South Korea discusses arms procurement and cooperation with Norway, Romania

(mm/fn) South Korea's head of state arms procurement agency, Seok Jong-gun, met with Norway's State Secretary of Defense last week to discuss expanding arms industry cooperation. Talks focused on Norway's operation of the South Korean K9 self-propelled howitzer. Norway is set to join nine other countries that have acquired the K9, alongside Australia, Egypt, Estonia, Finland, India, Poland, Romania and Turkey.

Discussions covered Norway's operational capabilities with the K9, potential weapons system upgrades and the country's bid to acquire long-range precision strike missiles, including multiple launch rocket systems.

Seok also met with the Norwegian Defence Material Agency to discuss ways the two countries can strengthen arms cooperation, including space, missile and electronic warfare. [Yonhap News Agency 1]

The talks reflect South Korea's growing role in the global defense market, with the country now ranked as the world's 10th largest arms exporter. [The Korea Herald]

In a separate meeting, Seok met with Nicoleta Pauliuc, the chair of the defense committee in Romania's Senate, to talk about the country's intentions to acquire new military equipments, including infantry combat vehicles and battle tanks. South Korea offered its Redback armored combat vehicle and K2 tank for these projects.

Seok also had a meeting with Romanian Economy Minister Bogdan-Gruia Ivan to explore potential collaboration in the areas of warship manufacturing and advanced technological developments. Ivan showed interest in cooperating with South Korean defense and shipbuilding firms to improve the security of the Black Sea area.

This visit follows South Korea's recent achievement in securing a 1.38 trillion-won ($940 million) deal with Romania's Hanwha Aerospace for the supply of K9 self-propelled howitzers and K10 ammunition resupply vehicles, indicating a bolstering of defense relations between the two countries. [Yonhap News Agency 2]

South Korea and Norway agree to cooperate on overseas adoption probe after damning report

(mm) South Korea and Norway have agreed to cooperate on their investigations into irregularities in intercountry adoptions and support the rights of affected adoptees. The meeting comes just one day after Korea's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) released their preliminary findings on South Korea's foreign adoption program between the 1960s – 1990s. The report highlighted the Korean government's failures in overseeing adoptions, which led to widespread misconduct, falsified documents and corrupt practices.

South Korea has sent over 6,500 children to Norway between 1969 and 2024, making it the largest source of adoptees to the Scandinavian country. Norway's investigation, ongoing since December 2023, focuses on whether Norwegian authorities properly oversaw international adoptions. The committee has already released an interim report on adoptions from Ecuador and Colombia. Both countries have emphasized the importance of learning from South Korea's TRC investigation, noting the meeting would help understand past and present adoption regulations. [The Korea Times]

Indian Prime Minister Modi to pay state visit to Sri Lanka while tensions over fishermen detention remain

(db/lm) Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi will pay a state visit to Sri Lanka from April 4 to 6, with an agenda focused on bolstering bilateral ties, economic recovery, and strategic cooperation. Modi is scheduled to hold talks with President Anura Kumara Dissanayake and Prime Minister Dr. Harini Amarasuriya, accompanied by senior Indian officials including the External Affairs Minister, National Security Advisor, and Foreign Secretary. [Daily Mirror 1]

The visit will feature the signing of key Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) covering defense, energy connectivity, and digitization. Notably, the two sides will break ground on the long-delayed Sampur solar energy project, and Modi will inaugurate several India-funded development initiatives. He will also visit the sacred Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi in Anuradhapura, underscoring the cultural and religious ties between the two countries. India has extended USD 4.5 billion in financial assistance to Sri Lanka during its recent economic crisis, reflecting deepening strategic ties. [Daily Mirror 2]

However, the visit comes amid renewed tensions over the detention of Indian fishermen in Sri Lanka. Indian External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar revealed in Parliament that 97 Indian fishermen are currently in Sri Lankan custody—83 are serving sentences, three are facing trial, and 11 were apprehended on March 27, 2025. Most of the detained individuals are from Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry.

Jaishankar stated that the Modi government is pursuing the matter through diplomatic channels while urging Sri Lanka to adopt a humanitarian approach. He also emphasized preventive steps, such as equipping Indian fishing vessels with transponders. The minister reiterated that the ongoing issue stems from maritime boundary agreements signed in 1974 and 1976, which delineated fishing jurisdictions and remain a source of friction. Many of the imprisoned individuals are repeat offenders or boat owners, further complicating efforts to secure their release. [Ada Derana] [Daily Mirror 3]

Amid these tensions, the Indian Supreme Court is also set to hear a challenge to the legality of the agreements over the Katchatheevu islet on September 15, 2025. The case, which concerns the 1974 and 1976 agreements that ceded the disputed islet to Sri Lanka, has been a source of ongoing political sensitivity, particularly regarding fishing rights in the area. The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) party, led by T.R.

Baalu, is contesting the agreements, arguing that they are unconstitutional and void. The issue remains a key point of contention between the two nations, with the future of Katchatheevu and its associated fishing rights still unresolved. [Daily Mirror 3]

Sri Lanka and Thailand deepen bilateral ties concerning health, tourism, and trade

(db) On March 27, Nalinda Jayatissa, Sri Lanka's Minister of Health and Mass Media, met Paitoon Mahapannaporn, the Thai Ambassador to Sri Lanka, in the Ministry of Health and Mass Media in Colombo. The meeting served to deepen the bilateral relationship between Thailand and Sri Lanka, focusing on both countries' dedication to cooperative efforts in crucial sectors, including health, investment, tourism, and trade.

During the meeting, Ambassador Mahapannaporn expressed admiration for Sri Lanka's advancements in its healthcare system and emphasized the Council of Ministers of Thailand's ongoing commitment to bolstering these services. A key initiative marking the 70th anniversary of bilateral relations between the two countries will be the start of a specialized orthopedic skill development program at the Kandy National Hospital. This project is designed to improve surgical capabilities and facilitate the exchange of knowledge and expertise among orthopedic surgeons from both nations.

Beyond healthcare, the conversation extended to fostering economic ties, focusing on attracting Thai investments in Sri Lanka. Ambassador Mahapannaporn also offered to share Thailand's know-how concerning tourism development. He promised to advocate for positioning Sri Lanka as a popular holiday destination for Thai travelers. In this context, he praised Sri Lanka's extensive Buddhist cultural heritage. [Daily News]

Sri Lanka criticizes UK sanctions, calls for support of domestic reconciliation process

(db) Sri Lanka has strongly criticized the United Kingdom's recent sanctions imposed on three former military commanders—Shavendra Silva, Jagath Jayasuriya, and Wasantha Karannagoda—as well as ex-LTTE commander-turned-politician Vinayagamoorthy

Muralitharan (Karuna Amman). The UK has accused the four individuals of serious human rights violations during the country's civil war, including extrajudicial killings, torture, and sexual violence, and imposed asset freezes and travel bans under its Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime.

In response, Sri Lanka's Foreign Ministry argued that such unilateral actions complicate the national reconciliation process. Officials emphasized that past human rights violations should be addressed through domestic accountability mechanisms rather than external pressure. The government reaffirmed its commitment to strengthening domestic processes for accountability and reconciliation and warned that external sanctions do not contribute constructively to these efforts. [Daily Mirror 1]

Foreign Minister Vijitha Herath conveyed Sri Lanka's formal position to the British High Commissioner, while the government continues to finalize its broader diplomatic response. Cabinet officials have noted that earlier governments issued swift rebuttals to similar sanctions in the past, including measures previously taken by the United States and Canada against other Sri Lankan leaders. [Daily Mirror 2]

The UK's Foreign Secretary David Lammy defended the decision, stating it aligns with the UK's commitment to ensuring accountability for civil war-era human rights abuses and reflects pledges made during the British election campaign. The UK, which leads the UN Human Rights Council Core Group on Sri Lanka, expressed interest in working with the new Sri Lankan government on national unity and human rights improvements.

