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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 Georgia's National Unity Day this week.

With best regards,

Henning Glaser

Editor in Chief

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

China: Communist Party swaps roles of two Politburo members

(ld) In a historic reshuffle, China's Communist Party has swapped the roles of two Politburo members, Li Ganjie and Shi Taifeng, marking the first such exchange at this leadership level. Li, who previously led the Organization Department—overseeing cadre appointments and promotions—has now taken charge of the United Front Work Department, responsible for non-party outreach and influence campaigns targeting Hong Kong, Taiwan, and overseas Chinese communities. Shi, 68, who formerly headed the United Front Work Department, has assumed control of the Organization Department. State media confirmed their new role in reports on April 2. [Xinhua, in Chinese] [12371.cn, in Chinese]

The shake-up, reportedly finalized during a recent closed-door party meeting, marks the first instance of Politburo members directly exchanging roles mid-term since the current leadership cycle began in 2022. While

internal cadre rotations are common, analysts note such senior-level swaps are exceptional, reflecting President Xi Jinping's prioritization of loyalty and ideological alignment as he prepares for the 2027 party congress. [Lianhe Zaobao, in Chinese]

Li, the Politburo's youngest member and a nuclear safety technocrat, rose rapidly from environmental minister to Shandong province leadership before joining the Politburo in 2022. His predecessor in the Organisation Department, Chen Xi—a Xi confidant—had centralized personnel decisions, abandoning traditional retirement age norms and prioritizing technocrats for key roles.

Shi, a veteran of ethnic policy implementation, previously served as Inner Mongolia's party chief, where he enforced Mandarin education and cultural assimilation per Xi's vision. His earlier role as vice-president of the Central Party School under Xi (2007–2010) cemented their working relationship. [South China Morning Post]

Xi's decision to swap the heads of two top Communist Party departments underscores intensified efforts to ensure loyalty within the ruling elite, analysts say, amid a persistent anti-corruption campaign that has ousted senior defense and foreign affairs officials since 2022. The unprecedented exchange of roles between Li and Shi comes without explicit corruption allegations, but signals Xi's dissatisfaction with personnel vetting processes, according to experts. [Reuters]

China: Censorship follows death of liberal "Princeling" Hu Dehua

(lb) Hu Dehua, son of former Chinese Communist Party General Secretary Hu Yaobang, passed away on March 30 at the age of 77. His death triggered a fresh round of censorship across Chinese platforms, where posts and articles mourning him and his father were swiftly deleted. Hu Dehua had long been a vocal critic of China's political system, advocating for political reform and press freedom. He was one of the rare "princelings" –children of senior Chinese Communist Party leaders – who dared to challenge the party's rigid structures and express his views openly.

Known for his liberal stance, Hu Dehua's involvement with *Yanhuang Chunqiu*, a magazine dedicated to reflecting on China's past and calling for reform, marked a significant point in his career. Despite his role as vice president, his tenure was cut short in 2016 when the Communist Party authorities intervened and

replaced the senior editors. The incident, where Hu Dehua publicly condemned the government's actions, continues to be remembered as a moment of defiance. He was also an outspoken critic of the June 4th Movement's violent suppression, a topic that remains taboo in China. [DW, in Chinese] [South China Morning Post]

Hu Dehua's remarks on China's missed historical window for reform and his warnings about President Xi Jinping's increasingly centralized leadership made him a controversial figure. His openness on sensitive subjects and his critiques of the growing gap between the party's interests and those of the people, have ensured his place as a rare liberal voice within the Communist elite. He notably expressed his frustration with the unfulfilled potential for reform in China, especially concerning the reluctance to disclose assets, a transparency measure he believed was crucial for political accountability.

In addition to his political advocacy, Hu Dehua became embroiled in the 2016 Panama Papers leak, which exposed the offshore holdings of several Chinese elites, including his own. Although other officials denied involvement, Hu Dehua admitted to owning an offshore company, stating that he had "no assets and no business" associated with it. This admission, along with his outspoken views, made him a target of state censorship.

Following his death, even his family's mourning and attempts to honor his legacy were suppressed by the Chinese government, as authorities moved to erase traces of Hu Dehua's controversial life and reformist beliefs from public discourse. [New Tang Dynasty Television, in Chinese]

China: Research center at top think tank closed as ideological control tightens

(lb) China's most prominent state-run think tank, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), has shut down one of its public policy research centers amid a wider political crackdown. The decision reflects a deeper campaign to enforce ideological discipline and ensure academic institutions prioritize loyalty to the ruling Communist Party over independent research. [Table Briefings]

In a public statement, the CASS said it had closed the center and transferred its projects to the Institute of Economics, which operates under its authority. All part-time researchers were told to return to their

original departments, while the remaining staff were dismissed. The think tank also warned that any future activities under the center's former name would be considered illegal. CASS social media channels and the website linked to the center were immediately deactivated.

The closure comes in the wake of an internal investigation into Zhu Hengpeng, an economist who had led the now-defunct center and served as deputy director at the Institute of Economics. Zhu was reportedly removed from his post in May 2024 after he allegedly criticized China's economic policies during a group chat on the social media platform WeChat. He has not been seen publicly since April. [Epoch Times, in Chinese]

The CASS, historically a space for relatively liberal voices, has been undergoing a sweeping transformation. In August, the leadership of its economics institute was quietly replaced. This followed the launch of a major internal campaign in June, instructing scholars to place "absolute loyalty to the party" at the heart of their work. CASS president and party secretary Gao Xiang has emphasized that while the academy conducts research, it is first and foremost a political body.

Recent moves suggest Beijing is expanding the academy's role in ideological enforcement beyond economics. Last month, the CASS signed agreements with both the Hong Kong and Macau Work Office and authorities in Xinjiang to promote central government narratives around the "one country, two systems" framework and the integration of ethnic minorities. The academy is also taking on a politically sensitive project to write an official history of the Qing dynasty—China's last imperial era—which holds relevance for contemporary debates over territorial integrity and national identity. No such history has been completed since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. [South China Morning Post]

China: New Hong Kong police chief vows to prioritize national security

(lb) Zhou Yiming, Director of Crime and Security of the Hong Kong Police Force has been appointed as Hong Kong's new Police Commissioner, replacing John So, who was sanctioned by the United States over actions related to the national security law. [People's Daily]

Zhou's appointment came just one day after the abrupt retirement of his predecessor, Siu Chak-yee.

The transition was notably swift, with Zhou only being named hours before Su's leave began. Zhou's priorities, he stated, would focus on enhancing national security awareness, promoting technological advancements in policing, and fostering a cohesive team culture. While the National Security Law has stabilized Hong Kong, Zhou warned that threats, especially forms of "soft resistance" like media manipulation and cultural incitement, still exist. [RFI, in Chinese]

In response to recent U.S. sanctions targeting Hong Kong officials, including former Commissioner Siu Chak-yee, Zhou dismissed the actions as "barbaric" and counterproductive. He emphasized that these sanctions did not concern him and expressed confidence that the Hong Kong Police Force (HKPF) would continue to collaborate effectively with international law enforcement. Zhou further rejected any notion that these sanctions would hinder the force's operations, reaffirming the HKPF's commitment to law enforcement and national security [People's Daily].

Zhou's law enforcement career spans more than two decades, with extensive experience in criminal investigation and intelligence work. During the 2019 anti-government protests, he played a central role in the high-profile operation at Polytechnic University, where police confronted protestors for several weeks. His swift rise through the ranks reflects his pivotal role in maintaining order during Hong Kong's most significant political unrest in recent years. [RFI, in Chinese]

China: Public health care concerns raised over soaring obesity rates

(lb) China is bracing for a public health crisis as projections warn that more than 65 percent of adults could be overweight or obese by 2030. Once a nation plagued by famine, China now faces rising cases of chronic diseases, including hypertension, diabetes, and heart conditions, that are increasingly linked to lifestyle factors. The National Health Commission (NHC) is leading efforts to reverse the trend, implementing national diet and fitness campaigns, and rolling out multidisciplinary "weight management clinics" in hospitals.

A 2024 study published in *The Lancet* estimates that more than 400 million Chinese adults were overweight or obese by 2021, with that figure expected to rise to 630 million by 2050. These estimates use the World

Health Organization's [WHO] benchmark for obesity, but China's own health authorities apply a lower threshold. In China, individuals with a body mass index (BMI) over 24 are considered overweight, while a BMI over 28 is classified as obese. Based on this national standard, the NHC predicts a 65 percent overweight or obesity rate by 2030. [Southeast Net, in Chinese]

The economic implications are staggering. By the end of this decade, China is expected to spend more than USD 57 billion (CNY 418 billion) annually treating overweight and obese patients. This would account for roughly 22 percent of the national health budget—up from just eight percent in 2022. The government's response also extends to children, with nearly one third of those over the age of seven projected to be overweight or obese by 2030. In response, the Ministry of Education is mandating daily outdoor activity in schools and reducing academic pressure, though implementation has been inconsistent. [South China Morning Post]

China: Plans for smart, digitized environmental monitoring network advancing

(lb) China is accelerating the digital transformation of its national ecological environment monitoring system, aiming for full integration of smart technologies by 2030. The Ministry of Ecology and Environment unveiled the "National Ecological Environment Monitoring Network Digital Transformation Plan," which outlines a two-step roadmap to overhaul existing systems into an intelligent, automated, and data-driven network.

By 2027, the ministry plans to pilot a new generation of environmental monitoring in key regions using unmanned maintenance, intelligent sampling, and standardized operations. These efforts are part of a broader top-level design strategy to incorporate advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence, digital twins, and virtual reality into routine monitoring practices. Remote sensing and real-time equipment will play a key role in upgrading the existing infrastructure for air, water, and biodiversity tracking. [Xinhua]

The government intends to systematically revamp the national network by 2030 to include an integrated aerial, terrestrial, and maritime system. This "smart brain" will link monitoring stations across sectors using real-time data feeds and AI-powered analysis. According to the plan, future technologies will reduce

on-site maintenance by over 70 percent, lower manual water sampling costs by more than 50 percent, and automatically detect human interference in environmental data with 80 percent accuracy.

To support these changes, China is also fostering its environmental protection equipment manufacturing industry. Jointly with other national agencies, the environment ministry is pushing policies to develop environmental monitoring robots and remote operation tools. The rollout of next-generation perception technologies such as light scattering, stereo telemetry, and acoustic recognition is expected to improve monitoring accuracy and service efficiency. A central data resource hub will integrate environmental and cross-sectoral data—such as meteorology and hydrology—into a unified analysis platform, creating a robust digital ecosystem for pollution control and ecosystem quality evaluation. [China Securities Journal]

China: Rights activist sentenced over Taiwan inauguration dinner

(lb) Chongqing-based human rights activist Chen Mingyu has been sentenced to two years and six months in prison for participating in a private dinner on May 20, 2024, to mark the inauguration of Taiwan's President Lai Ching-te. The Yubei District Court in Chongqing handed down the sentence on March 26, convicting her of "picking quarrels and provoking trouble," a broadly defined charge often used to target critics of the Chinese government. Chen has appealed the ruling and stated in court that her actions were legal under China's Constitution, which guarantees freedom of expression and assembly. [Radio Free Asia]

The dinner, attended by more than twenty activists, triggered a wave of detentions. Chen was arrested on July 4, 2024, and subjected to a months-long process of criminal detention, formal arrest, and prosecution before her trial. During the sentencing, Chen was visibly angry and rejected the court's verdict, declaring her innocence and accusing the authorities of violating legal norms. Her son, Yuan Chang, who attended the trial, said he felt manipulated by the police into staying silent and believed his silence contributed to the outcome. [Epoch Times, in Chinese]

Chen has a long history of activism rooted in personal tragedy. Over twenty-five years ago, her brother, Chen Minghua, was fatally shot by police during a land dispute. His body was forcibly cremated, and his ashes have not been returned. Since then, Chen has campaigned against government corruption and land

seizures, including the demolition of her family's home in 2014. These efforts have led to repeated abductions and harassment by unidentified agents, including two incidents in 2019 and 2020 where she was forcibly taken and prevented from traveling. [Beijing Spring, in Chinese]

Rights groups argue that Chen's sentence reflects escalating repression of dissent in China. Expressing political opinions—whether in support of Taiwan's democratic process or in criticism of Russia's actions in Ukraine—is increasingly criminalized as part of a broader crackdown meant to stifle grassroots activism and suppress independent voices. [Radio Free Asia]

China: British Ineos acquires deepwater gulf stakes as CNOOC withdraws from U.S. market

(lb) British energy firm Ineos has finalized the acquisition of Chinese oil major CNOOC's offshore oil and gas assets in the United States. The deal, valued at approximately USD 2 billion, gives Ineos non-operating interests in Shell's Appomattox platform and Hess' Stampede platform, alongside several mature assets and associated business units. [Maritime Executive]

This is Ineos' third major energy investment in the United States in three years. In 2023, the company acquired shale oil operations in Texas and signed an LNG agreement with Sempra. With the addition of deepwater assets in the Gulf of Mexico, Ineos strengthens its position in the U.S. energy market while pursuing a broader strategy focused on secure, long-term energy supply and carbon storage initiatives. [Maritime Executive]

CNOOC's divestment reflects a broader shift away from Western markets amid rising geopolitical tensions. In 2022, as relations between China and the United States deteriorated, the company reportedly considered exiting assets in Canada, Britain, and the U.S. to mitigate political risk. The sale of its U.S. portfolio marks a significant step in this shift. [Nikkei Asia

Despite its retreat from the U.S. domestic market, CNOOC continues to hold substantial interests abroad. Notably, it retains a 25 percent stake in ExxonMobil's Stabroek Block off the coast of Guyana—one of the most strategic offshore oil developments globally. This suggests that while CNOOC is reducing direct exposure to U.S. regulatory environments, it remains an active investor in key international energy ventures [CNOOC].

China: Fitch downgrades sovereign debt rating over debt risks and tariffs

(ld) Fitch Ratings has downgraded China's long-term foreign currency credit rating from A+ to A, citing concerns over rising government debt levels and the economic impact of escalating U.S. tariffs. The agency highlighted China's increasing fiscal spending to counter deflationary pressures and support growth, which it predicts will widen budget deficits and push the debt-to-GDP ratio higher in coming years. The decision, announced on April 3, followed U.S. President Donald Trump's proposal to impose reciprocal tariffs of 34 percent on Chinese goods, though Fitch noted its analysis preceded this latest trade escalation. [Fitch Ratings]

China's finance ministry strongly criticized the downgrade as "biased," asserting the economy maintains "stable foundations" and "long-term favorable conditions" for high-quality development. The ministry pledged to continue proactive fiscal policies and moderately loose monetary measures to stimulate growth, state media Xinhua reported. While China issues minimal foreign currency debt, recent sovereign bond offerings—including a USD 2 billion dollar-denominated bond in Saudi Arabia last November and a CNY 6 billion (USD 823 million) green bond in London this week—have drawn robust investor demand, underscoring global market confidence. [Xinhua, in Chinese]

Fitch revised its outlook on China's rating to "stable" despite tariff uncertainties, stating the current rating accommodates potential growth and fiscal risks. The downgrade follows Moody's December 2023 decision to lower its China outlook to negative over property sector risks and medium-term growth concerns. Analysts note China's bond market remains insulated from international rating actions, as domestic institutions dominate holdings. Danske Bank economist Allan von Mehren emphasized that high domestic savings and expected central bank liquidity measures will likely ensure sufficient demand for government debt issuance. [Financial Times]

China: Mainland services activity rises to three-month high

(ld) China's services sector activity expanded at the fastest pace in three months in March 2025, according

to a private survey released on April 3 by Caixin and S&P Global. The services purchasing managers' index (PMI) rose to 51.9 from 51.4 in February, marking the highest reading since December 2024. Growth was driven by stronger domestic demand, with new business orders rising at the quickest rate in three months, though export orders remained flat. The findings align with China's official non-manufacturing PMI, which edged up to 50.3 from 50.0. [Caixin, in Chinese] [National Bureau of Statistics, in Chinese]

The rebound prompted Standard Chartered to revise its first-quarter GDP growth forecast for China to 5.2 percent year-on-year, up from 4.8 percent, citing stronger-than-expected economic activity in early 2025. However, the outlook faces risks after U.S. President Donald Trump announced new tariffs targeting Chinese imports, including a 34 percent baseline levy on top of existing 20 percent duties, bringing the total to 54 percent. Analysts warn the move could disrupt China's export momentum and strain its manufacturing sector, which could indirectly dampen consumer confidence and hiring in the services industry. [Reuters 1]

The services sector, which employed 48 percent of China's workforce and contributed 56.7 percent of GDP in 2023, showed mixed signals in March. While business optimism improved on expectations of supportive government policies, employment levels contracted at the sharpest pace in 11 months due to staff resignations and cost-driven redundancies. Input costs for service providers rose slightly, but companies absorbed these expenses by reducing output charges at the fastest rate in six months, signaling competitive pressures.