Kuwait extradites 20 Sri Lankan prisoners under bilateral agreement

(lm) Kuwait has repatriated 20 Sri Lankan prisoners under a bilateral extradition agreement. The individuals, who had been convicted in Kuwait for offenses including drug use and smuggling, were returned to Sri Lanka earlier this month aboard a Kuwaiti Air Force C-17 aircraft and arrived at Katunayake Airport.

The prisoners were met by officials from Sri Lanka's Prison Department and transferred to a correctional facility in Colombo. Around 50 Kuwaiti security personnel accompanied the extradition.

The prisoner exchange agreement, signed between the two countries in 2007, has led to the repatriation of 52 Sri Lankan inmates on two occasions, including 32 in 2024. However, no Kuwaiti prisoners have yet been extradited from Sri Lanka under the same arrangement. [Daily Mirror]

Taiwan facing increased military threat from China's drills

(ce) China has initiated extensive military drills surrounding Taiwan, triggering heightened tensions and raising concerns across the Indo-Pacific region. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) launched the unannounced exercises, involving its Navy, Army, Rocket Force, and Coast Guard, with the stated aim of delivering a "stern warning" to Taiwan's democratically elected government.

Beijing justified the drills by accusing Taiwan's leaders of "separatist" activities and labeling them "parasites" pushing the island towards war. Chinese officials reiterated the "one-China principle," asserting that "reunification" is an "unstoppable trend." The PLA's Eastern Theatre Command detailed the exercises, which focused on combat readiness patrols, blockades, and simulated strikes on maritime and land targets, including the involvement of the Chinese aircraft carrier Shandong.

Taiwan's defense ministry responded by deploying its own military forces and elevating its readiness level, condemning China's "military provocations" as "reckless" and "irresponsible." Taiwan officials argue that China's actions reflect a desire for "hegemony in the western Pacific," extending beyond the mere annexation of Taiwan. [The Guardian]

Crucially, the drills occurred days after US Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth's Asia visit, during which he emphasized countering "China's aggression" in the Indo-Pacific. Taiwanese officials view the timing of the drills as a direct response to Hegseth's statements and the perceived shift in US security focus to the region. They also believe the drills serve as a signal to the Trump administration, demonstrating China's resolve. [CNN]

Alongside the military drills, China launched a significant propaganda campaign, flooding social media with videos and imagery depicting an assault on Taiwan. The propaganda targeted President Lai Ching-te with inflammatory language and cartoons,

portraying him as a figure leading Taiwan to "ultimate destruction."

Analysts suggest that China's actions are a direct response to Lai Ching-te's recent statements and measures, which Beijing considers "provocative." The drills also serve as a message to the United States, aiming to deter further US support for Taiwan. The drills also show a normalization of such actions from China.

The sudden nature of the drills, and the aggressive propaganda campaign, has raised concerns that China may be increasing its readiness to use force. This latest escalation follows a series of incidents that have ratcheted up tensions across the Taiwan Strait, including recent arrests and deportations, and underscores the growing volatility of the region.

Cross-Strait tensions flare up amid Taiwan's defiant response to China's "reporting portal"

(ce) China's launch of an online "reporting portal," targeting individuals labeled "Taiwan independence thugs," has triggered strong condemnation from Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council (MAC). The portal, operated by the China Taiwan Affairs Office (TAO), claims to gather reports on Taiwanese politicians, public figures, and online personalities, with the TAO vowing legal action. [Overseas Community Council, Taiwan]

The MAC swiftly responded, denouncing the portal as a blatant attempt to assert illegitimate jurisdiction and interfere in Taiwan's internal affairs. They argue this tactic mirrors historical Chinese Communist Party (CCP) methods of suppressing dissent, drawing parallels to the Anti-Rightist Campaign and Hong Kong's informant system. The MAC dismisses the portal as a "false narrative" designed to create an illusion of control, asserting it will have little impact on Taiwanese citizens. [Focus Taiwan]

The TAO has subsequently released a list of targeted individuals, including Interior Minister Liu Shyh-fang, legislators Puma Shen and Huang Jie, and YouTubers Pa Chiung and Chen Po-yuan. This move, according to the MAC, represents an attempt to portray China as a protector of pro-unification forces within Taiwan, extending intimidation tactics beyond traditional political figures to include ordinary citizens and online personalities.

Despite the TAO's threats, Taiwanese officials have responded with defiance. Legislator Rosalia Wu embraced her inclusion on the list as a sign she was "speaking the truth," while Legislator Huang Jie considered it "a form of recognition" for her defense of Taiwan. They, along with other named figures like tech entrepreneur Robert Tsao, have vowed to continue their work undeterred. [Taipei Times]

In a strong warning to Taiwanese citizens, the MAC has highlighted the risks of traveling to China, citing the potential for arbitrary detentions and arrests. The council argues the TAO's actions are designed to disrupt cross-strait exchanges and interfere with Taiwan's legal system. The MAC maintains that China's actions will only escalate tensions and prove counterproductive, reiterating the need for increased vigilance against China's attempts to undermine Taiwan's sovereignty.

Collision of Chinese and Taiwanese ships fuels cross-strait accusations

(ce) A collision in the Taiwan Strait between a Taiwanese navy ship and a Chinese fishing trawler has ignited a diplomatic row, deepening existing cross-strait tensions. China's Taiwan Affairs Office swiftly condemned the incident, labeling the Taiwanese vessel's actions "wicked," while Taiwan's Defense Minister Wellington Koo refuted these claims, asserting the collision occurred outside restricted waters and that military exercises would proceed as planned. Koo also dismissed suggestions of espionage, stating the trawler couldn't gather meaningful intelligence.

Investigations are underway by both sides, with Taiwan's Coast Guard taking the lead. The incident's location near the median line, a boundary China no longer acknowledges, complicates the situation, adding a layer of jurisdictional dispute. Analysts warn this could be exploited by Beijing to further assert control over the strategic waterway.

This maritime clash unfolds against a backdrop of increasing regional instability, with China escalating military drills and reaffirming its sovereignty claims, which Taiwan firmly rejects. Adding to the political friction, China's recent publication of a list of alleged "separatists" and its call for tip-offs has been seen as a provocative move (see article above). [Reuters]

China confirms military drills following Taiwan President Lai's remarks

(ce) Beijing has confirmed that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) conducted a military exercise near Taiwan on 18 March, following remarks by Taiwanese leader William Lai Ching-te on measures to counter threats from the mainland. The Chinese defense ministry's announcement is notable as it occurred after the exercise's completion.

China's defense ministry stated that the PLA's Eastern Theatre Command carried out a "combat readiness patrol and joint exercise" involving naval and air forces. The purpose of the drill was "to test and enhance the combat capabilities of the troops."

The exercise occurred after Lai announced a series of measures on March 13, citing perceived threats from the mainland. These measures included adjustments to military legal systems and residency criteria for individuals from mainland China, Hong Kong, and Macau.

Taiwan's defense ministry reported PLA activity on March 17, detailing the deployment of aircraft and naval vessels. This follows previous PLA exercises near Taiwan, including Joint Sword 2024A and 2024B, which were announced by Beijing at their commencement.

The PLA has maintained a pattern of military activity near Taiwan, with frequent aircraft deployments. China considers Taiwan part of its territory, while many nations, including the US, maintain a "one China" policy and oppose the use of force. The US also supplies Taiwan with defense equipment. [SCMP]

Taiwan intensifies efforts to defend democracy against pro-Beijing influence

(ce) Taiwan is considering new legislation to explicitly ban speech promoting military action against the island, a move driven by escalating cross-strait tensions and growing concerns over Chinese information warfare. The Ministry of Justice (MOJ) plans extensive public consultations for a potential special law, aiming to strike a delicate balance between national security and the preservation of free expression, a core democratic value.

This initiative follows the recent deportation of Chinese social media influencer Liu Zhenya, whose advocacy for China's military takeover sparked debate on how

Taiwan should respond to speech deemed a threat to its sovereignty. [The Straits Times]

Deputy Justice Minister Hsu Hsi-hsiang acknowledged the complex legal and ethical considerations surrounding potential restrictions on speech, even when it appears to endorse hostile actions against the state. He noted the fragmented nature of the current legal framework and the increasing calls from legal scholars for a consolidated special law with clear definitions and safeguards. The Taipei High Administrative Court's ruling, upholding the influencer's deportation, cited international human rights frameworks, specifically Article 20 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which prohibits propaganda for war. [TVBS]

Meanwhile, Beijing has intensified its efforts to counter what it perceives as pro-independence sentiment in Taiwan. The State Council's Taiwan Affairs Office launched a new tip-off channel, urging the public to report individuals and groups deemed supporters of Taiwan independence. This initiative targets "accomplices" who persecute pro-unification voices, according to Beijing. The announcement accuses Taiwan's ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) of suppressing opposition and persecuting pro-unification advocates, labeling certain pro-independence figures, officials, and online influencers as "thugs" aiding the DPP's "evil" actions. [SCMP]

Taiwan forges drone alliance with Japan for joint development

(ce) Taiwan and Japan have established a strategic partnership to accelerate drone technology development, marked by a memorandum of understanding between the Taiwan Excellence Drone International Business Opportunities Alliance (TEDIBOA) and the Japan Drone Consortium. The agreement, witnessed by Economics Minister Kuo Jyh-huei, outlines collaboration in critical areas such as disaster relief, autonomous flight testing, and the creation of a joint drone supply chain.

Nonami Kenzo, Chair of the Japan Drone Consortium, highlighted Taiwan's strong manufacturing capabilities and ICT infrastructure as valuable assets for this partnership. He also proposed TEDIBOA establishing a presence in Japan to leverage combined strengths, particularly for collaborative drone applications in disaster response given both countries' earthquake risks.

Wu Hsiu-hui, Co-Chair of TEDIBOA, detailed plans for Japanese delegations to visit Taiwan's drone facilities, showcasing Taiwan's expertise in key components. Minister Kuo noted the global drone market's growth potential and the crucial role of the Industrial Technology Research Institute (ITRI) in supporting this collaboration. This follows TEDIBOA's recent showcase of advanced drone technologies at the Xponential Europe tech expo, where Taiwan showcased advanced drone technologies, demonstrating its growing role in the global drone industry. [Taiwan News]

Japan lawmakers rally for Taiwan's security and inclusion

(ce) A bipartisan group of Japanese lawmakers has issued a strong resolution calling for proactive measures to prevent conflict in the Taiwan Strait, emphasizing that "a Taiwan contingency is a Japan contingency." The Japan-ROC Diet Members' Consultative Council, representing multiple political parties, set its annual agenda, prioritizing the prevention of a Taiwan crisis.

Among key initiatives is a trilateral security summit between Taiwan, Japan, and the US, tentatively scheduled for this summer in Taiwan. Council head Keiji Furuya stressed the importance of this in-person meeting, which is now possible after previous virtual formats. The council also plans to send a delegation to Taiwan's Double Ten National Day celebrations.

The lawmakers reaffirmed their support for Taiwan's inclusion in international organizations, such as Interpol, the World Health Assembly, and the International Civil Aviation Organization. They also established a Taiwan-Japan economic exchange project team to strengthen trade and cultural ties.

In a video address, President William Lai thanked Japan for its support and highlighted shared challenges, including geopolitical shifts and economic uncertainty. He called for closer cooperation to create "non-red supply chains" and defend democratic values. [Office of the President, Taiwan]

The Japan-ROC Diet Members' Consultative Council now boasts 288 members, signaling growing political support for Taiwan in Japan. This reflects a broader trend of deepening Japan-Taiwan relations, as underscored by Japan's top representative to Taiwan, Kazuyuki Katayama, who called for stronger economic and technological cooperation to address mutual security and economic challenges. [Taipei Times]

Taiwan emphasized in US military memo

(ce) A recent Pentagon memo has unveiled a significant strategic reorientation by the US military, placing a heightened emphasis on deterring a potential Chinese invasion of Taiwan. This shift, articulated in the "Interim National Defense Strategic Guidance," designates China as the Department of Defense's "sole pacing threat," with preventing a forced seizure of Taiwan as the "sole pacing scenario." This strategic focus is being actively demonstrated through tangible actions, notably the recent delivery of Taiwan's first F-16C/D Block 70 fighter jet from the United States.

The delivery of this advanced F-16 represents a crucial upgrade to Taiwan's air defense capabilities, significantly enhancing its ability to respond to potential threats. Equipped with advanced radar, electronic warfare systems, and a potent arsenal of weaponry, these aircraft directly reflect the US commitment to Taiwan's security and align with the Pentagon's "denial defense" strategy. This strategy aims to bolster US military presence across the Indo-Pacific, countering China's growing military capabilities, particularly its expanding naval power, which poses a direct threat to vital maritime trade routes. [Taipei Times 1]

The Pentagon memo also calls for Taiwan to substantially increase its defense spending, a key component of the US push for greater self-reliance among its regional partners. Furthermore, the US is actively seeking increased burden-sharing from its allies in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, allowing for a more concentrated strategic focus on the Indo-Pacific region. This reorientation, sometimes referred to as a "reverse Nixon" strategy, signifies a deliberate shift in US defense priorities, prioritizing Asia over Europe in its strategic planning. [Taipei Times 2]

US lawmakers push for regular reviews of Taiwan policy

(ce) In a concerted effort to bolster US support for Taiwan and counter China's growing regional influence, bipartisan lawmakers in both the House and Senate are advancing multiple pieces of legislation designed to strengthen US-Taiwan relations.

The US. Senate Foreign Relations Committee has approved a bill mandating regular, five-year reviews of State Department guidelines regarding US-Taiwan

relations. This legislation aims to ensure US policy remains flexible and responsive to the evolving security dynamics in the Indo-Pacific, reflecting an ongoing debate within the US government about the appropriate level of engagement with Taiwan. The Senate bill also enhances congressional oversight by requiring detailed reports following each review. [Sen. John Cornyn's Office]

Simultaneously, the House of Representatives is advancing two key pieces of legislation. First, a bipartisan coalition has reintroduced the Taiwan International Solidarity Act, aiming to counter China's efforts to isolate Taiwan on the global stage. This act seeks to clarify that UN General Assembly Resolution 2758 does not preclude the US from advocating for Taiwan's participation in international organizations. It mandates the US government to actively use its voice, vote, and influence to resist China's attempts to manipulate international bodies regarding Taiwan.