Economists urged Chinese policymakers to adopt "more proactive and decisive" measures to counter external headwinds and sustain recovery. Separately, scholars called for expanded government support for the services sector, arguing that existing initiatives like consumer goods trade-in subsidies are insufficient to drive broader consumption growth. [Reuters 2]

Hong Kong private sector PMI hits nine-month low

Meanwhile, Hong Kong's private sector activity contracted further in March as the city's PMI fell to a nine-month low of 48.3, according to seasonally adjusted data released on April 3 by S&P Global. This marks the second consecutive month below the 50-point threshold separating economic expansion from contraction, signaling weakening business conditions amid persistent U.S.-China trade tensions and new tariff threats.

The latest PMI reading reflects Hong Kong's worst quarterly performance since mid-2023, driven by the sharpest decline in new orders since June 2022. S&P Global analysts attributed the downturn to slowing economic growth, intensifying market competition, and global trade uncertainties that have dampened both domestic and external demand. Export orders from mainland China and international markets showed accelerated contraction during the period. [S&P Global]

The report also noted business confidence has deteriorated to its lowest level in four-and-a-half years, with firms expressing particular concern about global economic prospects, trade barriers, and heightened market competition. [Lianhe Zaobao, in Chinese]

Multiple research institutions have revised down 2024 growth forecasts for Hong Kong's economy. The University of Hong Kong (HKU)'s APEC Study Program estimates first-quarter growth at 1.6 percent—matching 2023 Q2 levels—before accelerating to 2.5 percent in Q2. The Mastercard Economic Institute (MEI) projects Hong Kong's GDP growth will slow to 2.2 percent in 2025 from last year's 2.5 percent, citing pressures from Hong Kong's U.S. dollar-linked exchange rate system that maintains high interest rates and a strong local currency. This monetary environment continues to strain retail, tourism, and real estate sectors while exposing the city to potential U.S. tariff impacts through its close economic ties with mainland China. [HKU] [MEI]

China: Course for agri-tech dominance and food self-sufficiency by 2035 set

(lb/dql) China has launched a comprehensive plan to modernize its agriculture sector by 2035, focusing on food self-sufficiency, technological innovation, and revitalization of rural areas. The roadmap—issued jointly by the Communist Party of China Central Committee and the State Council—sets a vision to transform agriculture into a strategic pillar of national strength by mid-century. Short-term targets include raising annual grain production to 700 million metric tons and improving rural living standards by 2027.

The plan places food security at the top of the agenda. It emphasizes protecting 124 million hectares of arable land and building high-standard farmland, particularly in Northeast China and the major plains. China will increase the yields of rice, wheat, and oilseeds, while enhancing livestock and dairy production. The strategy also includes reforming grain storage and distribution

systems and improving subsidies, insurance, and price protection mechanisms to better support farmers. [China Daily]

Technological self-reliance is central to the plan. The government aims to achieve breakthroughs in seed technology, digital agriculture, and precision farming. Initiatives will focus on building smart farming systems that integrate artificial intelligence, big data, and satellite monitoring. Significant investments are also planned for intelligent agricultural machinery and domestic production of critical machinery components, aligning with a wider national push to upgrade industrial equipment by at least 25 percent from 2023 to 2027.

Beyond production, the plan promotes a holistic transformation of rural economies. Rural industries such as e-commerce, food processing, and tourism will be expanded to raise incomes and create jobs. Training programs and agricultural cooperatives will empower smallholder farmers. In terms of global positioning, China will deepen agricultural trade cooperation and gradually open the sector to foreign investment. The country will also explore alternative food sources like synthetic biology and marine-based production, reflecting a broader strategy to build a resilient, diversified food system. [Global Times]

This initiative comes against the backdrop of tensions with the United States, an economic slowdown, and challenges posed by climate change. China, heavily reliant on imports from countries like Brazil and the U.S., seeks to diversify its import sources and boost domestic production. In 2024, China surpassed 700 million metric tons in grain output, underscoring early success. [Reuters]

Meanwhile, China's new tariffs on U.S. agricultural goods (see article in this edition) will strain both countries' farm sectors, with American exporters—especially in Republican-leaning Midwest states—facing significant losses. Beijing is betting on its increased domestic resilience since the initial U.S.-China trade war under Trump, and on the greater vulnerability of U.S. farmers.

Soybeans exemplify the shift. Despite recent imports totaling over 16 million tons from November to February—a 50 percent year-on-year increase—China has largely replaced U.S. soybeans with Brazilian ones, which accounted for over 70 percent of imports in 2024. China has also reduced its reliance on U.S. corn and wheat, favoring suppliers like Brazil, Australia, and Kazakhstan.

Chinese agricultural stocks have risen sharply, reflecting government efforts to boost self-sufficiency. Despite higher prices for Brazilian soybeans, the U.S. crop—favored for its lower moisture content—remains valuable for stockpiling, though overall U.S. sales to China have dwindled to minimal levels. [The Business Times]

China: Space capabilities expanded with twin satellite launches

(lb) China has launched two new satellites in the first days of April 2025, marking its growing commitment to space-based communications, radar calibration, and environmental monitoring. The launches are part of a broader effort to strengthen China's space infrastructure and strategic capabilities.

A Long March-2D rocket carried a test satellite for satellite internet technology into orbit from the Jiuquan Satellite Launch Center in northwest China. The satellite will be used to verify technologies including mobile-to-satellite broadband connections and the integration of space-ground networks. According to official reports, this was the 567th mission of the Long March rocket series. [People's Daily Online]

Two days later, a second satellite, Tianping-3A 02, was launched from the Taiyuan Satellite Launch Center in northern Shanxi Province aboard a Long March-6 rocket. This satellite will support the calibration of ground-based radar systems, radar cross-section measurements, and imaging experiments involving optical equipment. It will also collect data on the low-orbit space environment and assist with orbital prediction models. [State Council of the PRC].

These missions form part of a broader pattern of increasingly frequent and strategically aligned launches by China. While the stated purposes of the launches are scientific and technical, they are taking place against a backdrop of heightened geopolitical tension and military reform. The expansion of space capabilities, particularly those that support radar and satellite internet systems, has strategic implications for both civilian and defense infrastructure. [TRT World]

Beijing's growing investment in dual-use technologies —including satellite internet and remote sensing— parallels similar trends in other major powers. These efforts are also seen as reinforcing China's economic and security independence, especially in the face of US-led efforts to decouple critical technologies. With the 568th Long March mission now complete, the pace

and purpose of China's space program signal its broader ambition to become a dominant space power. [State Council of the PRC]

Japan: Lawmakers push for consumption tax cut amid economic pressure

(adi) A cross-party group of Japanese lawmakers has called for a reduction in the national consumption tax to support households and stimulate domestic demand, amid rising living costs and renewed external trade pressure.

Proponents argue that a temporary reduction in the current 10 percent consumption tax rate would help offset inflationary burdens, including food and energy price increases, and soften the impact of recent U.S. tariffs on Japanese exports. The proposal comes as the government faces mounting calls to cushion economic headwinds affecting both consumers and businesses.

The Japan Innovation Party and the Democratic Party for the People – both opposition parties – have publicly endorsed the idea, with some members of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party also showing interest. However, the Ministry of Finance remains cautious, citing concerns over fiscal sustainability and the risk of increasing the country's already high public debt.

The debate over the tax cut is expected to gain further traction ahead of the House of Councillors election in the summer, as political parties shape their economic platforms. While the government has not ruled out further stimulus, senior officials have indicated that targeted relief measures may be preferred over a broad-based tax reduction.

The discussion takes place against the backdrop of slowing global growth and heightened trade tensions. Japan's export sector has been hit by new reciprocal tariffs introduced by the Trump administration in late March, intensifying pressure on the domestic economy. [The Japan Times]

Japan: Activists fight rising hostility toward foreign communities

(dql) A recent incident has drawn attention towards xenophobia in Japan. In late March, members of Japan's Kurdish community gathered in Akigase Park, Saitama, to celebrate Newroz, the Kurdish New Year and spring festival. The festival was disrupted by

Yusuke Kawai, a local city councillor known for anti-Kurdish rhetoric, who denounced the event as a "terrorist gathering." However, Japanese supporters quickly confronted and drove him away, with police intervening to separate opposing sides. Protesters emphasized that combating anti-Kurdish hate is a broader issue of Japanese society, not just a Kurdish one.

Since 2024, anti-hate activists have organized regular "stand-ins" near Warabi Station to counter rising hostility toward foreign communities. Protesters, many of them unaffiliated locals, say they are responding to a long-standing pattern of discrimination that has shifted from targeting Filipinos to Kurds.

Local support initiatives also exist. Tatsuhiro and Madoka Nukui run Heval, a nonprofit supporting Kurdish integration through language classes and school assistance. Though they've received over 120 pieces of hate mail, mostly from outside Saitama, local cooperation remains strong. Nukui stressed the need for systemic solutions to help foreigners integrate, beyond volunteer efforts.

Meanwhile, Japan's legal community is taking action: an 83-member group of lawyers filed a lawsuit against a man who repeatedly harassed the Kurdish community, building on a court order restricting his activities. They hope the case leads to broader anti-discrimination ordinances. [Kyodo News]

Japan: Number of unclaimed bodies rises amid growing elderly isolation

(adi) Japan recorded approximately 42,000 unclaimed bodies in fiscal year 2023, according to a government-commissioned survey, reflecting the social impact of an aging population and the rise in single-person households.

The figure, compiled by the Japan Research Institute for the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, represents 2.7 percent of total deaths during the calendar year. In such cases, municipal authorities assumed responsibility for cremation and burial.

The trend is linked to a growing number of elderly individuals living alone without immediate family. The survey found that only 11.3 percent of municipalities had formal procedures in place to manage unclaimed remains, while 43.5 percent lacked any such systems. Some officials noted difficulties arising when relatives attempt to claim remains post-cremation.

The National Institute of Population and Social Security Research projects that single-person households will account for 44.3 percent of all households by 2050. In response, certain local governments have introduced preventative measures. Yokosuka City, for instance, assists low-income elderly residents in arranging end-of-life plans with funeral service providers.

The findings underscore the growing administrative and ethical challenges posed by demographic shifts, highlighting the need for clearer policy frameworks and community-based support systems. [Kyodo News]

Japan: Soaring apartment prices in Tokyo pressure even high-income couples

(dql) Residential land values in Japan are rising alongside a surge in condominium prices, particularly in Tokyo, where the average cost of a new apartment has surpassed JPY 100 million (approx. USD 660,000). This trend is prompting even high-earning dual-income couples—commonly known as "power couples"—to shift toward purchasing detached houses, which offer better value for money and fewer long-term costs.

According to the Real Estate Economic Institute, the national average price for new condominiums reached JPY 60.82 million (USD 405,000) in 2024—the highest since records began in 1973. Prices have been increasing for eight consecutive years, with the Tokyo average exceeding JPY 100 million (USD 687,000) for two years running. Rising construction costs—driven by high material prices and labor shortages linked to new overtime regulations—are fueling this trend.

To maintain profits, developers are focusing on premium areas where high prices are still sustainable, contributing to regional price polarization. This intensifies competition for land, especially in branded neighborhoods like Jiyugaoka and Minami-Aoyama, where foreign interest is also driving up prices. Land auctions now frequently attract a mix of midsize developers, vacation rental businesses, and housing firms. [The Mainichi]

Japan: Government, central bank, and business leaders express concern over U.S. tariff measures

(adi) Japan has voiced continued concern over the Trump administration's imposition of reciprocal tariffs,

as a direct appeal by Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba failed to defuse tensions. In a meeting with U.S. President Donald Trump on April 7, Ishiba called for the withdrawal of the measures, warning of economic damage and a departure from multilateral trade norms. Trump, however, reiterated accusations of unfair trade practices and maintained his administration's protectionist stance. [Asahi Shimbun]

Already last week, Japan expressed strong disappointment and "serious concern" over the U.S. decision to impose a 24 percent reciprocal tariff on Japanese products, with Ishiba warning that the measure would harm bilateral economic ties, global trade, and multilateral systems.

Economy Minister Yoji Muto conveyed Japan's concerns to U.S. Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick, noting the tariffs would discourage Japanese investment in the U.S. and damage both economies. Tokyo is exploring potential retaliatory measures while emphasizing that the new tariffs may violate WTO rules and the Japan-U.S. trade agreement.

Japan, a strong proponent of free trade, has highlighted the significant investments its firms have made in the U.S. economy in an effort to secure exemptions. The government criticized the unilateral action despite previous appeals and warned that the tariff hike could worsen Japan's economic uncertainty amid rising domestic costs.

President Trump justified the tariffs by citing imbalanced trade and alleged high Japanese duties, including a claimed 700 percent rice tariff—an assertion Japan's agriculture minister called "incomprehensible."

Automobiles and rice remain highly sensitive sectors for Japan. In response to the tariffs, the government instructed the ruling Liberal Democratic Party's policy chief to consider countermeasures and plans to establish 1,000 consultation centers to support affected small and medium enterprises. [Kyodo News]

The Bank of Japan (BOJ), meanwhile, has also flagged risks to the domestic economy. BOJ Governor Kazuo Ueda said the new tariffs threaten to reduce external demand and weigh on Japan's fragile post-pandemic recovery. [Reuters 1]

The financial sector has already been affected. Japanese bank shares declined sharply, with the Topix Banks Index falling over 4 percent on April 4. Investors expressed concern about weakening export growth

and a deterioration in global economic conditions. [Reuters 2]

Amid the uncertainty, Japanese automakers are reassessing their production strategies. Nissan Motor Co., for instance, is reportedly considering shifting part of its domestic manufacturing to the United States to mitigate potential losses under the new tariff regime. [Reuters 3]

Japan: Defense ministry launches new maritime unit

(adi) Japan's Defense Ministry has launched the Maritime Transportation Group to enhance the Self-Defense Forces' (SDF) capacity to rapidly deploy personnel and equipment to remote islands, particularly in the country's southwest.

Defense Minister Gen Nakatani attended the inauguration ceremony in Kure, Hiroshima Prefecture. He described the establishment of the new unit as "a historically important step," highlighting its joint structure involving both the Ground Self-Defense Force (GSDF) and the Maritime Self-Defense Force (MSDF). The unit, operational since March 24 and headquartered in Kure, currently comprises around 100 personnel. It operates under the direct control of the defense minister. Plans are underway to expand the group's fleet to 10 transport vessels by March 2028, with two ships already completed. While the vessels are captained by MSDF officers, the majority of crew members are GSDF personnel trained by the MSDF.

The Maritime Transportation Group is intended to support the GSDF's Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade, based in Sasebo, Nagasaki Prefecture, by facilitating rapid movement in emergency situations. The move comes amid increasing regional tensions, particularly in the Taiwan Strait, and growing concerns over the defense of Japan's southwestern islands, including the contested Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea. [Kyodo News]

Japan: Two individuals referred to prosecutors for aiding North Korean in identity fraud case

(adi) Japanese police have referred two individuals to prosecutors for allegedly helping a North Korean

national unlawfully obtain resident status through identity fraud, according to law enforcement authorities.

The suspects, a man in his 60s and a woman in her 50s, are accused of assisting the individual—who entered Japan in 1999 and has since resided under a false identity—in obtaining a residence card and other official documents. Investigators believe the suspects were aware of the North Korean national's true identity and nationality.

The North Korean man, who claimed South Korean nationality and assumed a false name, allegedly used forged documents to secure legal residency. Police are currently considering further legal action against him and continue to investigate whether the group received instructions from Pyongyang or related organizations.

The incident raises renewed concerns over illicit North Korean activities in Japan, including cases involving identity fraud, espionage, and financial operations. The case is also drawing attention in the context of Japan's broader counterintelligence efforts and efforts to monitor entities affiliated with North Korea. [Kyodo News]

Japan: More than 100 arrested in joint operation targeting online child abuse

(dql) 111 individuals aged 14 to 68 were arrested in a nationwide crackdown on online child sexual exploitation conducted in February and March, as Japan's National Police Agency reported on April 4.The operation, which targeted offenses such as the possession and distribution of child pornography, marked Japan's first participation in a coordinated international investigation alongside Singapore, South Korea, Hong Kong, and others.