Second, parallel to the Senate's review bill, the House is also reintroducing a bill authorizing development aid to countries that maintain ties with Taiwan. This initiative, along with the Taiwan International Solidarity Act, demonstrates a coordinated effort to solidify US's support for Taiwan and counter China's regional influence. [Taipei Times]

The Taiwan International Solidarity Act, reintroduced by Representative Gerry Connolly, builds upon the 2019 Taiwan Allies International Protection and Enhancement Initiative Act, addressing China's "weaponization" of international organizations. Representative Young Kim, a co-sponsor, underscored Taiwan's contributions to democracy and global health security, arguing for its rightful place in international dialogue. [Focus Taiwan]

These legislative actions, encompassing both policy adjustments and direct support for Taiwan's international standing, underscore a cohesive approach to reinforce US-Taiwan relations. The bills now await votes in the full chambers of Congress.

Thai defense minister downplays border dispute with Cambodia, urges restraint

(lm) Thai Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Phumtham Wechayachai has sought to defuse tensions over a recent border incident with Cambodia, emphasizing that the issue will be resolved through negotiation. The dispute concerns a structure reportedly erected by Cambodian forces in an area

considered a no man's land near Ta Phraya district in Thailand's Sa Kaeo province, opposite Banteay Meanchey in Cambodia.

A video that emerged last week showed Thai and Cambodian soldiers in a heated exchange after the structure was discovered. Thai troops from the Ta Phraya Taskforce reportedly asked their Cambodian counterparts to dismantle the structure and submitted a written protest.

Minister Phumtham stated that while both countries use different border demarcation lines, Thailand remains committed to peaceful dialogue. He insisted that the Cambodian actions were not seen as provocative and emphasized the importance of avoiding escalation through diplomatic channels. "We don't want to see war or violence," he said, adding that safeguarding sovereignty does not preclude restraint.

Phumtham also highlighted that communication, protest letters, and negotiation remain Thailand's preferred approaches to resolving frontier disputes.

Border tensions between the two countries occasionally flare up, often prompting strong nationalistic reactions online. A recent incident occurred in February when a group of Cambodian women was filmed singing a nationalist song at the Prasat Ta Muean Thom temple, which straddles the border in Surin province. Although that confrontation ended peacefully, the site was temporarily closed for three weeks afterward.

The current dispute, according to Phumtham, remains manageable and should not be allowed to overshadow the broader relationship between the two neighbors. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand targets Indian investment in key high-tech sectors

(ed) Thailand's Board of Investment (BOI) recently completed a successful mission to India, focusing on attracting significant investments in three key high-technology sectors: medical devices, electric vehicles (EVs), and semiconductors. This initiative is part of Thailand's strategy to position itself as a leading hub for future industries in Southeast Asia.

From March 24 to 27, the BOI engaged in high-level discussions with 15 major Indian companies in Hyderabad and Mumbai. The discussions highlighted Thailand's strategic advantages as an investment

destination, particularly in sectors where India excels globally. The pharmaceutical and medical device sector saw the greatest interest, with companies like Sahajanand Medical Technologies (SMT) planning to establish production and R&D facilities in Thailand for artificial heart valves and stents. Global pharmaceutical giant MSN Laboratories also expressed interest in expanding its ASEAN market presence from Thailand.

In addition, ACG Capsules, which has already invested THB 2.1 billion (USD 60.9 million) in a Rayong factory, plans to set up a local R&D center. Natural Remedies, a leading herbal livestock feed supplement producer, aims to collaborate with Thai universities and meat producers on R&D.

In the automotive sector, discussions with TATA Motors focused on expanding its EV and commercial vehicle operations, particularly in right-hand drive markets. TATA Motors recently recruited a senior executive from a major Thai automaker to drive its international passenger car business.

The semiconductor industry was also a key area of focus, with the BOI engaging with the India Electronics and Semiconductor Association (IESA), which represents over 400 companies. Tessolve Semiconductor, a chip design and testing firm, plans to establish a testing and engineering services center in Thailand later this year. The BOI and IESA are also planning to co-host investment promotion activities in Bangalore, a global semiconductor hub, in October.

This mission aligns with India's "Act East Policy" and underscores Thailand’s potential to become an ASEAN base for manufacturing, R&D, and logistics. The BOI's investment drive coincides with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to Thailand on April 4-5, further strengthening bilateral ties and economic cooperation. Over the past decade, the BOI has approved 161 investment projects from Indian firms, totaling over THB 13 billion (USD 377 million), primarily in pharmaceuticals, medical devices, chemicals, and jewelry. [The Nation]

Thailand and China strengthen legal ties to boost investment

(bk) Thailand and China are deepening their legal collaboration to foster a more favorable investment climate and stimulate economic growth. Justice Minister Tawee Sodsong outlined a plan to strengthen legal ties between the two countries, aiming to unlock new opportunities for both Thai and Chinese

businesses. He emphasized the critical role of legal cooperation in enhancing economic and investment activities. This initiative is particularly significant as the two nations mark the 50th anniversary of Thai-Chinese diplomatic relations.

To commemorate this milestone, the Justice Ministry, in collaboration with the Thai-Chinese Enterprises Trade Association, DTL Law Office Limited, and the Thai-Chinese Law Alliance Association, hosted a seminar focused on Thai-Chinese legal cooperation. The seminar emphasized improving business operations for Chinese enterprises in Thailand by utilizing the justice system. A key focus was promoting alternative dispute resolution mechanisms, such as mediation, to facilitate smoother and more sustainable business relationships. Tawee stated that this collaboration would open new legal avenues, support investment, and establish fair frameworks for both Thai and Chinese investors.

Several cooperation agreements were also signed, including pacts between the Thailand Arbitration Center and the Guangzhou International Arbitration Court of China, as well as between the Thai-Chinese Enterprises Trade Association and the Thailand-China International Alternative Dispute Resolution Center (TCIAC). These agreements aim to enhance support for entrepreneurs investing in Thailand and assist those facing legal or business disputes. [The Nation]

Four Thai fishermen return home after Myanmar pardon following diplomatic engagement

(bk) Four Thai trawler crew members detained by Myanmar authorities in November 2024 have returned to Ranong province after receiving a pardon from Myanmar's military government. The release, granted on March 27, followed months of diplomatic negotiations and was attributed to humanitarian considerations and strong bilateral relations.

The fishermen had been incarcerated in Kawthaung prison after their boats allegedly entered disputed waters. During the incident, Myanmar patrol boats opened fire, and one Thai crew member drowned after jumping into the sea.

A Thai delegation, including representatives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Thailand-Myanmar Township Border Committee, and Ranong provincial officials, traveled to Kawthaung (Koh Song) to receive the released crew. Upon their return to Thailand on

March 29, they were welcomed by their families. [Bangkok Post 1]

Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra thanked the Myanmar government, stating the release reflects the positive relationship between the two countries. Thai authorities had earlier confirmed that returnees would be screened to distinguish victims of deception from those involved in unlawful activities, as was done with the repatriation of 151 Thai prisoners in January. [The Nation] [Bangkok Post 2]

South Korea's Gyeonggi Province opens first tourism office in Bangkok to boost bilateral travel

(hrs) South Korea's Gyeonggi Province – the most populous province, surrounding the capital Seoul and borders the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), has launched its first provincial tourism office in Thailand, aiming to strengthen bilateral tourism and promote Gyeonggi's cultural and economic attractions. The new office in Bangkok, inaugurated over the weekend by the Gyeonggi Tourism Organization, marks the first such initiative by a Korean provincial agency in Thailand.

Officials emphasized Thailand's importance as a tourism market, noting that it was the largest source of ASEAN tourists to Korea before the COVID-19 pandemic, with 570,000 visitors in 2019. That figure fell to 330,000 in 2024, but Gyeonggi Province expects a rebound to pre-pandemic levels, supported by the new office.

The office's establishment follows a 2023 meeting between Gyeonggi Governor Kim Dongyeon and Thailand's former tourism minister Phipat Ratchakitprakarn. [Bangkok Post]

Thai trade representative visits Vietnam to boost exports and investor confidence

(acs) Umesh Pandey, Thailand's Trade Representative for the ASEAN region, visited Vietnam to promote Thai products, including fruits and processed food, and strengthen investor confidence. During his meetings in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi, Umesh emphasized the goal of achieving a USD 25 billion two-way trade value between Thailand and Vietnam, targeting the milestone by 2026, the 50th anniversary of their

diplomatic relations. In 2024, the trade value stood at just over USD 20 billion.

Umesh's visit focused on expanding the export of Thai fruits and processed food, which are highly regarded in Vietnam. He highlighted the positive perception of Thai-made goods and called for increased support from Vietnamese businesses, including MM Mega Market and Central Retail Vietnam, to promote Thai products.

Umesh also visited Thai-based companies operating in Vietnam across various sectors, including renewable energy, industrial estates, and construction. He addressed concerns raised by investors from companies like Banpu Plc, Gunkul Engineering Plc, and Siam Cement Group Plc, and assured them of assistance in resolving operational challenges. [Royal Thai Government]

Thailand aims to decrease trade surplus with the U.S. amid tariff concerns

(acs/lm/ed) Thailand's trade surplus with the United States, which reached USD 35.4 billion last year, has become a key focus for the government. The Ministry of Industry's Industrial Economics Office, led by Passakorn Chairat, has announced Thailand's goal to reduce this surplus to USD 20 billion this year. To achieve this, Thailand plans to increase imports of U.S. products, particularly agricultural goods like corn, soybeans, and ethylene. [Reuters]

The U.S. is Thailand's largest export market, accounting for 18.3 percent of Thailand's total exports last year. As such, any developments in the U.S. significantly impact bilateral trade. Recently, U.S. President Donald Trump imposed tariffs on the automobile sector, which Thailand has identified as a potential threat to its exports of auto parts. Finance Minister Pichai Chunhavajira warned that the 25 percent tariffs on imported vehicles could have a negative effect, particularly on Thai auto parts routed through other countries for car assembly.

In response to these challenges, the Thai government is exploring options to mitigate the impact, including negotiating a direct export arrangement with the U.S., as shifting production to the U.S. would take considerable time. Thailand is a major hub for auto production in Southeast Asia, with significant exports to the U.S. In 2023, Thai exports of auto parts to the U.S. were valued at an estimated USD 4 billion, with

total auto parts exports reaching approximately USD 9.8 billion in the first nine months of 2024.

While the situation remains fluid, with further tariff details expected this week, industry representatives such as the CEO of AAPICO Hitech, a leading Thai auto parts supplier, have downplayed the immediate risk. Most of AAPICO's production supports Japanese manufacturers whose vehicles are not exported to the U.S. However, tariffs on parts shipped directly to the U.S. could pose challenges for Thai firms hoping to expand their presence in the American market. [Bangkok Post]

Portugal's GNR commander visits Timor-Leste for 25th anniversary of national police

(lm) The Commander General of Portugal's National Republican Guard (GNR) visited Timor-Leste to mark the 25th anniversary of the National Police of Timor-Leste (PNTL) and the GNR's continuous presence in the country since 2000. The visit included meetings with top Timorese officials, including the Prime Minister, the Head of State, and the Commander General of the PNTL.

Talks focused on strengthening cooperation in community policing, road safety, border control, and combating transnational crime. Officials highlighted the GNR's role in capacity building, reaffirming mutual interest in continuing the partnership. The Portuguese commander was also honored with the Insignia of the Order of Timor-Leste during the commemorative ceremony.

The GNR's involvement transitioned from peacekeeping missions to formal technical-police cooperation in 2009, aimed at bolstering public security and institutional development. [Government of Timor-Leste]

Vietnam investigates Chinese tea chain Chagee for displaying disputed South China Sea map

(lm) Vietnam is accelerating its land reclamation efforts in the disputed Spratly Islands, reinforcing its territorial claims amid growing tensions with China over maritime boundaries and national sovereignty.

According to the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative (AMTI), Vietnam added 641 acres (260 hectares) of new land in the Spratlys since June 2024, bringing its total reclaimed area to over 3,300 acres (1,335 hectares). This includes the construction of eight new harbors and a major 8,000-foot (2,440-meter) runway on Barque Canada Reef—capable of accommodating most military aircraft. Additional developments occurred on Discovery Great Reef, Ladd Reef, South Reef, Namyit Island, and Sand Cay, with further expansion expected, including possible airstrips on Ladd, Pearson, and Tennent reefs.

Vietnam's rapid build-up is seen as an effort to enhance its year-round naval presence in the South China Sea, although analysts note its military capabilities still fall far behind China's. Beijing has long-established airstrips and advanced military facilities on Fiery Cross, Mischief, and Subi reefs, allowing it to dominate the area's skies and waters. Experts suggest Vietnam's strategy is more economically focused—linking maritime development with coastal economic zones and safeguarding access to marine resources. [Radio Free Asia 1]

These developments unfold as tensions rise over symbolic assertions of sovereignty. In a separate incident, authorities in Ho Chi Minh City launched an investigation into the Chinese tea brand Chagee after its mobile app displayed the controversial "nine-dash line"—China's map claim over much of the South China Sea. The line, which has been internationally rejected, triggered strong backlash in Vietnam. In response, Chagee removed all branding materials ahead of its store launch. Officials emphasized that only state-sanctioned maps may be used and warned the public against disseminating the disputed imagery online.

The controversy adds to a pattern of Vietnamese pushback against Chinese territorial assertions, following bans on products and films—like Barbie—that depict the nine-dash line. [Radio Free Asia 2]

Construction begins on USD 58.6 million Vietnam-China cross-border bridge

(lm) Construction has officially begun on a USD 58.6 million bridge across the Red River, linking Vietnam's Lao Cai Province and China's Yunnan Province. The total investment for the project is VND 1.5 trillion (approximately USD 58.6 million), with completion expected three months ahead of schedule by June 30, 2026.

In addition to the bridge, Vietnam is pursuing other major infrastructure projects, including the Sa Pa Airport, the Lao Cai-Ha Noi-Hai Phong Railway, and the expansion of the Noi Bai-Lao Cai Expressway. These initiatives are set to transform Lao Cai into a key trade hub between Vietnam, ASEAN countries, and southwestern China. [Viet Nam News]

Japan and Vietnam sign 25-year oil and gas partnership

(cmc) On March 31, Vietnam and Japan signed a 25-year production sharing contract (PSC) for oil and gas exploration in Block 15-2, located in the Cuu Long basin in Vietnam's southern waters. The agreement, which is set to begin on April 7, involves the Vietnam Oil and Gas Group (PetroVietnam), Japan Vietnam Petroleum Company Limited (JVPC, a subsidiary of Japan's ENEOS Xplora), and PetroVietnam Exploration Production Corporation (PVEP).