The joint effort, conducted from February 24 to March 28, led to a total of 544 arrests across participating countries and regions. Some arrests in Japan resulted from intelligence shared through international cooperation, underscoring the value of cross-border collaboration.

Those apprehended in Japan included high school teachers, preparatory school lecturers, company employees, and teenage students. The agency affirmed its commitment to enhancing international cooperation to combat online child exploitation. [Kyodo News]

Japan: Number of yakuza members drops to record low

(dql) The number of *yakuza* members and associates in Japan fell to a record low of 18,800 by the end of 2024, dropping below 20,000 for the first time since records began in 1958, according to data released by the National Police Agency (NPA). This continued decline reflects the impact of sustained crackdowns since 2005, with arrests of *yakuza* members totaling 8,249 last year, a fall of 1,361 on the previous year, marking the lowest number recorded.

In contrast, 10,105 individuals affiliated with anonymous, loosely structured ad hoc criminal groups known as *tokuryu* that have emerged as alternatives to traditional yakuza organizations, were investigated in 2024 for profit-driven crimes, marking the first full-year enforcement statistics on such groups. These groups have been increasingly linked to violent robberies, social media scams, and other fraud schemes, with losses estimated at around JPY 200 billion (approx. USD 1.4 billion). [The Japan Times]

Among the suspects, 3,925 were recruited via social media through promises of illicit "yami baito" (underground part-time work). Of those apprehended, 5,203 were involved in five major crimes—fraud (2,655 cases), theft (991), drug offenses (917), robbery (348), and adult entertainment law violations (292). An additional 4,902 individuals were implicated in offenses such as bank account trafficking and money laundering.

While 633 suspects were identified as masterminds or coordinators, they were mostly mid-level operatives, indicating that the top leadership remains elusive. Authorities have also found evidence of yakuza groups profiting from tokuryu activities, sometimes by integrating them under their networks, with current or former gang members involved in such crimes. [Kyodo News] [The Asahi Shimbun]

Mongolia: New legislation on health and police reform proposed

(fs) Mongolian Members of Parliament Chinburen Jigjidsuren, Ariunzaya Ayush, Aldarjavkhlan Jukov, and Batsumberel Natsagdorj submitted the draft Law on Organ and Tissue Transplantation to Chairman of the

State Great Khural Amarbayasgalan Dashzegve on March 31.

The proposed law aims to modernize Mongolia's health sector by enabling advanced medical procedures and ensuring a regulated policy for organ and tissue transplants from deceased donors, improving the quality and accessibility of transplantation services. [Montsame 1]

A draft Law on Blood Donation was also submitted that same day, seeking to address concerns over Mongolia's declining proportion of active blood donors, particularly those aged 24–45. The bill aims to strengthen the legal framework governing blood donation, enhance public awareness and training, and improve accessibility in rural areas.

Parliament members emphasized that the law would establish social welfare provisions and incentives for donors, encouraging broader participation. Additionally, it is expected to ensure a stable supply of blood and blood products, particularly during disasters and public health emergencies. [Montsame 2]

Separately, on April 4, Member of Parliament Tsogtbaatar Damdin submitted a draft Law on Amendments to the Law on Police Service.

The proposed changes include introducing fixed terms for police leadership positions and setting legal grounds for early dismissal when necessary. The draft also aims to enhance transparency in police operations and improve public communication to prevent crime.

Additionally, it seeks to classify refusal by officers to work in assigned territories as a prohibited act. [Montsame 3]

Mongolia: Ulaanbaatar mayor announces dissolution of two city agencies

(fs) Ulaanbaatar Mayor Khishgeegiin Nyambaatar has announced the dissolution of the Capital City Registration Office and the Capital City Child and Family Development and Protection Agency, citing redundancy in government functions.

The Registration Office is responsible for organizing and implementing state registration activities, while the Child and Family Development Agency coordinates government policies on family, children, and youth welfare. However, similar functions are already performed by district-level offices.

Nyambaatar emphasized the need for a more efficient public administration, stating that maintaining overlapping structures contradicts efforts to optimize government operations. As part of broader cost-cutting measures, the city also plans to eliminate certain project units. [Sonin]

Mongolia: Construction of railway to Khushig Valley to begin in April

(fs) The construction of a 102 km railway connecting Bagakhangai station to Khushig Valley, in the northern part of the country, is set to begin by late April, with completion expected by August 20.

Mongolia's Minister of Road and Transport Delgersaikhan Borkhuu held a consultation with road and bridge construction companies, highlighting the project's role in developing a satellite city of 150,000 people in Khushig Valley, located around 50 km from the capital city Ulaanbaatar. The city will feature a free economic zone, as well as industrial and transport logistics areas.

The meeting, attended by over 100 industry representatives, also addressed broader cooperation in infrastructure and transport development projects planned for 2025. [Montsame]

Mongolia: Government to resume open trading of domestic bonds

(fs) Starting April 16, the Ministry of Finance of Mongolia will resume open trading of domestic government securities for the first time in eight years.

The initiative aims to support the securities market and establish a benchmark interest rate for tugrik-denominated bonds. The government is offering low-risk, tax-exempt, and highly liquid bonds, which can also be used as collateral.

This move is expected to align bond valuation with international standards, enhance transparency, and attract institutional investors. [Montsame]

Mongolia: New wastewater treatment plant nears completion

(fs) The construction of Mongolia's second central wastewater treatment plant, delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, is nearing completion.

According to the Ministry of Construction and Urban Development, 98 percent of construction work is finished, while 91 percent of equipment installation is underway.

The facility, located on a 17.6-hectare site in Songinokhairkhan District (Ulaanbaatar), west of the existing plant, began construction in 2020. Handover to the State Commission is scheduled to begin in June 2025 in four stages.

Full-scale operations are expected by October 2025, with the plant capable of treating 250,000 cubic meters of household and industrial wastewater daily to meet environmental standards.

The USD 262.7 million project is financed 95 percent by China and five percent by Mongolia. [News.mn]

North Korea: Increase in under-five mortality rate recorded for second consecutive year

(fn) In 2023, North Korea's under-five mortality rate increased for the second consecutive year, reaching 18 per 1,000 live births, according to United Nations statistics. This marks an increase from 17.72 in 2022 and 17.44 in 2021. The rise in mortality during the COVID-19 pandemic may be linked to the country's strict border restrictions, which impacted child vaccination rates. UNICEF reported that only 41% of children in North Korea received their initial dose of the diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis (DTP3) vaccine in 2023.

Since 1995, when the under-five mortality rate peaked at 107.68 per 1,000 live births during a devastating famine, North Korea had made significant progress in reducing this figure. By 2021, the rate had decreased to 17.44, showing steady improvement over the years. However, the pandemic has disrupted this progress, and the current rate remains notably higher than that of South Korea, where the under-five mortality rate was just 2.76 per 1,000 live births in 2023. [Yonhap News Agency]

North Korea: Leader Kim Jong Un tests new sniper rifle

(fn) North Korean leader Kim Jong Un recently visited the special forces units, where he oversaw training exercises and conducted a test of a newly developed sniper rifle. According to state media, Kim expressed strong approval of the weapon's effectiveness and emphasized the significance of rigorous training in improving the country's war capabilities.

The sniper rifle is expected to be distributed to the special operation units which are among the most elite units within of the North Korean army. Units like these are part of the thousands of troops that South Korea's intelligence agency reports Pyongyang has sent to Russia in support of Moscow's actions in Ukraine. [KCNA] [CNA] [South China Morning Post]

North Korea: Analysts suggest latest warship design boosts missile capability

(fn) North Korea is constructing a new class of warships that may be capable of carrying dozens of missiles, thereby potentially enhancing its navy's offensive capabilities. Recent satellite images have been revealed which have shown significant openings on the vessel's deck that could hold over 50 missiles, depending on their types. The ships are designed with vertical launch systems (VLS), which facilitate improved missile storage and launching, thereby increasing the ship's flexibility and reloading capabilities. Analysts believe the VLS could house a range of missile types, including anti-ship, land attack, air defense, and submarine-launched ballistic missiles.

These warships are currently being built at the Chongjin and Nampo shipyards which are projected to displace approximately 4,000 tons, about half the weight of a U.S. Arleigh Burke-class destroyer. Even with North Korea's limited resources, these new ships could indicate a substantial advancement in the country's naval capabilities. Additionally, they could serve as a potential export market for countries seeking affordable, tested missile systems, especially North Korea's anti-ship missiles.

However, while these ships represent a significant advancement step for North Korea's navy, analysts contend that their combat effectiveness may be constrained due to geographical limitations and outdated technology compared to South Korean and U.S. warships. [Reuters]

South Korea: Constitutional Court removes President Yoon Suk-yeol from office in unanimous impeachment ruling

(kp) On April 4, South Korea's Constitutional Court unanimously upheld the impeachment of President Yoon Suk-yeol, formally removing him from office after months of legal proceedings and political unrest. The ruling, which was delivered 122 days after the National Assembly passed the impeachment motion, marks the second time in the nation's history that a sitting president has been dismissed. All eight justices voted to remove Yoon from power, citing his unconstitutional declaration of martial law on December 3, 2024, and his deployment of military and police forces to obstruct parliamentary proceedings. The decision took effect immediately, triggering a 60-day countdown for a snap presidential election, which has been confirmed to be held on June 3, 2025. [The Korea Times][The Straits Times]

Yoon, once known for prosecuting past presidents and political figures as prosecutor general of the Seoul Central Prosecutors' Office, now faces a criminal trial for insurrection scheduled to begin on April 14. If convicted, he could face a maximum penalty of life imprisonment. His removal has also revived scrutiny of his wife, Kim Keon Hee, who has long faced allegations related to stock manipulation and illicit gifts. A permanent special counsel probe into her activities was approved by the National Assembly and has yet to begin due to delays in appointing a special prosecutor. However, Acting President Han Duck-soo, who has been accused of stalling related investigations in the past, has not indicated whether he will cooperate with the probe. [The Korea Herald 1][The Korea Herald 2]

The court found that Yoon's declaration of martial law lacked any legitimate legal basis and was politically motivated. It was determined that no wartime emergency or comparable national crisis existed to justify such a measure and that Yoon's attempt to mobilize state power against the National Assembly violated both statutory and constitutional limits. Justices noted that his actions mirrored the authoritarian excesses of South Korea's past, reviving fears of executive overreach and threatening democratic institutions. Ultimately, the court's official ruling stated that Yoon had "eroded public trust in the presidency" and triggered "deep social, economic, political, and diplomatic unrest." The court also condemned Yoon for infringing on civil liberties, including ordering warrantless searches of the

National Election Commission and interfering with the judiciary. [The Chosun Daily]

With the presidency now vacant, attention has turned to the upcoming election, where the Democratic Party of Korea's chair, Lee Jae-myung, stands as the clear frontrunner. Lee, who narrowly lost to Yoon in 2022, leads national polling with a strong plurality and faces no serious internal rivals within his party. Conservative candidates from the ruling People Power Party (PPP), however, remain fragmented. Notable figures include Kim Moon-soo, former labor minister and favored among Yoon's base in various opinion polls; Han Dong-hoon, the former justice minister turned PPP chair; and Seoul Mayor Oh Se-hoon, who has hinted at a presidential bid. In preparation, Kim Moon-so has already resigned from his position as labor minister on April 8 to run as a presidential candidate. Other potential contenders include former Daegu Mayor Hong Joon-pyo, former Prime Minister Kim Boo-kyum, and Rep. Ahn Cheol-soo, who has already declared his intent to run if a snap election is called. While Lee dominates current polling, the conservative field remains volatile, with ideological rifts complicating a unified campaign. [The Korea Herald 3][Yonhap News Agency 1]

The impeachment has also underscored South Korea's deepening political divide. In the months following Yoon's martial law attempt, massive rival protests have become a regular occurrence in Seoul, with Gwanghwamun Square transforming into a battleground of ideologies. Yoon's supporters, often galvanized by far-right YouTubers and evangelical leaders, argue the impeachment was illegitimate and part of a leftist plot to dismantle the state. On the other hand, opponents insist it was a necessary defense of constitutional democracy. These tensions were palpable on April 4, as police enforced a security "vacuum state" around the Constitutional Court, deploying over 14,000 officers and erecting barricades to separate demonstrators. While the court ruling is final, the political and societal rifts it revealed remain far from resolved. [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace][Aljazeera]

Public response to the ruling has been divided along generational, regional, and ideological lines. According to Gallup Korea, 77 percent of voters in their forties supported Yoon's impeachment, while only 47 percent of those in their sixties did. Regional disparities were equally stark, with support for removal peaking at 80 percent in the liberal Jeolla provinces and dipping to 33 percent in conservative North Gyeongsang. In downtown Seoul, scenes of celebration by Yoon's opponents were matched by angry protests from his

loyalists, some of whom called for the nullification of the snap election. The upcoming vote, likely to take place by June 3, will not only determine South Korea's next leader but will likely reflect these tensions across the nation.[People's Dispatch]

The political landscape continues to evolve rapidly following Yoon Suk-yeol's removal, as rival parties intensify their preparations for a snap presidential election expected by June 3. The Democratic Party has called on acting President Han Duck-soo to promptly announce the election date and commit to political neutrality, while also emphasizing the need for Yoon to face criminal accountability. Adding to the unfolding political scenario, National Assembly Speaker Woo Won-shik proposed holding a national referendum on constitutional reform concurrently with the presidential vote. He argued that revising the 1987 Constitution—particularly to reinforce the separation of powers—could promote greater national unity.

Although past attempts to amend the Constitution have failed due to deep political divides, Woo's proposal signals an effort to channel the momentum of this political transition toward broader systemic reform. [Yonhap News Agency 2][Yonhap News Agency 3]

In the latest development, PPP Labor Minister Kim Moon-soo, a top contender among conservative voters, announced his presidential bid on April 8 after a Cabinet meeting. He expressed regret over Yoon's ouster, saying he had hoped for the former president's reinstatement. Kim, 73, previously served as Gyeonggi Province governor (2006–2014) and as a three-term lawmaker. A recent Gallup Korea poll showed him leading among PPP supporters with 23 percent support, ahead of former party leader Han Dong-hoon and Seoul Mayor Oh Se-hoon.

Lawmaker Ahn Cheol-soo also declared his candidacy, pledging to heal national divisions and pursue constitutional reform to replace the current single five-year presidential term with a two-term, four-year system. Ahn was among the few People Power Party lawmakers who backed Yoon's impeachment. [The Korea Herald 4]

South Korea: Criminal trial against potential presidential candidate of ruling party begins

(dql) The first pretrial hearing in the criminal case against lawmaker Lee Jae-myung, leader of South

Korea's main opposition Democratic Party (DP), was held at Suwon District Court on April 8. The hearing comes as Lee is expected to announce his candidacy for the upcoming presidential election, where he is widely seen as the frontrunner (see article above).

Lee faces charges of misappropriating public funds during his tenure as Gyeonggi Province governor from 2018 to 2021. Prosecutors allege he used corporate credit cards for personal expenses, including laundry services, food, and items for family memorials—amounting to KRW 106.5 million (approx. USD 72,000).

Lee was indicted without detention in November 2024. He did not attend the Suwon court hearing, as attendance is not mandatory for pretrial proceedings. However, he appeared separately at the Seoul Central District Court for another trial related to bribery charges during his time as Seongnam mayor.

The Suwon court scheduled two additional pretrial hearings for April 29 and May 27, with the formal trial expected to begin in June.

Lee is also set to face another trial starting April 23 on charges of violating the Foreign Exchange Transactions Act and engaging in third-party bribery. He is accused of orchestrating an USD 8 million illegal remittance to North Korea via local underwear maker Ssangbangwool in 2019, in exchange for supporting the company's projects and funding a proposed visit to the North. [The Chosun Daily]

Although Lee was indicted in June 2024, the proceedings were delayed due to a request for the judge's recusal, citing alleged bias. The request was dismissed in March. Under South Korean law, defendants may seek a judge's recusal if there are concerns over trial fairness. [The Korea Herald]

South Korea: Former special warfare commander released on bail amid alleged martial law investigations

(kp) A central military court has granted bail to Lieutenant General Kwak Jong-keun, the former chief of South Korea's Army Special Warfare Command, amid ongoing investigations into the failed martial law attempt by former President Yoon Suk Yeol. The defense ministry confirmed on April 4 that Kwak was released to receive medical treatment after a March 26 hearing, during which he largely acknowledged the charges and pledged not to destroy evidence or flee. Kwak is accused of mobilizing special forces to block

the National Assembly in an effort to prevent lawmakers from overturning Yoon's December 3 martial law decree. [Yonhap News Agency 1]

Kwak is one of five generals formally indicted on charges of insurrection and abuse of power related to the short-lived imposition of martial law. According to a defense ministry report submitted to the National Assembly in February, a total of 30 military officials are under investigation, including 17 generals and 13 field-grade officers. Among those implicated, the Defense Counterintelligence Command is reportedly the most heavily implicated unit, with eight of its members under scrutiny for allegedly planning to seize the National Election Commission's servers and mobilize troops to detain lawmakers. [Yonhap News Agency 2]

South Korea: National Election Commission to cancel appointments over nepotism

(dql) The National Election Commission (NEC) announced on April 8 that it is canceling the appointments of 10 individuals implicated in preferential hiring, including children of senior NEC officials.

The decision follows a February report by the Board of Audit and Inspection, which revealed widespread nepotism within the agency, and an internal investigation which resulted in the suspension of 11 individuals and the referral of their cases to the police.

Last week, the NEC began disciplinary hearings by issuing summons notices, resulting in one dismissal so far. Additionally, 16 employees who facilitated the illegal hiring have faced disciplinary action, including terminations.

The NEC had previously reviewed all 291 recruitment rounds for experienced hires since 2013 and found 878 regulatory violations. [Yonhap News Agency]

South Korea: Democratic Party loses to small party in key by-election

(kp) South Korea's main opposition Democratic Party (DP) suffered a symbolic blow in low-profile by-elections on April 2, losing a key race in one of its longtime political strongholds. Jeong Cheol-won of the minor opposition Rebuilding Korea Party was elected

as the new chief of Damyang County in South Jeolla Province, securing 51.82 percent of the vote with 12,860 ballots cast in his favor. This marks the first time the Rebuilding Korea Party has won control of a local government post.

The by-elections, held two days ahead of the Constitutional Court's scheduled ruling on President Yoon Suk Yeol's impeachment, were viewed as an early litmus test of public sentiment following the president's controversial attempt to impose martial law last December. The DP opted for a subdued campaign strategy, citing ongoing national recovery efforts from the country's worst-ever wildfires and the sensitive political timing. Despite the low-key approach, the loss in Damyang, a DP stronghold, highlights a shifting political landscape.

In total, 23 local posts were contested, including the superintendent of education for Busan, and mayoral seats in Seoul's Guro Ward, Asan, Gimcheon, Geoje, and other municipalities. The ruling People Power Party also refrained from hosting large-scale campaign events, even as it fielded candidates in three mayoral races. Voter turnout was relatively low, with the National Election Commission reporting just a 26.27 percent participation rate. [Yonhap News Agency]

South Korea: Chinese national and South Korean soldier arrested for attempting to leak military secrets

(fn) A Chinese national and a South Korean soldier have been arrested for allegedly trying to illicitly obtain sensitive military information. The Chinese suspect reportedly used anonymous chat rooms on KakaoTalk to approach active-duty South Korean soldiers, offering money or compensation in return for classified data. One of the soldiers, based in Yanggu, Gangwon Province, is accused of smuggling spy equipment into his unit and capturing images of sensitive materials, including plans for joint military exercises between South Korea and the US, which he then sent to the Chinese suspect.

Both suspects were arrested on Jeju Island, where the Chinese national had come to provide compensation. They are being investigated for breaching the Military Secrets Protection Act, although espionage charges are unlikely due to South Korea's National Security Act, which restricts such charges to cases involving North Korea.

This case comes on the heels of a similar case from the previous year when a civilian worker at the Defense Intelligence Command was arrested for leaking military secrets to a Chinese operative in exchange for bribes. [The Korea Herald]

Taiwan: Cabinet to seek revote of contentious pension bill

(dql) The Executive Yuan, Taiwan's Cabinet, has announced plans to request a legislative revote on a bill passed in January that raises retirement pensions for police officers, firefighters, and other law enforcement and emergency service personnel. Premier Cho Jung-tai stated the Cabinet would seek President William Lai's approval to overturn the amendments to the Police Personnel Management Act, citing concerns about implementation.

The amendments – backed by opposition parties Kuomintang (KMT) and Taiwan People's Party (TPP) which together hold the majority in Parliament, raise the income replacement rate for retirees in these sectors to up to 80 percent, retroactively applied. Currently, all public servants, including law enforcement, face a phased reduction of this rate to 60 percent by 2029.

The Cabinet warned that the changes would undermine the fairness and financial stability of the public service pension system and were introduced without consulting the Executive Yuan, violating Article 91 of the Budget Act, which requires lawmakers to identify funding sources for bills that significantly increase expenditures.

Although the government acknowledges the demanding nature of law enforcement roles, it stressed that existing pension benefits already account for these conditions. The Ministry of Civil Service projected a NTD 170 billion (USD 5.12 billion) shortfall in the pension system over the next 50 years if the amendments take effect, warning that taxpayers would bear the cost.

Opposition lawmakers argued the adjustment aligns with pensions for armed forces personnel, citing the high-risk and irregular hours faced by police and emergency workers, some of whom are required to undergo military training and could be deployed to protect critical infrastructure in wartime. [Taipei Times]

Taiwan: KMT demands Cabinet reshuffle

(dql) The main opposition Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang, KMT) has called for a Cabinet reshuffle, particularly targeting national security and economic officials, in response to what it sees as the government's mishandling of new U.S. tariffs on Taiwanese goods (see article in this edition).

The Executive Yuan, Taiwan's Cabinet, denounced on April 3 the tariffs as "deeply unreasonable" and announced NTD 88 billion (USD 2.66 billion) in support measures at a press conference the next day.

However, KMT caucus secretary-general Wang Hung-wei criticized Minister of Economic Affairs J.W. Kuo for remaining silent at the event and accused the Cabinet of incompetence for allegedly following ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) caucus whip Ker Chien-ming's suggestion to "ignore the media." Wang also questioned national security officials' preparedness, citing Ker's reported comment that the tariffs would be "at most" 10 percent.

In response, DPP caucus chief executive Rosalia Wu dismissed the reshuffle demand as political posturing, emphasizing the need for national unity. DPP Legislator Hsu Chih-chieh added that replacing government personnel during a crisis would be unwise and suggested it is the opposition disrupting governance. [Taipei Times]

Taiwan: Recall campaigners claim incidents of harassment

(dql) Citizen groups campaigning to recall opposition Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang, KMT) legislators have reported multiple incidents of harassment and intimidation.

In Hualien, video footage shared by YouTuber "Pa Chiung" shows a woman verbally abusing volunteers gathering signatures to recall KMT caucus whip Fu Kun-chi, calling them "garbage" and "useless," while a man also shouted insults. Police are investigating a separate incident in which a woman allegedly assaulted a volunteer outside a post office, later admitting to the attack due to political differences. The volunteer sustained a minor foot injury, and the woman may face assault charges.

Similar incidents occurred elsewhere. In Taichung, campaigners seeking to recall KMT legislator Lo Ting-wei reported verbal harassment from a motorist and

the vandalism of a recall banner. Police reports have been filed in both cases. [Taipei Times]

Taiwan: Concerning data on child abuse unveiled

(dql) Latest government data raise concerns over child abuse in Taiwan. According to the Ministry of Health and Welfare (MOHW), over one-third of sexual image abuse victims are minors. In 2024, the MOHW's Sexual Image Abuse Reporting Center received 1,928 complaints, involving 1,040 victims. Of these, 35 percent of reports related to minors, with 364 victims aged 13 to 17 and 22 under 12.

With the rise of digital devices, minors are increasingly vulnerable to extortion scams, particularly on dating apps and gaming platforms. Preventative education is now mandatory in schools, and the MOHW is working with the Ministry of Education to enhance awareness campaigns. However, a decline in child-parent interaction has left children more exposed to online dangers, according to the MOHW. [Taipei Times]

Taiwan: High School prohibits interviews with Chinese state media

(dql) Taipei First Girls' High School has banned staff from giving interviews to Chinese state media. The measure follows a controversy over a teacher's comments on CCTV.

Principal Chen Chih-yuan announced the policy, citing cross-strait tensions and the need to avoid unnecessary trouble. He emphasized that while the school upholds freedom of expression, it must operate within established rules.

The decision comes against the backdrop of an interview by Chinese literature teacher Alice Ou with CCTV, in which she criticized President Lai Ching-te's characterization of China as a "hostile foreign force." Ou claimed this stance strained familial ties and accused Lai of promoting a distorted view of Taiwan's identity and history.

Taiwan's Mainland Affairs Council condemned Ou's remarks as inappropriate and aligned with Chinese propaganda, noting her awareness of China's frequent military activities near Taiwan. Education Minister Cheng Ying-yao affirmed teachers' right to free speech but stressed the importance of national awareness.

The Taipei education bureau asked the school to review the case. The school concluded that Ou did not violate educational neutrality on campus.

The controversy follows President Lai's March 13 statement reaffirming China as a "hostile foreign force" under Taiwan's Anti-Infiltration Act, along with the release of 17 measures to counter espionage and infiltration threats. [Taiwan News]

Taiwan: World's most advanced chip presented

(dql) Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) unveiled the world's most advanced microchip: the 2-nanometer (2nm) chip on April 1. Mass production is expected in the second half of the year, marking what is seen as a major leap in performance, energy efficiency, and device miniaturization.

Compared to its predecessor, the 3nm chip, the 2nm chip offers a 10–15 percent increase in speed at the same power level or a 20–30 percent reduction in power usage at the same speed. It also features a 15 percent increase in transistor density, enabling faster, more energy-efficient, and more capable devices.

TSMC's chips power a vast array of devices, including Apple's A-series processors, NVIDIA's GPUs for AI applications, AMD's processors used in supercomputers, and Qualcomm's Snapdragon chips found in major smartphone brands. The company holds a dominant position in the global semiconductor foundry market, accounting for the majority of Taiwan's 60% global market share.

However, the technology also presents challenges. Manufacturing 2nm chips requires costly and complex processes like extreme ultraviolet (EUV) lithography. Heat management becomes increasingly difficult as transistors shrink, and traditional materials like silicon may soon reach their physical limits, prompting the need for new alternatives.

Taiwan's strategic role in chip manufacturing—sometimes referred to as the "silicon shield"—carries geopolitical significance. While TSMC has agreed to build five new factories in the U.S. under a USD 100 billion deal, concerns remain over whether 2nm production can or should be transferred outside Taiwan, as it could affect the island's security. [Asia Times]

Taiwan: Water pollution control fee rules revised

(dql) The Ministry of Environment has revised regulations to gradually raise water pollution control fees and expand coverage to include zinc, tin, and ammonia nitrogen, aiming to strengthen pollution reduction efforts under the “polluter pays” principle.

The fees, unchanged for a decade, will be phased in starting next year, targeting hazardous substances such as lead, nickel, copper, mercury, cadmium, chromium, arsenic, cyanide, and the newly added zinc, tin, and ammonia nitrogen. These substances were included due to their environmental harm—such as bioaccumulation and risks to aquatic ecosystems.

The changes are expected to affect around 2,200 operators, including those in industrial and science parks, power plants, and industries like semiconductors, circuit board manufacturing, and electroplating. To ease the transition, a 50 percent discount will apply in the first year, gradually decreasing until full rates are applied by 2031.

A tax credit will be introduced for firms investing in wastewater treatment technologies that convert waste into resources, supporting carbon reduction and net-zero goals. Eligible projects—such as biogas generation from wastewater or ammonia nitrogen recovery—can receive up to a 60 percent fee deduction per period for up to three years. [Taipei Times]

Taiwan: Duration of largest military drill extended

(dql) Taiwan has begun a record 14-day tabletop computer simulation on April 5 as part of its revised Han Kuang 41 military exercises, the longest simulation in the history of the annual drills.

The simulation coincides with recent large-scale Chinese military exercises around Taiwan, which included live-fire drills. The scenario assumes China could escalate its drills into a full-scale invasion, prompting Taiwan to explore a broader range of threats, including gray zone tactics.

Experts note the extended duration allows for more comprehensive planning, especially as 6–10 Chinese navy vessels routinely operate near Taiwan. If these are armed with missile systems, up to 500 cruise missiles could be launched and strike Taiwan within

three minutes, according to Su Tzu-yun of the Institute for National Defense and Security Research. [Taiwan News]

To enhance Taiwan's overall defense readiness, the 2025 Han Kuang military exercises—Taiwan's largest annual drills—will be significantly expanded in both scope and duration.

This year's 41st edition of the Han Kuang exercises will feature two phases: a 14-day computerized tabletop wargame from April 5–18 and a 10-day live-fire drill from July 9–18. The computerized phase will be the longest in the history of the exercises, surpassing last year's eight-day duration. Conducted using the U.S.-built Joint Theater Level Simulation (JTLS) platform, the simulations will run around the clock and focus on military coordination and response to a potential surprise attack by China, including the escalation of "gray zone" activities into full-scale conflict.

The live-fire component will involve all branches of the armed forces across Taiwan and its offshore islands. As in 2024, this phase will be unscripted to test emergency responses, decentralized command structures, and continuous operations. Newly acquired systems, including unmanned aerial vehicles, M1A2T tanks, HIMARS, and Harpoon Coastal Defense Systems, will be integrated into the drills to evaluate their operational effectiveness.

The extended format reflects the Ministry of National Defense's objective to better assess joint operation planning and execution capabilities. It also incorporates outcomes from ongoing Urban Resilience Exercises, which run from April to July and combine air raid and disaster response drills across 11 cities and counties. These exercises aim to strengthen coordination between central and local governments and enhance national resilience under the Whole-of-Society Defense Resilience Committee.

Established in 1984, the Han Kuang exercises play a key role in testing Taiwan's preparedness against a potential Chinese invasion. [Focus Taiwan]

Furthermore, Taiwan's Marines are forming a new unit focused on defensive tasks in response to increasing Chinese military drills near the island. This marks a shift for the Marines, transitioning from an offensive to a defensive role. The unit, which includes conscripts, will handle missions such as defending missile batteries and providing coastal defense support. Their tasks involve reconnaissance for mobile missile launchers and radar vehicles and ensuring their protection.

At sea, the unit will assist rapid mine-laying vessels, with response times of just 10 minutes from receiving orders to deploying on M109 speedboats. The new boats can carry 10 passengers, surpassing the capacity of previous models. The unit's logo features an armadillo clutching a missile, symbolizing its protective strength. [Taiwan News 1]

Meanwhile, in a separate development, the navy's fifth mobile squadron under the Hai Feng Shore-Based Anti-ship Missile Group achieved operational readiness last month, five months after its formation. The group now comprises 12 squadrons—six static, five mobile, and one support unit.

From January 2026, it will be reorganized into the Littoral Combat Command, divided into four regional "strike groups." The group is equipped with Taiwan's Hsiung Feng II and III missiles and their extended-range variants, alongside U.S.-made Harpoon Block II missiles. Once fully armed, the unit is expected to achieve a 70% kill probability against PLA surface vessels.

The Hsiung Feng II has a range of 148 km, while the extended Hsiung Feng IIE can reach up to 200 km. The Hsiung Feng III ranges from 150 km to 250 km, with an extended variant reaching 400 km, surpassing all other naval systems in Taiwan's arsenal. The capabilities of the newly acquired AGM-84L-1 Harpoon missiles remain largely classified. [Taipei Times]

In addition, Taiwan's first indigenous submarine, the Narwhal, is set to begin sea acceptance tests before the end of April, with torpedo firing trials scheduled for October. Following successful tests, the submarine is expected to be delivered to the Navy in November.

At that point, a contract for the construction of two additional submarines will likely be signed between the Navy and CSBC Corporation, Taiwan. The submarine program follows a 2+3+2 production model, with the initial two to be followed by contracts for three more and eventually a final two. [Taiwan News 2]

CSBC Corporation is Taiwan's largest shipbuilding company, specializing in the design, construction, and repair of both civilian and military vessels.

Taiwan: Ex-Legislative Speaker former aid investigated for alleged espionage for China

(dql) Sheng Chu-ying, a former assistant to You Si-kun, former speaker of the Legislative Yuan, Taiwan's parliament, has been released on bail amid an investigation into alleged espionage for China. Sheng is suspected of leaking sensitive Legislative Yuan information to Chinese intelligence agents in exchange for financial rewards.