The contract is crucial for Vietnam's energy security and its oil recovery rate, especially after the enactment of the 2022 Law on Oil and Gas, which urges contractors to maximize productivity. Deputy Prime Minister Bui Thanh Son emphasized the importance of foreign investments, especially from advanced technological partners like Japan, to boost Vietnam's oil and gas sector and enhance its global standing.

The deal also aims to support Vietnam's economic growth, with Deputy Minister of Industry and Trade Nguyen Hoang Long noting that leveraging existing infrastructure and expertise will contribute to achieving the government's growth targets from 2025 onward. Additionally, it reaffirms Vietnam's sovereignty and rights in the East Sea, where the Block 15-2 project is located. [VietnamPlus] [Reuters]

Singapore and Vietnam deepen comprehensive strategic partnership with key agreements

(hn/lm) Singaporean Prime Minister Lawrence Wong concluded his first official visit to Vietnam on March 26, marking a significant advancement in bilateral relations following the recent elevation of Vietnam-Singapore ties to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) earlier in March 2025.

During the two-day visit, Prime Minister Wong met with all four of Vietnam's top leaders—Party General Secretary To Lam, President Luong Cuong, Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh, and National Assembly Chairman Tran Thanh Man—and witnessed the signing of multiple agreements that underscore the growing strategic, economic, and people-to-people ties between the two countries.

Five major agreements were signed in Hanoi across sectors including cross-border electricity trade, digital innovation, financial services, and bilateral QR code payment systems. A key focus was energy cooperation, with a letter of intent on cross-border electricity trade signed as part of broader ASEAN power grid initiatives. Discussions also advanced on the import of low-carbon energy into Singapore via renewable projects and subsea cable connectivity.

The two sides reaffirmed their commitment to swift implementation of the CSP, which sets the direction for deeper cooperation in strategic areas such as green and digital economies, carbon credits, sustainable infrastructure, cybercrime prevention, and food security. Prime Minister Wong noted Vietnam's potential as a major agricultural partner, while Prime Minister Chinh emphasized the importance of institutional reform, digital infrastructure, and human resource development—objectives closely aligned with Singapore's priorities.

Industrial cooperation was another highlight of the visit. PM Wong and PM Chinh broke ground on a new Vietnam-Singapore Industrial Park (VSIP) in Thai Binh, expanding the successful VSIP model to 20 parks across 14 provinces, which have attracted over USD 23 billion in investment and created 320,000 jobs. Four additional memoranda of understanding were signed to expand VSIPs in Hai Phong, Hung Yen, Hai Duong, and Binh Duong. Future parks will incorporate smart and green technologies, renewable energy, and advanced infrastructure.

Additional cooperation agreements were signed in areas such as biofuels, tourism promotion, agriculture, and scientific innovation. The Vietnam Biofuels Association signed an MoU with Singapore's Global Green Fuels Center, while the Tourism Development Support Fund partnered with Grab Vietnam to accelerate digital transformation in tourism. Thanh Thanh Cong-Bien Hoa Group and Nanyang Technological University agreed to enhance agricultural value chains through integrated platforms.

During a formal dinner, PM Wong praised Vietnam's economic achievements since the Doi Moi reforms and

affirmed Singapore's role in supporting Vietnam's development, noting that Singapore has trained over 22,000 Vietnamese officials through the Singapore Cooperation Programme. He also emphasized Singapore's growing Vietnamese community as a symbol of strong people-to-people ties. [Vnexpress, in Vietnamese] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore] [Channel NewsAsia] [The Straits Times] [The Investor]

Vietnam moves to reduce tariffs on US imports, approve Starlink ahead of potential trade tensions

(cmc/lm) In response to U.S. President Donald Trump's warning of potential tariffs on trading partners, Vietnam has proactively taken steps to strengthen its economic relationship with Washington.

Hanoi recently announced plans to reduce tariffs on goods such as liquefied natural gas (LNG), automobiles, and agricultural products. The tariff reductions, including lowering LNG tariffs from 5 percent to 2 percent, automobile tariffs from up to 64 percent to 32 percent, and ethanol from 10 percent to 5 percent, are intended to prevent potential U.S. tariffs and improve trade relations with the U.S. Vietnam's trade surplus with the U.S. reached USD 123 billion in 2024, a factor that prompted these tariff adjustments. [Channel NewsAsia]

In addition to the tariff reductions, Vietnam has also granted approval for SpaceX's Starlink satellite internet services under a five-year pilot program. The program, which allows up to 600,000 subscribers, will run until 2031. It enables SpaceX to operate without restrictions on foreign ownership, provided it complies with national defense and security principles. Starlink will be able to operate like other telecommunications companies, offering services directly to customers or collaborating with local businesses for distribution. [Bloomberg] [CNN] [Reuters]

Diplomatically, Vietnam continues to strengthen its strategic partnership with the U.S. During a meeting with U.S. Ambassador Marc Knapper, Vietnamese Party General Secretary To Lam emphasized the growth in economic, trade, and investment ties between the two countries. He highlighted Vietnam's commitment to importing more U.S. products, such as farm produce, LNG, and high-tech equipment, and fostering a favorable environment for U.S. businesses. The U.S. has recognized Vietnam's growing role in regional and global stability, with Ambassador Knapper expressing

support for Vietnam's policy of independence and self-reliance. [Viet Nam News]

However, complications arise from China's increased investment in Vietnam, which now accounts for nearly 30 percent of new projects. U.S. policymakers are concerned that Chinese firms may use Vietnam as a manufacturing hub to circumvent U.S. tariffs, potentially leading to heightened scrutiny of Vietnam's exports. In response, Vietnam is tightening regulations to prevent the illegal relabeling of Chinese goods as Vietnamese. [The Wall Street Journal]

In response to these challenges, Vietnam is tightening regulations to prevent the illegal relabeling of Chinese goods as Vietnamese. The effectiveness of this "trade charm offensive" in placating U.S. concerns remains uncertain as the Trump administration continues to monitor Vietnam's trade policies and economic partnerships. [South China Morning Post]

Belgian King on state visit in Vietnam

(cmc/lm) Vietnam has welcomed King Philippe and Queen Mathilde of Belgium for a state visit, marking the first head-of-state exchange between the two countries in over 50 years. The visit, running from March 31 to April 4, highlights the deepening political, diplomatic, and economic ties between the nations.

State President Luong Cuong chaired a welcome ceremony, followed by private and official meetings with King Philippe to discuss future cooperation. Vietnam and Belgium have built strong diplomatic relations since their establishment in 1973, and bilateral ties have grown across sectors such as trade, education, agriculture, and science. Belgium is Vietnam's sixth-largest trading partner in the EU, with trade turnover increasing significantly from USD 1.8 billion in 2013 to USD 4.45 billion in 2024. [Viet Nam News 1]

Deputy Prime Minister Bui Thanh Son also emphasized the importance of the EU-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement (EVFTA) and urged Belgium to expedite the ratification of the EU-Vietnam Investment Protection Agreement (EVIPA). This agreement, alongside enhanced bilateral cooperation in defense, technology, and innovation, is expected to further strengthen Vietnam's partnership with Belgium. The two nations have agreed to translate the outcomes of the royal visit into tangible actions and facilitate mutual visits at various levels.

In addition to economic ties, Belgium has supported Vietnam's efforts related to Agent Orange victims, highlighting the long-standing friendship between the two countries. The visit also sets the stage for greater collaboration in areas such as high technology, energy transition, and workforce development for sectors like semiconductors. [Viet Nam News 2]

Vietnam and Cyprus expand trade and investment ties amid 50th anniversary of relations

(lm) Vietnam and Cyprus have agreed to deepen economic and investment cooperation during a high-level visit by Vietnamese Ambassador to Italy and Cyprus Duong Hai Hung from March 27 to 28, marking 50 years of diplomatic relations.

A key highlight was the Vietnam–Cyprus Cooperation Forum 2025, co-organized in Nicosia by the Vietnamese Embassy and the Cyprus Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCCI). Over 30 leading Cypriot businesses attended, with discussions focused on trade, investment, labor, and real estate. Cypriot firms expressed strong interest in Vietnam's market, and sectors like pharmaceuticals, aviation training, finance, and logistics saw specific proposals.

Ambassador Hung emphasized Vietnam's commitment to stronger bilateral ties, particularly in light of Cyprus's March 14 ratification of the EU–Vietnam Investment Protection Agreement (EVIPA). He also urged greater use of the EU–Vietnam Free Trade Agreement (EVFTA). CCCI President Stavros Stavrius reaffirmed Cyprus's enthusiasm, announcing more trade missions to Vietnam.

During his visit, Hung met with Cypriot parliamentary and government officials, including Parliament Speaker Annita Demetriou, who proposed creating a Vietnam–Cyprus parliamentary group and congratulated Vietnam on its upcoming 50th reunification anniversary.

The ambassador called for Cyprus's continued support as it prepares to assume the EU's rotating presidency in 2026, particularly in addressing the EU's IUU "yellow card" on Vietnam and strengthening ASEAN–EU cooperation.

With its strategic location in the Eastern Mediterranean and EU membership since 2004, Cyprus offers Vietnamese exporters a key gateway to Europe and the MENA region. Its economy is centered on services,

including finance, maritime trade, and real estate. [Viet Nam News]

President of Burundi to pay official visit to Vietnam

(lm) President of Burundi Evariste Ndayishimiye and his spouse will pay an official visit to Vietnam from April 3 to 6. [Viet Nam News]

Australia to provide USD 61 million in development aid to Vietnam in 2025-26

(hn) Vietnam is set to receive AUD 96.6 million (USD 61 million) in official development assistance (ODA) from Australia for the 2025–26 fiscal year, according to a budget plan released by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. This marks a slight increase from the previous fiscal year.

The aid will support Vietnam's efforts to build an inclusive and self-reliant economy, enhance human resource development, strengthen climate resilience, and reduce carbon emissions. Since the establishment of diplomatic ties in 1973, Australia has provided approximately AUD 3 billion (USD 1.9 billion) in development assistance to Vietnam.

Past assistance includes major infrastructure such as the Cao Lanh Bridge, over 26 million COVID-19 vaccine doses, and more than 7,000 scholarships for Vietnamese citizens.

The new allocation is part of Australia's broader AUD 5.1 billion (USD 3.2 billion) global development budget, with AUD 1.3 billion (USD 820 million) earmarked for Southeast Asia. Australia aims to focus its support in the region on climate change adaptation, sustainable growth, health security, and community resilience. [Viet Nam News]

Vietnam deepens strategic partnership with Brazil during high-level state visit

(cmc/he) Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva concluded a three-day state visit to Vietnam on March 29, marking a major milestone in bilateral relations and reaffirming the countries' Strategic Partnership established in November 2024.

The visit brought together senior Brazilian ministers, lawmakers, and a large business delegation for meetings with all four of Vietnam's top leaders, emphasizing shared commitments to broaden cooperation in trade, defense, technology, renewable energy, and global governance. Brazil is currently Vietnam's largest trading partner in Latin America, and both countries now aim to capitalize on their complementary strengths—particularly in agriculture, aviation, and innovation—to expand cooperation amid shifting global trade dynamics. [Viet Nam News]

President Lula met with Party General Secretary To Lam, President Luong Cuong, Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh, and National Assembly Chairman Tran Thanh Man. In joint statements and discussions, both sides emphasized the need to deepen cooperation across six key pillars: political-security collaboration; economic, trade, and investment ties; science, technology, and innovation; climate change and environmental protection; people-to-people diplomacy; and consular and community support.

At the Vietnam–Brazil Economic Forum, President Lula and Prime Minister Chinh set a target to raise bilateral trade from nearly USD 8 billion in 2024 to USD 15 billion by 2030. Key agreements were signed to support this goal, including Vietnam's decision to open its market to Brazilian beef and Brazil's commitment to lifting import bans on Vietnamese tilapia and shrimp. Brazil also pledged to expedite reviews on pangasius imports.

Brazilian firms—including food giant JBS and aircraft manufacturer Embraer—joined the delegation, with Lula announcing potential investment of USD 100 million in a meat processing plant in Vietnam and the sale of up to 50 Embraer aircraft. Vietnam is also being considered as a regional hub for the assembly of Embraer jets for the ASEAN market. [Viet Nam News] [Reuters]

The visit also focused on strengthening Vietnam's engagement with the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR) and BRICS. Lula invited Prime Minister Chinh to the upcoming BRICS Summit in Brazil, furthering discussions on a potential free trade agreement between Vietnam and Mercosur. Vietnam, which first attended BRICS as an observer in 2024, is seen as a strategic partner for expanding Brazil's influence in ASEAN.

The Action Plan for 2025–2030, signed during the visit, charts a detailed roadmap for the Strategic Partnership, with provisions for collaboration in agriculture, energy transition, cybersecurity, artificial

intelligence, and education. A memorandum on football cooperation was also signed to promote cultural exchange and people-to-people ties. [Viet Nam News]

Announcements

Upcoming online events

2 April 2025 @ 9:00 a.m.– 12:15 p.m. (GMT-5), Stimson Institute, USA

Navigating Mainland Southeast Asia: Mekong Governance, Cyber Scams, and Regional Flashpoints

This Stimson Center event investigates American engagement in mainland Southeast Asia and the Mekong Region, including strategic alliances with Vietnam and Thailand, economic opportunity, and regional security issues. Experts will debate critical topics, such as conflict in Myanmar, conservation of the environment, human rights, and competition between the U.S. and China. The event will highlight Stimson's work on sustainable development, cleanup of war legacies, and cybersecurity. The speakers are from the U.S. Congress and Department of State, the argument will focus on why a successful, prosperous Southeast Asia is in America's interest. For more information and to RSVP online, see [Stimson Institute].

3 April 2025 @ 11:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. (GMT+2), Bruegel, Belgium

Sound of Economics Live: Trump’s tariffs and the EU

The Sound of Economics Live podcast addresses how Europe ought to react to Trump's trade policy and tariffs. Rebecca Christie is the host, and the guest experts are Uri Dadush, Ignacio Garcia Bercero, and Petros Mavroidis from Bruegel. They talk about US tariffs' effects on the EU, trade policy, and the general geopolitical consequences. This debate live features perspectives on transatlantic trade tensions and ways in which the EU can address challenges caused by the new protectionist policy of the U.S. administration. For more information, and to register online, please visit [Bruegel].

3 April 2025 @ 1:00 – 2:15 p.m. (GMT+2), Bruegel, Belgium

Making the best of the new EU Social Climate Fund

The event discusses the EU's new Emissions Trading System (ETS-2) and its implications for decarbonizing transport and buildings. While ETS-2 will reduce emissions and improve energy independence, it increases the price of fuel to the disadvantage of vulnerable households and SMEs. The Social Climate Fund (SCF) intervenes to mitigate these effects through revenue redistribution. Since Social Climate Plans are not required until June 2025, specialists will deliberate on how to enable ETS-2 to support a fair transition, balancing income support, investment incentives, and administrative feasibility. For more information, and to register online, see [Bruegel].