The Taipei District Prosecutors' Office and the Ministry of Justice Investigation Bureau searched Sheng's residence last month and summoned him for questioning.

Authorities allege that Sheng was introduced to Chinese intelligence agents during a 2019 visit to China. He is suspected of receiving payments in renminbi, U.S. dollars, and later cryptocurrency, to obscure financial records. He reportedly traveled abroad multiple times to meet with handlers. Investigators also found that Sheng tried to delete evidence, including chat logs and document transfers, and had attempted to recruit a friend into the scheme. A whistle-blower reported the activity, prompting the investigation.

While Sheng admitted to receiving money, he denied leaking classified information, claiming the documents were publicly available.

A top graduate of National Taiwan University's Department of Political Science, Sheng worked for You from 2020 to early 2023, before transferring to the offices of DPP legislators Lo Mei-ling, Kuo Yu-ching, and Hsu Chih-chieh. He resigned from Lo's office in February, reportedly pursuing other work, and has since deleted his Facebook account. [Taipei Times] [Focus Taiwan]

Meanwhile, the government plans to deter retired military officers from spying for China by threatening to revoke their pensions and healthcare benefits.

Veterans Affairs Council Minister Yan Te-fa proposed new restrictions on pensions and healthcare for those convicted of espionage, aiming to educate veterans about China's tactics and discourage illegal activity. Lawmakers warned that China's infiltration efforts are growing and affecting all of Taiwan, with retired officers often involved in military contracts and travel agencies that could assist China. [Taiwan News]

Only last month, 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 (see AiR No. 13, April/2025, 1).

In a separate case, a local chapter of the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) has expelled Presidential Office consultant Wu Shang-yu following reports that he is under investigation for allegedly spying for the Chinese Communist Party.

The DPP's Chiayi County branch stated that Wu had infiltrated President William Lai's inner circle, betrayed Taiwan, and damaged the party's reputation. After a disciplinary review, the branch revoked Wu's party membership. [Taipei Times]

Taiwan: Huge drug bust reported

(dql) Prosecutors have announced Taiwan's largest-ever ketamine seizure, confiscating 1.6 tons of ketamine and 22.5kg of amphetamines from a fishing boat near the Pratas Islands. The drugs, valued at an estimated NTD 2 billion (USD 60.99 million), were discovered last April 4 aboard the Taiwan-flagged vessel Maan Ruby Fuh during a raid led by Prosecutor Sheng Yu-chih and a joint task force of coast guards, military police, and local police.

The boat's captain was detained along with two Indonesian crew members. Authorities suspect the captain was planning to distribute the drugs across Taiwan and had links to a well-organized trafficking operation, as the drugs were packaged in tea bags marked by apparent quality codes. [Taipei Times]

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

Bangladesh: FY2025–26 budget to be presented via TV, focus on inflation control and realistic spending

(lm) In the absence of a political government and functioning parliament, Bangladesh's national budget for the 2025–26 fiscal year will be presented by Finance Adviser Dr. Salehuddin Ahmed through a televised address in early June. The budget will be issued via presidential ordinance, echoing the approach used during the 2007–08 caretaker government.

Expected to total around BDT 8.5 trillion (USD 77.4 billion), the budget will emphasize inflation control—setting a target of 7 percent—and a GDP growth projection of 5.5 percent. The government plans to keep the budget deficit below 5 percent of GDP, down from the current year's BDT 2.56 trillion (USD 23.3 billion), or 4.6 percent of GDP.

The budget will aim to avoid populist measures while introducing a more business-friendly tax regime. It will prioritize allocations for health, education, information technology, and social protection. Key subsidies for agriculture, fertilizer, and electricity will continue, and the speech is expected to run 50–60 pages.

The upcoming Annual Development Program (ADP) will be smaller, with no major new projects introduced, reflecting limited spending—only BDT 400 billion (USD 3.6 billion) of the current BDT 2.65 trillion (USD 24.1 billion) ADP has been spent so far. Revenue collection remains below target, prompting tax hikes on over 100 goods and services earlier this year.

The finance ministry has instructed line ministries to submit updates on implemented reforms, post–Least Developed Country (LDC) transition strategies, and key achievements. While external agencies forecast GDP growth below 5 percent, the government remains cautiously optimistic about achieving. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: New York Times warns of rising extremism, interim government calls it misleading

(lm) A New York Times report published on April 1 warns that Bangladesh's ongoing political transition is giving space to Islamist hard-liners seeking to push the country toward religious conservatism. Citing a series of incidents—including bans on girls' sports, support for harassers, and rallies demanding an Islamic caliphate—the article argues that extremists are gaining ground in the power vacuum left by the fall of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

According to the report, Islamist groups that were previously banned or marginalized are now pushing for an Islamic government and attempting to reshape the national identity. Officials drafting a new Constitution reportedly acknowledge that the principle of secularism may be replaced with "pluralism," signaling a shift toward more religiously framed governance. The article also notes that female student leaders who had played a prominent role in anti-government protests now feel sidelined and vulnerable in the face of rising religious populism.

The Times highlights the failure of the interim government, led by Muhammad Yunus, to respond forcefully to these developments. It portrays Yunus as conflict-averse and lacking a clear vision, while the police remain demoralized and the military increasingly distrustful of student-led democratic movements. It draws regional parallels to other South Asian countries, warning of a broader wave of religious fundamentalism taking root. [The New York Times] [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh's interim government strongly rejected the New York Times article, accusing it of oversimplifying the country's political dynamics and unfairly portraying it as a nation on the brink of religious extremism. In an official statement, the Chief Adviser's Press Wing described the report as "troubling and one-sided," criticizing it for relying on selective incidents while ignoring broader progress.

The government emphasized its commitment to minority protections, democratic reforms, and women's rights—highlighting Muhammad Yunus's longstanding record of championing women's empowerment. It rejected the claim that Yunus had been soft on extremism and pointed out that the interim government had prioritized public safety, law enforcement cooperation, and social resilience.

Officials argued that the incidents cited in the article were largely political in nature, not sectarian, and that religion was often used by political actors to galvanize support, which should not be conflated with a societal shift toward extremism.

The rebuttal also underscored Bangladesh's recent economic achievements, including a stable exchange rate, rising exports, and successful international investment campaigns. The government noted that Yunus had recently secured USD 2.1 billion in investments and that over 2,300 participants from 50 countries are set to attend a global investors' conference in Dhaka. [Dhaka Tribune]

Separately, senior BNP leader Ruhul Kabir Rizvi also dismissed the Times report, claiming it was orchestrated by allies of the former ruling Awami League. He denied any rise in extremism and accused the article's sources of using black money and international influence to damage Bangladesh's image. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: BNP's Fazlur Rahman slams Jamaat over war legacy and election tactics

(lm) Advocate Fazlur Rahman, an adviser to the chairperson of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), has sharply criticized Jamaat-e-Islami, accusing the party of lacking public support and relying on conspiratorial strategies to remain politically relevant. Speaking at an Eid reunion in Kishoreganj on April 2, he questioned Jamaat's claims of electoral strength, alleging they would fail to win even three seats if they contested elections independently.

He accused Jamaat of manipulating the administration, claiming they wield influence over local officials such as UNOs and deputy commissioners. Fazlur Rahman also revisited Jamaat's controversial role in the 1971 Liberation War, stating that former collaborators have survived politically due to being forgiven by the public.

Turning to the broader political context, Fazlur Rahman criticized the ruling government for allegedly delaying elections to avoid defeat. He warned that repeated postponements—from December to June, and possibly beyond—are part of a strategy to undermine the BNP, which he claimed would win 80 percent of the vote in a fair election. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: NCP accuses BNP of losing local control and fostering political violence

(lm) The National Citizen Party (NCP), a relatively new political party that was formed earlier this year by two key organizations behind last year's student-led mass protests, has accused the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) of losing control over its grassroots units, leading to increased political instability and violence. In a statement released on April 2, the NCP condemned repeated internal clashes within BNP-affiliated groups and alleged assaults on political opponents.

The NCP cited a March 30 incident in Ramganj, Lakshmipur, where a violent clash between local factions of Chhatra Dal and Swechhasebak Dal – the student wing and volunteer wing of the BNP, respectively – resulted in an attack on the father of NCP Central Joint Convenor Mahbub Alam Mahir. Another incident occurred on March 24 in Hatia, Noakhali, where BNP activists allegedly assaulted NCP Joint Chief Coordinator Abdul Hannan Masud during a public outreach event.

The NCP claimed that threats and intimidation by BNP activists are frequent across the country. Although BNP's central leadership has condemned such violence and expelled some individuals involved, the NCP argues that the measures have been ineffective in curbing ongoing aggression. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: National Consensus Commission aims for reform consensus by mid-July

(lm) The National Consensus Commission, a seven-member body chaired by interim leader Muhammad Yunus, is focused on building a national consensus on reform initiatives from six different commissions addressing electoral, public administration, judiciary, anti-corruption, and police reforms. The commission aims to finalize consensus by mid-July. This goal was confirmed by Vice-Chairman Prof Ali Riaz during a meeting with the AB Party.

To date, the commission has collected feedback from 29 political parties on its reform proposals and plans to complete the first round of discussions by the first week of May. The second round of talks will begin in mid-May, though differing opinions on the proposals are expected.

The AB Party, led by Chairman Mujibur Rahman Manju, expressed support for 108 out of 166 recommendations, partially agreeing with 26 others and disagreeing with 32. The commission is concentrating on key recommendations from several reform commissions, including those focused on constitutional changes and electoral systems.

The commission's outreach began before Independence Day, continuing with dialogues with four political parties before Eid-ul-Fitr. It had previously shared its reform recommendations with 38 political parties, requesting feedback by March 13. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: Interim government confirms election timeline while BNP clarifies reform stance

(lm) Information and Broadcasting Adviser Mahfuj Alam has reiterated that national elections in Bangladesh will be held within the timeline announced by Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus — between December 2025 and June 2026. Speaking during a visit to his hometown on April 2, Alam emphasized there is no uncertainty about the timing, and that political parties should prepare accordingly. The specific election date, he said, would depend on the extent and pace of ongoing reforms.

Alam also addressed speculation about the potential banning of the Awami League of ousted ex-Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, noting that any such decision would only be taken after consulting political parties and both domestic and international stakeholders. He acknowledged that while many citizens have called for the party to be banned, the interim government would approach the issue cautiously and inclusively. [Dhaka Tribune]

Meanwhile, Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir refuted claims circulating on social media that the BNP supports holding elections before reforms. Speaking to journalists at his residence, Fakhrul insisted that the BNP has consistently maintained that reforms must precede elections. He said the party's 31-point reform agenda remains unchanged and emphasized that electoral system reform is essential to ensuring free and fair polls.

Addressing internal governance, Fakhrul acknowledged challenges in maintaining discipline within the BNP amid political unrest, but claimed the party has taken

corrective action by dissolving some committees and expelling members involved in misconduct. He also pointed to a broader breakdown in law enforcement and said the BNP has submitted reform proposals to the interim government, including recommendations for judicial and policing reforms. [Dhaka Tribune 2]

Bangladesh: Election Commission focuses on expatriate voting and equal campaign access

(lm) The Election Commission (EC) of Bangladesh is actively working on two significant initiatives aimed at improving the electoral process ahead of the upcoming national elections.

First, the EC is exploring ways to enable expatriate Bangladeshis to vote, a topic that has gained substantial interest from the diaspora. A workshop is currently underway with experts from Dhaka University, Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology, and other organizations, focusing on determining the most effective voting system for expatriates. While the current options under review include postal, online, and proxy voting, Election Commissioner Abul Fazal Md. Sanaullah highlighted that postal and online voting may not be effective for expatriates. He suggested that proxy voting could be the most viable solution. [Dhaka Tribune 1]

In parallel, the EC is also working on a new code of conduct designed to ensure equal campaign access for all candidates in the upcoming elections. The draft code, which is currently under internal review, aims to introduce stricter regulations on campaign spending and social media campaigning, ensuring a level playing field for all participants. Election Commissioner Md. Anwarul Islam Sarker emphasized that the code will help minimize campaign expenditure while maintaining order throughout the election process. The code also includes provisions for penalties for violations, particularly related to social media campaigning, which has become an increasingly contentious issue. The code is expected to be finalized before formal consultations with political parties, with the election likely set for December. [Dhaka Tribune 2]

Additionally, the EC is still awaiting approval from the government for boundary revisions, which could affect constituency demarcations.

Bangladesh: Court details pro-Awami League lawyers over 2024 violence during anti-discrimination protests

(lm) A Bangladesh court has detained at least 70 lawyers affiliated with the now-topped Awami League government on charges of assault, vandalism, and attempted murder during a protest in August 2024. The detained individuals, many of whom are senior legal figures and former presidents of the Dhaka Bar Association, are accused of attacking fellow lawyers and vandalizing chambers on the premises of the Dhaka Bar Association.

The court proceedings stem from a case filed in February 2025 by Mohammad Ali Babu, an executive member of the Lawyers' Association. In total, 144 pro-Awami League lawyers were named in the complaint. Among the allegations are that the accused carried illegal weapons, detonated explosives, and chanted slogans in support of then-prime minister Sheikh Hasina, who was ousted in a student-led uprising later that month. Witnesses say one of the accused attempted to shoot a fellow lawyer outside the court complex.

On April 6, 93 of the accused surrendered and sought bail at the Dhaka Metropolitan Sessions Judge Court. The hearing was scheduled for the same afternoon. Many had previously secured interim bail from the High Court, which was to expire on April 7. [South China Morning Post] [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: Draft of Supreme Court Secretariat Ordinance 2025 finalized

(lm) Bangladesh has finalized the draft of the Supreme Court Secretariat Ordinance, 2025, which seeks to formally establish a dedicated Supreme Court (SC) Secretariat under the administrative authority of the Chief Justice. The draft outlines that the SC Secretariat will consist of a secretary—equivalent in rank to a senior secretary in the government—alongside other officers and employees.

The ordinance is designed to give effect to Article 109 of the Constitution, which places the supervision and control of all subordinate courts and tribunals under the High Court Division. It also aligns with Article 22, which stipulates the separation of the judiciary from the executive.

According to the draft, the SC Secretariat will oversee appointments, postings, transfers, training, budgetary matters, and other administrative responsibilities related to the Supreme Court and the subordinate judiciary. It will also support the apex court in defining jurisdiction, powers, and composition of all subordinate courts and tribunals.

Crucially, the SC Secretariat will be empowered to communicate directly with any ministry, department, or government office, bypassing intermediary channels. Likewise, any government office must correspond directly with the SC Secretariat on judicial matters. The Chief Justice will have the final authority over the Secretariat's budget expenditure. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: Draft genocide case report against Hasina submitted to prosecution

(lm) A draft investigation report accusing former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina of genocide and crimes against humanity during the July–August 2024 period prior to her fleeing the country on August 5 last year has been submitted to the prosecution of the International Criminal Tribunal, according to Chief Prosecutor Mohammad Tajul Islam.

Speaking on April 2, Islam stated that the draft report includes evidence of multiple criminal activities, with no scope for compromise. He confirmed that formal charges are being prepared based on the findings. The final list of individuals involved is still pending.

The case includes the August 5, 2024 killing of five individuals by gunfire in Chankharpool, Dhaka. A separate draft report on this incident, also categorized as a crime against humanity, was submitted on March 27 and is expected to be formally filed with the tribunal after Eid. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: ACC defends case against Tulip Siddiq, warns of legal action for non-appearance

(lm) The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) of Bangladesh has defended its case against British MP and former UK anti-corruption minister Tulip Siddiq, warning that she will be treated as a criminal absconder if she fails to appear in court. At a post-Eid press briefing, ACC Chairman Dr. Mohammad Abdul

Momen stressed that the charges are based on documented evidence and that no individual—regardless of political status or foreign privilege—is above the law.

The ACC filed a First Information Report (FIR) earlier this year naming Siddiq in connection with allegations of embezzlement, property misallocation, and abuse of influence during the tenure of her aunt, Bangladesh's ousted ex-Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. The commission alleges Siddiq used her position to help secure land in Dhaka's diplomatic zone for her mother and influenced officials to facilitate the misuse of public authority. She is also accused of involvement in a 2013 infrastructure deal with Russia, allegedly marked by inflated costs—an allegation she denies, stating she merely attended the signing as part of a family visit.

Siddiq's legal team has argued that she has not been formally contacted, but the ACC maintains that proper notifications were issued to both her and her lawyer. Momen said the case is being handled with the same standards applied to other high-profile figures, including several members of the Sheikh family who are also under investigation.

Siddiq, who resigned from her UK ministerial post in January, had previously referred herself to the British government's ministerial standards adviser amid mounting scrutiny over property ties and her family's political background. While the adviser found no evidence of financial impropriety, he criticized Siddiq's lack of awareness regarding the reputational risks posed by her close association with her aunt's government. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: Passport Department suspends officials amid widening anti-corruption crackdown

(lm) Bangladesh's Department of Immigration and Passport has launched a sweeping crackdown on internal corruption, suspending two senior officials and preparing to suspend several more. The effort comes amid ongoing investigations by the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), which has uncovered significant irregularities and illicit wealth among top department personnel.

Director General Nurul Anwar confirmed the suspensions and warned that more officials will face consequences. Among those suspended is Toufiqul Islam Khan, director of the Passport Data and

Personalization Centre, who reportedly amassed multiple properties and assets far exceeding his government income. Masum Hasan, deputy director of the e-passport personalization complex, is also under investigation for concealing assets and violating travel regulations. He was arrested and suspended in December 2024.

Two more directors are expected to be suspended soon. Both are accused of corruption and abuse of power.

Officials report that over ten individuals are currently on the suspension list, with actions to be taken in phases based on verified evidence. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: Protests erupt nationwide against Israeli atrocities in Gaza

(ij) On April 7, Bangladesh witnessed widespread protests in response to Israel's ongoing military operations in Gaza. Students, faculty, and citizens took to the streets across multiple cities, including Dhaka, Jessore, Rangpur, and Tangail, to condemn the violence and show solidarity with the Palestinian people. The protests, part of the global "World Stops for Gaza" campaign, saw significant participation from educational institutions like Dhaka University (DU) and Jagannath University (JnU), where both faculty and students joined the "No Work" program, suspending classes and exams in protest of Israel's actions. [Dhaka Tribune 1] [Dhaka Tribune 2] [Dhaka Tribune 3] [Dhaka Tribune 4] [Dhaka Tribune 5]

The protests spread to cities beyond Dhaka, including Jessore, Rangpur, and Tangail, where thousands participated in rallies. Notably, in Jessore, protesters held a march calling for a boycott of Israeli products. Educational institutions like Begum Rokeya University also organized solidarity events. In addition to the street protests, cultural events such as the 'Swadhinata Concert' by the Shobar Agey Bangladesh Foundation were rescheduled to April 12 as a mark of solidarity with Gaza. [Dhaka Tribune 6] [Dhaka Tribune 7] [Dhaka Tribune 8]

As these protests escalated, the government took measures to ensure security, particularly in Dhaka's diplomatic zone, where heightened security was implemented around the US embassy in Gulshan. The army, BGB, APBn, police, CID, and intelligence forces were placed on high alert in the Gulshan and Baridhara areas. Security forces imposed traffic

restrictions near the embassy to maintain order and prevent any untoward incidents. [Dhaka Tribune 9]

Amidst the unrest, acts of vandalism were reported in cities such as Sylhet, Bogra, and Cox's Bazar, where mobs targeted businesses associated with Israel, including Bata, KFC, and Pizza Hut. The police detained 49 individuals involved in these incidents and condemned the attacks as violations of public safety and the rule of law. [Dhaka Tribune 10] [Dhaka Tribune 11]

The government also issued a strong condemnation of Israel's actions in Gaza, with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs calling the aerial bombardments "ethnic cleansing" and demanding that Israel halt its attacks. The statement urged Israel to adhere to international humanitarian law and reiterated Bangladesh's support for Palestine. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Worker unrest erupts at CEPZ after mass dismissals, 15 injured in factory violence

(lm) Violence broke out on April 6 at the Chattogram Export Processing Zone (CEPZ)—one of Bangladesh's oldest and most prominent industrial zones dedicated to export-oriented manufacturing—after the termination of over 170 workers sparked protests across multiple factories.

At Excelsior Shoes Limited, dozens of agitated workers stormed the premises, attacked staff, and vandalized equipment, injuring at least 15 people, including three senior executives. Eight of the injured were hospitalized at Chattogram Medical College Hospital. The unrest later spread to JW Apparel, where protesters also assaulted officials and security personnel.

The protests followed the recent dismissal of 173 workers from three factories—including Excelsior Shoes and JW Apparel—during the Eid holidays. While CEPZ authorities stated that all dues were cleared and that the terminations were linked to prior unrest, workers responded with demonstrations and road blockades lasting over 30 minutes.

Security forces intervened, and CEPZ officials confirmed the situation was under control by afternoon. Operations at the affected factories were suspended for the day. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Private college teachers to resume protests over exclusion from MPO benefits

(lm) Teachers at the honors and master's levels in private colleges plan to resume protests after Eid-ul-Fitr, demanding inclusion in the Monthly Pay Order (MPO) system. Around 5,500 teachers from 315 private colleges have long sought MPO enlistment, which would make them eligible for government-subsidized salaries.

Although some reform initiatives were proposed in 2018, and former education minister Dipu Moni assured teachers in 2020 of inclusion in the official workforce structure, no budget allocation was approved by the Ministry of Finance. Teachers continue working without state salaries and are paid instead through student tuition, following a 1993 National University policy.

The teachers previously launched protests in October 2024, which were met with police repression, injuring several participants. Their federation warned that unless MPO enlistment is confirmed before the upcoming budget, more aggressive protest actions, including hunger strikes, will be launched. Despite 32 years of appeals and intermittent assurances, the issue remains unresolved. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: Job seekers protest at PSC, demand clear timeline for BCS exams

(lm) Job seekers staged a sit-in protest outside the Bangladesh Public Service Commission (PSC) headquarters in Agargaon, Dhaka, on April 6, demanding a definitive roadmap for the Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) exams.

The demonstrators, mostly candidates from the 44th, 45th, and 46th BCS batches, demanded the publication of a full viva schedule for the 44th BCS, with completion by May and final results by June 2025. They also called for the cancellation of the Non-Cadre Regulation of 2023 and an increase in cadre and non-cadre posts to ensure job placements for all successful candidates.

Additional demands included publishing the 45th BCS written results only after the 44th BCS final results, starting 45th BCS viva exams promptly, and concluding them by December. They further asked that the 46th BCS written exam be held only after the conclusion of

the 44th and 45th BCS cycles, and that the 47th BCS preliminary exam be scheduled at least two months later. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: Three arrested after journalist sexually harassed and companions assaulted

(lm) Authorities have arrested three men, including the prime suspect, in connection with the sexual harassment of a New Age journalist and the assault of her companions in Rampura, Dhaka. The incident, which occurred on April 2, sparked widespread outrage after footage and testimonies went viral on social media. All three men currently in police custody under the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act, with legal proceedings ongoing. [The Daily Star 1] [The Daily Star 2]

Bangladesh: Tariff dispute with US poses economic risks, but Dhaka aims for strategic realignment

(zh/lm/ij) Bangladesh is responding to the United States' decision to impose a 37 percent tariff on its imports, particularly affecting the ready-made garment (RMG) sector, with a multi-faceted diplomatic and economic strategy.

This tariff hike, part of the broader protectionist agenda under President Donald Trump, threatens to disrupt Bangladesh's USD 7.2 billion RMG sector, which relies on the US for 18 percent of its exports. Experts warn that the increase in costs and potential supply chain disruptions could lead US retailers to shift sourcing to lower-tariff countries like Jordan and Egypt. [Fashion Network] [Dhaka Tribune 1] [Daily Sun]

The tariff's immediate impact is already evident, with some US buyers demanding price cuts of up to 10 percent on ready-to-ship goods. Buyers are also putting work orders on hold or negotiating discounts, which puts pressure on local suppliers. Smaller buyers, in particular, are pushing suppliers to absorb the full cost, raising ethical concerns within the industry. [The Daily Star 1]

Despite these challenges, Chief Adviser's Press Secretary Shafiqul Alam downplayed the impact of the suspended export orders, calling it a temporary issue. He reassured the public that the government is

focused on boosting exports, emphasizing that ongoing initiatives will strengthen Bangladesh's market share in the US. [Dhaka Tribune 2]

Central to these initiatives, Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus and Commerce Adviser Sk Bashir Uddin have both written letters to US President Donald Trump and the US Trade Representative (USTR). Yunus has requested a three-month extension of the previous 15 percent tariff rate, while Bashir Uddin has proposed expanding US imports, particularly cotton, fuel, and machinery, to rebalance trade. The aim is to create a "win-win" framework that facilitates mutual market access. [Dhaka Tribune 3] [Dhaka Tribune 4]

Bangladesh had already taken proactive steps to improve relations with the US, beginning discussions in February and approving the operation of Starlink, the US-based satellite internet provider, in March. While this move was seen as a gesture of goodwill, it failed to influence the US tariff decision, reflecting the transactional nature of US trade policy under the "America First" doctrine. [Dhaka Tribune 5]

Despite the setback, Dhaka is reframing the crisis as an opportunity. Finance Advisor Dr. Salehuddin Ahmed said Bangladesh is confident of negotiating a resolution and pointed to stable remittances and growing foreign currency reserves as signs of macroeconomic resilience. Meanwhile, BIDA Chairman Chowdhury Ashik Mahmud Bin Harun has argued that the tariffs could actually accelerate investment reforms, positioning Bangladesh as a more competitive and transparent destination for global investors. [Dhaka Tribune 6] [Dhaka Tribune 7]

The government's flagship Bangladesh Investment Summit 2025, starting this week, is central to that pivot. The summit will gather delegations from the US, UK, China, India, Singapore, and South Korea, and provide a platform to showcase Bangladesh's reform agenda, including tax rationalization, infrastructure readiness, and digital expansion. Starlink will demo its services at the summit—symbolizing Bangladesh's aspirations to align with global tech trends and attract high-value foreign investment. [The Daily Star 2]

Economists, however, warned that retaliatory tariffs—such as on US cotton—could hurt Bangladesh more than help, raising input costs and reducing its global competitiveness. They suggest using frameworks like the Trade and Investment Cooperation Forum Agreement (TICFA) to negotiate better terms and encourage reciprocal concessions. [The Business Standard]

To complement these efforts, the US-Bangladesh Unity Initiative (UBUI) has proposed a 36-month "Bangladesh Tariff Waiver Protocol" (BTWP). It recommends expanding US agricultural imports, securing long-term LNG deals, offering US equity in infrastructure projects, establishing a climate-focused sovereign wealth fund, encouraging US investment in healthcare, and facilitating auto-sector cooperation. [Dhaka Tribune 8]

Bangladesh: Government expects IMF loan disbursement in June, but reform hurdles remain

(lm) Bangladesh is optimistic that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) will release both the delayed fourth and the upcoming fifth tranches of its loan program — totalingand the upcoming fifth tranches of its loan program—totaling USD 2.39 billion — in June, pending a critical review by an IMF mission now in Dhaka. A visiting IMF delegation began its two-week assessment on April 6, with meetings scheduled with the Finance Division, National Board of Revenue (NBR), and energy authorities. A final review meeting is scheduled for April 17. [Dhaka Tribune 1]

According to Finance Adviser Dr. Salehuddin Ahmed, the IMF has expressed satisfaction with Bangladesh's recent economic progress and ongoing reform efforts. However, to qualify for the next disbursements, Bangladesh must fulfill three primary conditions: move towards a market-based exchange rate, raise additional revenue equal to 0.5 percent of GDP (roughly BDT 570 billion or USD 4.9 billion), and separate the NBR's policy and administrative functions.

While Bangladesh has taken steps such as introducing a 15 percent VAT on 43 goods and services, revenue collection still falls short of expectations. Business groups have pushed back against the tax hikes, arguing for an expanded tax base rather than an overreliance on indirect taxation.

Additionally, the government has yet to fully implement a floating exchange rate, citing the risk of exacerbating inflation. The BDT remains under a managed crawling peg, currently at BDT 122 per USD. The IMF has signaled this could be a sticking point in final assessments.

The fund has also emphasized the need to address defaulted loans, boost banking sector discipline, and finalize a legal framework to improve loan recovery. Discussions are ongoing with Bangladesh Bank and other institutions.

Failure to meet these benchmarks could stall not only IMF funding but also support from other development partners, economists warned. They also urge caution regarding further electricity price increases, noting that while inflation is easing, it remains a concern. [Dhaka Tribune 2] [Dhaka Tribune 3]

Bangladesh: Central bank to Launch USD 68-76 million startup fund and ease foreign investment processes

(lm) Bangladesh Bank is set to introduce a fund ranging from BDT 8 billion to BDT 9 billion (approximately USD 68 million to USD 76 million) to support the country's startup ecosystem. The initiative, announced by Bangladesh Bank Governor Ahsan H Mansur at the Bangladesh Investment Summit 2025, aims to provide capital for startups, helping them grow and scale. In addition, the central bank has already established a BDT 5 billion (approximately USD 42 million) co-financing fund for startups, which is expected to increase further.

Governor Mansur emphasized the importance of transparency for startups, noting that 95 percent of startups do not succeed, urging entrepreneurs to focus on increasing sales and wait for returns. He also highlighted that new policy provisions would simplify procedures, making it easier for foreign investors to repatriate funds without the need for separate applications to the central bank.

The summit, organized by Startup Bangladesh Limited, the ICT Division, and the Bangladesh Investment Development Authority (BIDA), aims to showcase the country's growing startup ecosystem and position it as a key player in the global investment network. BIDA Executive Chairman Chowdhury Ashik Mahmud Bin Harun highlighted that the government is actively working to improve the investment environment and is focused on fostering cooperation between domestic and foreign companies. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: Illegal sand mining continues unchecked in Jamalpur despite repeated crackdowns

(lm) Illegal sand mining across multiple upazilas —sub-districts akin to counties—in Jamalpur, a north-central district of Bangladesh, continues to cause environmental and structural devastation despite

repeated government crackdowns. Jamalpur, situated along the Brahmaputra River and known for its fertile agricultural land, is seeing widespread damage due to unregulated dredging and sand extraction.

In Madarganj, residents protested on March 9 against the destruction of fertile farmland by sand syndicates reportedly backed by political figures. Despite the land's productivity, dredger machines are being used to extract sand, destroying three-crop fields. Allegations have been raised against leaders from both the Awami League of ousted ex-Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), although they deny wrongdoing.

In Melandah, unregulated sand mining from the Madardah River poses threats to homes, farmland, and bridges. Residents report daily extraction of truckloads of sand by operators using heavy machinery, despite local bans.

Bakshiganj faces similar damage, where syndicates are removing sand and topsoil from rivers and farmland, especially during the dry season. Locals say the soil, once fertile, is being stripped for sale to brick kilns. In erosion-prone areas, the mining is accelerating the collapse of riverbanks, putting hundreds of homes at risk.

In Jamalpur Sadar, sand lifting near the Brahmaputra Bridge—a critical transport link—has continued for years, raising fears of structural collapse. Meanwhile, in Sarishabari, extraction from the Jhenai River continues despite occasional raids. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Advisers reject militancy claims, link past abuses to political repression

(lm) Two senior advisers to Bangladesh's interim government have pushed back against claims of rising militancy and religious extremism, asserting that the current administration is restoring law and order and addressing past political abuses. The statements come amid ongoing debates about the country's political direction following the fall of the Awami League-led government and amid criticism from international media.

Home Affairs Adviser Lt Gen (Retd) Md Jahangir Alam Chowdhury dismissed concerns raised in a New York Times article that suggested a surge in Islamist influence in the post-Hasina political vacuum. Speaking during Eid visits to police stations in Dhaka, he

emphasized that since the interim government assumed control in August 2024, there has been “no rise in militancy” and “no cause for concern.” He added that while the immediate aftermath of the previous government's collapse created a brief power vacuum, the situation has steadily improved, crediting the efforts of the country’s security forces. [Dhaka Tribune]

Information and Broadcasting Adviser Mahfuj Alam, meanwhile, shifted focus to alleged abuses committed under Sheikh Hasina’s administration, linking the widespread practice of enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings to deliberate political decisions. Addressing victims’ families at a gathering organized by Mayer Dak, he claimed that law enforcement agencies —including the police and the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB)—had received explicit instructions to carry out these abuses.