8 April 2025 @ 8:00 – 9:00 a.m. (GMT-5), Asia Society Policy Institute, USA

ASEAN Caught Between China's Export Surge and Global De-Risking: Navigating New Economic Realities

This article talks about how China's excess capacity in industry is reshaping ASEAN's supply chains and trade. While Chinese exports to ASEAN expanded 12% during 2024, ASEAN exports to China rose only 2%, domestic industries are becoming increasingly strained. ASEAN must balance deepening economic ties with China with Western de-risking. Speakers like Dr. Rebecca Sta Maria and Brendan Kelly will cover policy tools to

protect ASEAN's economy, preserve partnerships, and navigate long-term trade and investment challenges. The discussion is moderated by Shay Wester. For more information and to register online, please visit [Asia Society Policy Institute].

8 April 2025 @ 9:00 a.m. (GMT-5), International Crisis Group, USA

What's Driving the Red Sea Crisis and How to Stop It?

This webinar deals with escalating tensions in the Red Sea with resurgent fighting between the Houthis, the U.S., and Israel, precisely as Israel re-launches its war against Gaza. Drawing from Crisis Group's report Calming the Red Sea's Turbulent Waters, our panelists will discuss how the region has become a war zone, the reasons behind Houthi actions, and the possibilities for de-escalation. The webinar will examine how to avert greater militarisation and more conflict in this important maritime chokepoint. For more information, and to register, visit [International Crisis Group].

7 April 2025 @ 8:00 – 9:00 a.m. (GMT-5), Hudson Institute, USA

Evolving Issues in Regulation of Digital Platforms: A View from the UK and EU

This Hudson forum discusses the increasing EU and UK regulatory and antitrust scrutiny of online platforms. Experts will discuss main drivers of investigation, such as market power and competition issues. Agenda items feature the UK's Digital Markets Unit, the EU's Digital Markets Act, and recent antitrust investigations of big tech. The conference will also tackle issues in the definition and regulation of digital platforms and explore policy options outside classic competition law to promote fair digital market conduct. For more information, see [Hudson Institute].

3 April 2025 @ 2:00 – 5:30 p.m. (GMT+3), Finnish Institute of International Affairs, Finland

FIIA FORUM 2025: The key challenges and direction of Finnish foreign and security policy

This event analyzes the security environment of Finland in response to increasing geopolitical pressures and assaults on the rules-based international system. As external pressure mounts, and the boundary between peace and war becomes obscure, Finland also must contend with economic and technological vulnerabilities utilized in the global game. Finland's emerging national security strategy will be discussed by specialists and evaluated as its foreign and defense policy response. The forum will discuss Finland's strategic response during the period of higher threats, such as the threat of military attack and quick deterioration in security. For more information, see [FIIA].

3 April 2025 @ 12:00 – 1:00 p.m. (GMT+1), The International Institute for Strategic Studies, UK

Critical minerals and green industries in the Indo-Pacific

This IISS webinar examines the Indo-Pacific's geo-economics with specific regard to green industries, so-called critical minerals, and EV supply chains. In an era where China is the hegemon of materials like lithium and cobalt, their supply chains raise concerns in the U.S., EU, and UK. Export controls are ramping up tensions. Amano Tatsushi, Dr. Kristin Vekasi, and Dr. Suzuki Hitoshi will discuss Japan's leadership, economic security challenges in the global arena, and possible Japan-Europe cooperation for building supply-chain resilience in the transition towards clean energy. For more information, see [IISS].

8 April 2025 @ 10:30 – 11:30 a.m. (GMT-5), The Heritage Foundation, USA

Reclaiming the Culture of American Higher Education

This session reviews Trump's second term higher education reforms, including combating antisemitism, protecting free speech, and combating cultural and economic challenges facing academia. From ROI fear decline to culture crisis, US Department of Education presenters and college presidents will discuss innovative campuses such as the College of the Ozarks and Grand Canyon University. The conversation will discuss ways to enhance higher education, focusing on value-based education and a creative vision for

America's universities. For more information, please see [The Heritage Foundation].

Recent Book Releases

Jathan Sadowski, ***The Mechanic and the Luddite: A Ruthless Criticism of Technology and Capitalism***, University of California Press, 296 pages, published March 17, 2025. For a review, see [LSE].

Simon Sherratt, ***Propaganda and Power in the Age of Globalization: The Myths We Live By***, Routledge, 280 pages, published August 15, 2024. For a review, see [LSE].

Annie Karni and Luke Broadwater, ***Mad House: How Donald Trump, MAGA Mean Girls, a Former Used Car Salesman, a Florida Nepo Baby, and a Man with Rats in His Walls Broke Congress***, Penguin Random House, 320 pages, published March 25, 2025. For a review, see [Penguin Books].

Brian Goldstone, ***There Is No Place for Us: Working and Homeless in America***, Crown, 448 pages, published March 25, 2025. For a review, see [Penguin Books].

Kazu Haga, ***Fierce Vulnerability: Healing from Trauma, Emerging through Collapse***, Parallax Press, 224 pages, published March 25, 2025. For a review, see [Penguin Books].

Calls

The **Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC)** invites paper proposals for its ***International Conference "The crossroad of international environmental law: Paradoxes of energy transition and global inequalities,"*** to be held on September 3-4, 2025. The deadline for abstract submission is April 10, 2025. For more information, see [UOC].

The **Latin American Society of International Law (LASIL)** invites paper proposals for its ***pre-conference workshop "Narratives in International Courts and Tribunals,"*** to be held online June 25, 2025. The deadline for abstract submission is April 30, 2025. For more information, see [LASIL].

Jobs and Positions

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights - Switzerland is looking for an **Intern - Human Rights, Africa Branch**. The deadline for application submission is April 23, 2025. For more information, see [OHCHR].

IC Strategic Protocol and Communication Consultant – Serbia is looking for an **IC Strategic Protocol and Communication Consultant**. The deadline for application submission is April 7, 2025. For more information, see [UNDP].

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights – Switzerland is looking for a **Human Rights Officer (Tjo)**. The deadline for application submission is April 4, 2025. For more information, see [OHCHR].

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights- Bangladesh is looking for a **Human Rights Officer**. The deadline for application submission is April 5, 2025. For more information, see [OHCHR].

United Nations Development Programme – Turkey is looking for an **International Consultant on Violence Against Women Data, Homebased**. The deadline for application submission is December 29, 2025. For more information, see [UNDP].

United Nations Children's Fund is looking for a **Consultant - National Expert on Local Governance, Romania, Remote**. The deadline for application submission is April 6, 2025. For more information, see [UNICEF].

University of Copenhagen is looking for a **Postdoctoral Position in Law and Humanities**. The deadline for application submission is April 27, 2025. For more information, see [University of Copenhagen].

University of Reading is looking for a **Lecturer in International and Operational Law**. The deadline for application submission is April 21, 2025. For more information, see [University of Reading].

Cardiff International Study Centre is looking for a **Law Tutor**. The deadline for application submission is April 18, 2025. For more information, see [Cardiff International Study Centre].

Xi'an Jiaotong - Liverpool University is looking for a **Faculty Position in Business Law**. The deadline for application submission is May 18, 2025. For more information, see [Xi'an Jiaotong - Liverpool University]

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