Mahfuj also alleged that torture centers, such as Aynaghor, operated throughout the country, targeting members of opposition parties including the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Jamaat-e-Islami. He accused the former prime minister and senior Awami League leaders of continuing to plot from abroad, particularly from India, and pledged that “justice would be served.” Arrest warrants have reportedly been issued as part of an investigation by a commission on enforced disappearances. [Dhaka Tribune]

These assertions came as the state reinforced its commitment to law enforcement in response to a violent incident, where around 100 to 150 BNP-linked individuals were accused of attacking police to free a detainee. The police responded with a joint overnight operation alongside the army, detaining 16 individuals. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Dismissed BDR members protest for reinstatement, compensation

(lm) Hundreds of former members of the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR)—now Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB)—staged a sit-in outside BGB headquarters in Dhaka on April 5, demanding reinstatement to service and compensation. Many of them were dismissed following the 2009 BDR mutiny, which they claim they had no part in.

The BDR mutiny took place on February 25–26, 2009, when soldiers of the paramilitary BDR revolted at their headquarters in Dhaka. The uprising resulted in the brutal killing of 74 people, including 57 army officers.

The mutineers cited grievances over pay, working conditions, and lack of promotions. The revolt sparked national shock and prompted a massive crackdown. In the years that followed, over 6,000 BDR personnel were tried—mostly in mass trials—leading to hundreds of convictions, including death sentences and life terms. Critics, including rights groups, raised concerns about due process and conditions of detention during the judicial proceedings.

Against this backdrop, the recent protesters, joined by family members, described their dismissal as "unjust," saying they were punished without due process. Some emphasized they were stationed far from Dhaka during the mutiny yet still faced jail terms or expulsion. Former subedar major Fazlur Rahman said their five-member delegation had attempted to meet the BGB director general to submit a memorandum, but it was accepted only through a police officer at the gate.

A parallel protest at the Central Shaheed Minar by the BDR Kalyan Parishad echoed similar demands: reinstatement of dismissed personnel with full benefits and the release of those still in custody despite being granted bail. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: 249 killed in road crashes during Eid holidays

(lm) During the 11-day Eid-ul-Fitr travel period from March 26 to April 5, at least 249 people were killed and over 2,000 injured in 257 road crashes across Bangladesh, according to the Road Safety Foundation (RSF). The average daily death toll stood at 22.63, marking a 7.48 percent decrease from 2024. While the official injury toll was reported at 553, the actual number is believed to exceed 2,000. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bhutan: Education ministry reviews teacher shortage and misallocation amid rising concerns

(lm) Bhutan's Ministry of Education and Skills Development (MoESD) is conducting a nationwide assessment of teacher deployment and shortages across all dzongkhags (subdivisions) to address persistent inefficiencies. Preliminary findings indicate both surpluses in some schools and acute shortages—particularly in rural areas and critical STEM subjects. Over 1,100 teaching positions remain vacant, including

252 in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

In response, the ministry is redeploying teachers, rehiring experienced educators on contract, and accelerating short-term recruitment. To date, 55 STEM teachers, including 22 from India, have been hired after multiple recruitment rounds. The ministry is also considering merging under-enrolled extended classrooms with nearby schools to optimize resources.

Underutilization is another concern. For instance, 443 teachers serve only 3,044 students across 132 primary schools and extended classrooms—yielding a student-teacher ratio of 1:7, far below the recommended standard of 1:24.

To address these issues, MoESD is revising recruitment policies and updating the Education Management Information System (EMIS). A long-term solution under consideration is the establishment of a National Teaching Service, which would grant MoESD more flexibility and autonomy in hiring, bypassing bureaucratic delays caused by Royal Civil Service Commission procedures. [Kuensel]

Bhutan: New certification system to protect local handicrafts from mass-produced imports

(lm) Bhutan's Ministry of Home Affairs is preparing to launch a "Bhutan Made Certification" to protect the country's traditional handicraft sector from mass-produced imports that threaten the authenticity and livelihoods of local artisans. The move comes amid concerns about the influx of cheap arts and crafts—particularly statues from Nepal and India—that undercut Bhutanese products.

The certification initiative, developed in collaboration with the Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Employment and the Handicrafts Association of Bhutan (HAB), will distinguish genuine local crafts through quality assurance and regulated iconography. A separate "Collective Mark" certification is also being developed for national craft centers.

Authorities said over 500 hotels had benefited from loan deferments during the pandemic, and they emphasized that arts and crafts continue to thrive, supported by the 13 traditional arts (Zorig Chusum) and demand from both domestic and international clients.

To further support the sector, the government is updating curricula to include courses on material science and conservation, aiming to enhance artisans' use of sustainable, durable materials. Cultural education initiatives for children are also being introduced to foster long-term preservation. [Kuensel]

Bhutan: Government considers tobacco law amendments to regulate e-cigarettes

(lm) Bhutanese authorities are seeking to amend the Tobacco Control Act to regulate the growing import and use of non-nicotine e-cigarettes, which currently fall outside existing legislation. While nicotine-based e-cigarettes are subject to a 100 percent sales tax and 10 percent customs duty under tobacco laws, non-nicotine variants—especially flavored ones—face only five percent sales tax and 10 percent customs duty, as they are imported as electronic gadgets.

Health officials have raised alarm over a surge in vaping-related health issues, including collapsed lungs and increased tuberculosis among youth. In 2024, Bhutan imported 288,939 e-cigarette units valued at BTN 16 million (USD 192,000), up sharply from BTN 2.7 million (USD 32,400) in 2023.

Health Secretary Pemba Wangchuk called vaping a rising trend among youth and emphasized the need to dispel myths about its safety. The Bhutan Food and Drug Authority has restricted sales to minors and banned advertising, while the government is allocating funds under the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control to step up public awareness.

Neighboring countries like Thailand, Singapore, and India have already banned e-cigarettes entirely, adding pressure on Bhutan to act decisively. [Kuensel]

Bhutan: Government intensifies tuberculosis response with new diagnostics, AI tools, and public outreach

(lm) Bhutan is ramping up efforts to eliminate tuberculosis (TB) by 2030 through a nationwide strategy focusing on early detection, advanced diagnostics, mobile screening, and improved treatment adherence. The push comes as TB remains a major public health challenge in the country, particularly among the economically active age group of 15 to 44, which accounts for 83 percent of cases. In 2024,

Bhutan recorded 920 TB cases, including 66 multi-drug resistant TB (MDR-TB) cases, with 36 related deaths—up from previous years.

To meet the End TB goals, the Ministry of Health has aligned its response with global strategies and launched a National Strategic Plan emphasizing rapid diagnosis and prompt treatment. [Kuensel]

Bhutan: Government targets 485 MW green hydrogen capacity by 2050

(hgk) Bhutan has unveiled an ambitious green hydrogen strategy, aiming to build 485 megawatts of electrolyzer capacity by 2050 to produce over 70,000 tons of clean hydrogen annually. The plan, which will require USD 395 million in cumulative investments, is part of Bhutan's effort to decarbonize its transport and industrial sectors while reducing reliance on imported fossil fuels.

The country's first pilot plant, located in Gidawom near Thimphu, will begin operations with a 1 MW facility, eventually scaling to 5 MW. By 2030, the government aims to power 2,700 vehicles with hydrogen, rising to 45,000 by 2050. Resource mapping has also been conducted at four additional sites—Jigmeling, Lhamoizingkha, Dhamdum, and Samrang—for further hydrogen development.

Officials highlighted Bhutan's competitive advantage in green hydrogen production due to its surplus of renewable hydroelectric power, much of which is currently exported to India. The strategy also explores export opportunities and targets industries such as cement and steel production as key end-users.

Bhutan's hydrogen roadmap follows its formal launch during COP28 in December 2023 and includes efforts to build national awareness, conduct feasibility studies, and establish necessary infrastructure for production, storage, and distribution. [Kuensel]

Bhutan: Over USD 49 million disbursed under stimulus program, focus on jobs, tourism, and agriculture

(hgk) Bhutan's Economic Stimulus Programme (ESP), a government initiative supported by Indian aid to revive the post-pandemic economy, has disbursed BTN 4.1

billion (USD 49.2 million) out of the BTN 15 billion (USD 180 million) allocated to boost key sectors.

Funded by the Government of India, the ESP supports business recovery, job creation, and sectoral growth through financial institutions and government agencies. BTN 1 billion (USD 12 million) has been used for tourism revival, including Indian roadshows, infrastructure upgrades, and hotel evaluations. The creative industry received BTN 530 million (USD 6.4 million) to support local films, digital media, and cinema infrastructure.

BTN 770 million (USD 9.2 million) was allocated to youth employment, benefiting over 1,300 job seekers. In agriculture, BTN 1.014 billion (USD 12.2 million) supported crop and livestock aggregation, while BTN 2 billion (USD 24 million) went to the Desuung Skilling Programme. BTN 600 million (USD 7.2 million) and BTN 1.5 billion (USD 18 million) have been set aside for education loans and home ownership schemes, respectively.

Audits and strict performance targets are in place to ensure transparency and track outcomes across all initiatives. [Kuensel]

Bhutan: Employment rises to 96.5 percent, but urban and gender gaps persist

(lm) Bhutan's overall employment rate reached 96.5 percent in 2024, up from 94.1 percent in 2022, with the number of employed individuals rising by 28.7 percent to 370,479. However, this improvement conceals persistent challenges, including urban joblessness, gender inequality, and youth unemployment.

Urban unemployment remains more than double that of rural areas—5.7 percent versus 2.3 percent. Thimphu recorded the highest rate at 5.9 percent, followed by Sarpang, Paro, and Chukha. In contrast, Trashiyangtse and Dagana reported the lowest rates at 1.3 percent.

The service sector has overtaken agriculture as the largest employer, now accounting for 42 percent of jobs, while agriculture dropped to 41.7 percent and industry remained at 16.3 percent. Youth unemployment declined from 28.6 percent in 2022 to 19 percent in 2024, yet remains a key concern.

Women continue to face higher unemployment (4.3 percent compared to 2.9 percent for men) and are disproportionately represented among the

economically inactive, comprising 61.9 percent of that group. Long-term unemployment also affects women more (0.9 percent versus 0.5 percent for men).

Only 9.9 percent of the workforce holds a bachelor's degree or higher, and one-third have no formal education, underscoring persistent educational disparities in Bhutan's labor market. [Kuensel]

Bhutan: Government targets economic diversification with focus on FDI, agriculture, and tourism

(lm) Bhutan is accelerating efforts to diversify its economy beyond hydropower by focusing on agriculture, tourism, and foreign direct investment (FDI), with the goal of achieving high-income status by 2034. The government aims to attract BTN 500 billion (USD 6 billion) in FDI by 2029, driven by growing investor interest in hydropower, digital services, and the ambitious Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC) project —a planned Special Administrative Region that blends infrastructure development with Bhutanese values of sustainability and cultural preservation.

The Economic Development Board (EDB), chaired by the Prime Minister, has been tasked with minimizing bureaucratic barriers and streamlining approvals. In 2024, Bhutan approved 17 new FDI projects worth BTN 15.96 billion (USD 191 million), increasing the total to 121 projects valued at BTN 60.84 billion (USD 730 million). However, four projects were withdrawn during the year. Government efforts now also focus on deregulation, extending land lease terms, and promoting reforms that align Bhutan's business environment with global investment hubs like Singapore and Switzerland.

Finance Minister Lekey Dorji projects economic growth to reach 8.93 percent in 2025, boosted by the commissioning of the Punatsangchhu-II hydropower project and the launch of the Khorlochhu and Dorjilung hydropower projects. The government has committed BTN 245 billion (USD 2.94 billion) under the 13th Five-Year Plan for infrastructure, digital transformation, and workforce development.

Complementing the FDI strategy, Bhutan is also prioritizing agriculture, with the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock (MoAL) aiming to boost high-value exports and achieve greater food self-sufficiency. Under the "Agrifood Sector Strategy 2034," Bhutan plans to triple agri-export value to BTN 9 billion (USD 108 million) and increase the sector's GDP contribution

to BTN 100 billion (USD 1.2 billion). Export-oriented commodities include cardamom, honey, yak cheese, trout, black caviar, and asparagus, with trade linkages being developed with Singapore, Japan, Thailand, Australia, and major Indian cities.

To reverse rural depopulation and enhance productivity, the government is supporting mechanization, commercial farming, and climate-resilient agriculture. Only 2.96 percent of arable land is currently cultivated, with under 29 percent of wetlands irrigated. Between 2013 and 2022, Bhutan's agricultural workforce shrank by over 33 percent, due in part to youth migration and perceptions of farming as unviable.

MoAL's strategy includes insurance schemes, support for cooperatives, and the strengthening of domestic markets. The government also aims to achieve 30 percent self-sufficiency in rice, 80 percent in vegetables, and maintain 100 percent in eggs by 2029. The upcoming Gelephu Mindfulness City is expected to open new domestic markets for organic and value-added farm products.

Domestically, the government is improving market access through linkages with schools, hospitals, hotels, and the Gyalsung Academies. Initiatives like "One child, one egg" promote both nutrition and rural production. The MoAL is also developing a geographical indication system for select products, in coordination with the Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Employment. [Kuensel 1] [Kuensel 2] [Kuensel 3]

Bhutan: Government to reclaim subsidies for 27 undelivered EV taxis under emission project

(lm) The Prime Minister's Office (PMO) has announced it will recover subsidies for 27 electric vehicle (EV) taxis that were never delivered or sold under Bhutan's Sustainable Low Emission Urban Transport System project. Launched in 2018 and concluded in 2022 after a pandemic-related extension, the project aimed to replace 300 fuel-based taxis with EVs, offering a 20 percent subsidy (capped at USD 5,500 or BTN 458,333) and a 70 percent loan facility.

Although subsidies were fully disbursed, official records show only 297 EV taxis registered, prompting an investigation. Kuenphen Motors, the main supplier, had received BTN 9.9 million (USD 118,800) for the 27 undelivered vehicles. The company claims delays were due to poor coordination and unclear instructions

after many taxi operators withdrew. It eventually sold some EVs to private buyers without guidance from the Project Management Unit.

Despite the dispute, the supplier says it remains willing to deliver the remaining vehicles if provided with a confirmed buyer list. The PMO, now overseeing the project after its transfer from the Department of Surface Transport (DoST), insists the supplier failed to deliver vehicles to eligible recipients and will reclaim the funds.

The project, co-funded by the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and the Bhutanese government, exceeded its initial financial commitments, raising USD 21.99 million—213 percent of its planned co-financing target. The funds supported EV subsidies, training, human resources, and charging infrastructure, including land contributions and loans from the Bank of Bhutan. [Kuensel]

Bhutan: Government considers new loan relief measures for struggling hotel sector

(lm) With pandemic-era loan deferments set to expire by June 30, the Bhutanese government is in discussions with the Royal Monetary Authority (RMA) and financial institutions (FIs) to explore possible extensions or alternatives—particularly for the hotel and tourism sector, which received about 80 percent of previous deferments.

Industry, Commerce, and Employment Minister Namgyal Dorji acknowledged the sector's economic importance and said the government would examine deferment eligibility without jeopardizing employment and services. A total of 503 hotels had received loan deferments, collectively owing BTN 13.9 billion (USD 166.8 million).

Bankers have suggested phasing out deferments and instead restructuring loans—extending repayment terms up to 50 years—to reduce borrowers' monthly burdens. They warned that deferments increase interest liabilities, especially for loans deferred after June 2024.

The Hotel and Restaurant Association of Bhutan (HRAB) has requested an additional year of deferment, economic stimulus loans, and tax holiday extensions. Hoteliers said the sector remains fragile, with tourist arrivals in 2024 only reaching 35 percent of pre-COVID levels. Despite this, Bhutan earned USD 26 million in

tourism revenue last year from 144,973 Sustainable Development Fee-paying tourists.

As of December 2024, 5,083 loans had been deferred. Bhutan Development Bank Limited had the most deferments with 3,840 accounts, followed by the Royal Insurance Corporation of Bhutan Limited (378 accounts) and Bhutan National Bank Limited (322 accounts). According to RMA, BTN 33.25 billion (USD 398.9 million) in credit had been issued to the hotel and tourism sector, with BTN 561.2 million (USD 6.7 million) marked as non-performing loans. Transport loans totaled BTN 6.76 billion (USD 81.1 million), with BTN 869 million (USD 10.4 million) in non-performing loans.

To support recovery, the government is promoting Bhutan through influencer campaigns, international travel fairs, and incentives for Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions (MICE) tourism. New attractions and events across all districts are also planned. Bhutan aims to attract 250,000 tourists in 2025 and return to pre-pandemic levels by 2027. [Kuensel]

Bhutan: Gelephu International Airport construction to begin in July as part of Mindfulness City plan

(lm) Construction of the Gelephu International Airport, a flagship project within the Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC) Special Administrative Region, is set to begin in July 2025. Preparatory work, including the master plan and detailed project report, is nearing completion.

The Gelephu International Airport is projected to be operational by 2029, forming a critical part of Bhutan's long-term connectivity and infrastructure strategy. The airport will span 2,250 acres and is expected to accommodate 1.3 million passengers annually by 2040 and 5.5 million by 2065.

Resettlement for 224 households from Samtenthang and Samtenling chiwogs in Samtenling gewog (villages) will begin in June, with compensation based on a value-based land replacement strategy. [Kuensel]

Bhutan: Health ministry seeks alternative to dispose of seized narcotics after incinerator failure

Bhutan's Ministry of Health (MoH) is urgently seeking a solution for the safe disposal of seized narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances after the incinerator at Jigme Dorji Wangchuck National Referral Hospital (JDWNRH) broke down. The facility, which failed to reach the high temperatures required for pharmaceutical incineration, has left the Bhutan Food and Drug Authority (BFDA) unable to dispose of growing quantities of confiscated substances, including 47.88 kg of brown sugar, 13.15 kg of cannabis leaves, and thousands of pharmaceutical tablets. [Kuensel]

India: Controversial Waqf (Amendment) Bill passes parliament; concerns persist

(rt) India's lower house of parliament passed the Waqf (Amendment) Bill after a lengthy 12-hour debate, with 288 votes in favor and 232 against. The bill was subsequently passed in the upper house, where the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) holds a majority, with 128 votes in favor and 95 against. [Deccan Herald 1] [Deccan Herald 2]

The bill, introduced by Union Minority Affairs Minister Kiren Rijiju, proposes significant changes to the governance of Muslim religious endowments, known as waqf. With waqf boards managing properties worth an estimated INR 1.2 trillion (USD 14.22 billion) across over 940,000 acres in India, the bill aims to improve their administration, enhance transparency, and introduce technology for better management of waqf records. [BBC]

Key provisions of the bill include stipulations that only individuals who have practiced Islam for at least five years can donate property to waqf, and that government properties cannot be declared waqf. The bill also proposes adding non-Muslim members to waqf boards for administrative purposes, a move that has sparked significant controversy. Rijiju defended this change, stating that it would not interfere with religious affairs and was necessary to ensure that the waqf council remains secular.

Opposition parties and Muslim organizations, however, have expressed strong concerns. They argue that the bill undermines Muslim autonomy over their religious endowments and could lead to the confiscation or destruction of waqf properties. Muslim groups, including the All India Muslim Personal Law Board (AIMPLB), have condemned the bill as discriminatory, accusing the government of trying to weaken the constitutional rights of Muslims. They also argue that the bill could pave the way for greater

government control over Muslim properties, particularly at a time of increasing attacks on the Muslim community under the BJP-led government. [Al Jazeera] [Associated Press]

Despite the opposition, BJP leaders defended the bill, claiming that it would bring much-needed accountability, transparency, and efficiency to the management of waqf properties. They also rejected accusations that the bill would interfere with the religious rights of Muslims, emphasizing that the non-Muslim members on waqf boards would simply help ensure compliance with legal standards. [Anadolu Ajansı]

India: Judicial probe into cash found at judge's residence continues as top police officials testify

(lm) Delhi Police Commissioner Sanjay Arora and New Delhi Deputy Commissioner of Police (DCP) Devesh Kumar Mahala appeared before a judicial panel investigating the discovery of a large amount of burnt currency at the residence of Delhi High Court Justice Yashwant Varma. The committee, formed by Chief Justice of India Sanjiv Khanna, questioned Arora for two hours and Mahala for four hours on April 4 at the Haryana State Guest House in Chanakyapuri.

The probe was triggered by a fire on the night of March 14 in a storeroom attached to Justice Varma's residence. Although the fire was brought under control by midnight, responding police and fire officials allegedly discovered burnt bundles of cash at the scene. Justice Varma and his wife were not home at the time.

Following the fire, the judge's personal assistant reportedly asked police personnel to leave the scene and return the next morning. The next day, the incident was recorded in the police morning diary and escalated to Commissioner Arora, who then briefed central authorities and the Chief Justice of the Delhi High Court, D.K. Upadhyaya.

In addition to the senior officers, the panel has recorded statements from five police personnel who responded to the fire, the Delhi Fire Services chief, three firefighters, and three members of the judge's security staff. Justice Varma's three domestic helpers also testified earlier in the week.

As part of the investigation, DCP Mahala sealed the storeroom where the cash was found. The Delhi Police

also submitted security deployment records, call detail records, and internet protocol detail records from the past six months to the Delhi High Court.

The panel continues to investigate the source and purpose of the cash, as well as whether any procedural lapses occurred in the immediate response to the fire. [The Indian Express]

India: Parliament passes Aircraft Objects Bill to enhance lessor protections and streamline leasing process

(rt) India's Parliament has passed the Protection and Enforcement of Interests in Aircraft Objects Bill, designed to improve the aircraft leasing process and provide better protections for lessors. The bill, which aligns Indian aviation laws with international standards, was approved by the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha in early April 2025. It empowers aircraft leasing companies to repossess planes if airlines default on lease payments, ensuring faster recovery of aircraft in case of insolvency.

One of the key provisions of the bill is the reduction of the moratorium period for lessors trying to reclaim aircraft during insolvency proceedings to 40 days, shorter than the global standard of 60 days. It also requires lessors to clear outstanding dues, such as airport fees and oil company charges, for up to 60 days before repossessing the aircraft.

This legislative change comes in response to issues highlighted by the Go First Airlines insolvency case, where lessors faced difficulties in reclaiming planes due to a moratorium imposed by the National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT). The delays in repossession led to higher leasing costs for other airlines and undermined confidence in India's leasing environment. The bill also aims to prioritize the Cape Town Convention over India's local laws, such as the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC) of 2016, to ensure international standards take precedence in lease disputes.

The legislation is expected to boost the investment climate for aircraft leasing in India and improve the efficiency of the country's aviation sector, aligning it with global practices and enhancing lessor confidence. [Deccan Herald] [The Economic Times]

India: Wikimedia appeals Delhi court order to remove Wikipedia content on ANI

(wyn) Wikimedia, the operator of Wikipedia, has appealed a Delhi High Court ruling that ordered it to remove statements deemed defamatory toward Indian news agency Asian News International (ANI). The court had ruled in favor of ANI, which claimed its reputation was harmed by a Wikipedia entry that described the agency as a "propaganda tool" for the Indian government. The court also directed Wikimedia to issue an apology and pay INR 20 million (approximately USD 240,000) in damages.

Wikimedia has sought a review of the decision by a larger bench of the Delhi High Court, arguing that the order sets a concerning precedent for intermediary liability and raises significant questions about free speech and access to information. The appeal hearing has been postponed, and no final decision has yet been made.[Reuters 1] [Reuters 2]

This legal battle underscores the increasing scrutiny faced by global tech platforms in India. Wikimedia now joins companies like X (formerly Twitter), which have similarly challenged Indian government or court-ordered content takedowns.

India: Supreme Court judge flags rise in hate speech targeting minorities, urges balance with free speech

(lm) Supreme Court Justice A S Oka has warned that most hate speech cases reaching the court involve attacks on religious minorities and oppressed groups such as Scheduled Castes. Speaking at an event organized by Columbia Law School students, he urged a careful balance between tackling hate speech and protecting free expression. Justice Oka also criticized politically motivated hate speech and stressed that dissent and protest are vital in a democracy but must follow constitutional methods. He called for public education to reduce hate speech and promote social harmony. [The Indian Express]

India: Bokaro protest turns deadly as displaced youth demand long-promised jobs

(lm) A protest by displaced youth demanding employment at the Bokaro Steel Plant in Jharkhand

turned violent on April 4, resulting in the death of a 23-year-old man and injuries to at least 15 others.

The protest was organized by the Visthapit Apprentice Sangh (VAS), a group representing individuals whose families were displaced during the construction of the Bokaro Steel Plant in the late 1960s. The movement stems from longstanding grievances, as around 34,000 acres of land were acquired for the plant, with promises of 20,000 jobs for displaced families—most of which remain unfulfilled.

According to the protestors, despite government identification of over 4,300 displaced youth eligible for employment, only about 1,500 were offered apprenticeships between 2016 and 2022, with numbers dwindling in each phase. The latest protest was sparked by frustration after a February meeting with officials failed to yield results. On April 3, youth and their family members began a sit-in demonstration, demanding justice and long-overdue employment.

Operations at the steel plant were disrupted following the protest, trapping thousands of workers inside and bringing parts of the city to a halt since late last week. A three-member inquiry committee has been formed to investigate the incident, and the Bokaro Steel Plant's chief general manager has been ordered to be arrested. The family of the deceased will receive INR 2 million (USD 24,000) in compensation. [The Indian Express]

India: Tata Power plans first coal expansion in six years amid renewable energy slowdown

(wyn) Tata Power, one of India's largest integrated power companies, is planning its first coal-fired capacity expansion since 2019, signaling a shift as the country's clean energy sector grapples with delays and declining investor interest. A recent tender shows that Tata Power's associate company, Renascent Power, has sought an environmental impact assessment to expand the Prayagraj Power Generation Co Ltd (PPGCL) plant in Uttar Pradesh by 1,600 megawatts (MW), adding to its existing 1,980 MW capacity.

This development marks Tata Power's return to coal amid mounting challenges in India's renewable energy sector, including weak demand for tenders, land acquisition hurdles, and project cancellations. While India aims to achieve 500 gigawatts (GW) of non-fossil

fuel capacity by 2030, fossil fuels accounted for over two-thirds of new power generation in 2024.

Tata Power currently operates about 8.9 GW in coal-fired capacity across six states. Despite this expansion, the company has pledged to grow its clean energy portfolio from 6.7 GW to over 20 GW by 2030, with an investment of USD 9 billion. Nationally, India plans to increase coal-fired capacity by 80 GW by 2031–32 to meet surging electricity demand. [Reuters]

India: NTPC explores small nuclear reactors to replace coal plants

(wyn) India's state-run power producer, NTPC (National Thermal Power Corporation), is exploring the possibility of building small modular reactors (SMRs) as a replacement for its older thermal power plants. This move comes as part of the country's initiative to open its nuclear sector. The company has issued a tender for consultants to run feasibility tests for SMRs, which are simpler in design and can be scaled up based on demand.

NTPC, which primarily operates coal-fired plants with a capacity of 63 gigawatts (GW), plans to retire some of these older plants within the next five years and replace them with SMRs. NTPC has been in discussions with international firms, including those from Russia and the U.S., to explore building SMRs. In addition to SMRs, NTPC is also planning to build large nuclear reactors with a combined capacity of about 15 GW, with two 2.6 GW plants already under development.

India aims to increase its nuclear capacity to 100 GW by 2047, up from its current 8 GW, by amending its nuclear liability laws to attract foreign and private investments. [Reuters]

India: Government to avoid retaliation against U.S. tariffs; focus on concluding bilateral trade agreement

(rt/wyn/lm) In response to the United States' decision to impose a 27 percent reciprocal tariff on Indian imports, New Delhi has chosen not to retaliate and is instead doubling down on efforts to finalize a bilateral trade agreement with Washington by autumn 2025. The move reflects India's broader strategic calculus to preserve stable relations with the U.S., mitigate the

global trade fallout, and enhance its long-term economic position. [NDTV]

The tariff, announced by President Donald Trump as part of the "Fair and Reciprocal Plan," cites India's average tariffs and non-tariff barriers—estimated at 52 percent—and seeks to correct the U.S. trade deficit of USD 46 billion with India. While the reciprocal duty is higher than India expected (an initial 10 percent applies from April 5, with the full rate taking effect on April 9), the Indian government is treating the decision as an opportunity to accelerate trade negotiations. [The Indian Express] [The Economic Times] [Reuters 1]

New Delhi has invoked a clause in Trump's executive order that allows relief for countries demonstrating progress in correcting non-reciprocal trade arrangements. India believes it is better placed than regional peers—such as China, Vietnam, and Thailand, which have been subjected to even higher tariffs—to secure favorable terms. Officials note that India is currently the only country engaged in an active, structured trade dialogue with the U.S.

Trade talks resumed virtually in early April, focusing on tariff reduction, investment facilitation, and technology transfers. India has also expressed willingness to reduce duties on USD 23 billion worth of U.S. imports, including high-end motorcycles, bourbon, and digital services. Pharmaceutical exports from India—valued at nearly USD 9 billion annually—have been exempted from the new U.S. tariffs, offering relief to one of the country's key export sectors. [Reuters 2]

However, India's automotive sector, particularly electric vehicles (EVs), has been a point of contention in the trade talks. Despite opposition from domestic automakers such as Tata Motors and Mahindra & Mahindra, who have invested heavily in local EV production, India is prepared to reduce import tariffs on EVs immediately, as part of the broader trade negotiation with the U.S. This move is expected to benefit international carmakers like Tesla, which is looking to enter the Indian market. [Reuters 3]

Despite the strategic diplomatic tone, the U.S. tariffs are expected to have sectoral impacts within India. The hardest hit include electronics (USD 14 billion in exports), gems and jewelry (USD 9 billion), and seafood —particularly shrimp, where Ecuador now enjoys lower tariffs. The government is in consultations with affected exporters and is considering support measures such as extended credit lines, subsidies, and faster quality clearance to alternative markets like the European Union. [Financial Express]

Private economists, including those at Goldman Sachs, have revised India's growth outlook downward by 20 to 40 basis points. Growth for FY 2025/26 is now projected at 6.1 percent, down from earlier estimates of 6.3–6.8 percent. However, Indian officials remain confident that the target is still achievable, particularly if crude oil prices remain under USD 70 per barrel and global demand stabilizes. [Reuters 4]

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) is also monitoring potential currency effects. If China permits the yuan to weaken in response to U.S. tariffs, the rupee may be allowed to depreciate further to maintain India's export competitiveness. Given the size of the India-China trade deficit, any shift in the yuan's value could have significant spillover effects. [Reuters 5]

Opposition voices, including Indian National Congress leader Rahul Gandhi, criticized Prime Minister Narendra Modi's approach, urging a pivot toward a more self-reliant, production-based economy. Gandhi argued that the tariffs exposed the vulnerability of India's trade strategy and that the government's optimistic rhetoric has been outpaced by global realities. [The Times of India]

India: Governance concerns mount at IndusInd Bank after derivatives misreporting and RBI scrutiny

(wyn) IndusInd Bank, India's fifth-largest private sector lender, is facing its most serious crisis in decades after disclosing a USD 175 million accounting discrepancy in its derivatives portfolio. The issue, revealed in March, triggered a 25 percent drop in its share value and has led to a forensic investigation by Grant Thornton to determine whether fraud or intentional misstatement occurred.

The discrepancy stems from the bank's long-standing practice of not marking internal derivative trades to market. While external trades—used to hedge foreign currency borrowings—were recorded with real-time valuations and showed gains, the internal hedges were not similarly accounted for. This practice concealed substantial losses until the recent sharp depreciation of the Indian rupee exposed the financial imbalance. The issue was first flagged in September 2024 by the then CFO, who recommended a full review. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI), notified later, has since asked IndusInd's CEO and deputy to step down once replacements are found, though the bank denies receiving such a request.

Despite the governance failure, the RBI has maintained that IndusInd remains well-capitalized. The bank's largest shareholder, the UK-based Hinduja family, has also offered to inject capital if needed. [Reuters]

Operationally, IndusInd reported weak quarterly performance, with fourth-quarter loan growth contracting by 5.2 percent and deposits remaining flat compared to the previous quarter. On an annual basis, loan growth was just 1.4 percent and deposit growth stood at 6.8 percent. To shore up liquidity, the bank raised USD 2 billion in high-cost bulk deposits in March —its largest such monthly mobilization in over two years. However, the CASA ratio (a measure of low-cost deposits) declined to 32.8 percent, from 34.9 percent in the prior quarter and 37.9 percent a year ago.

Compounding these challenges, the bank is also grappling with elevated non-performing loans in its microfinance segment, which contributed to declining profitability over the past two quarters. Nevertheless, management has stated that it still expects to post a profit for the fourth quarter and the full fiscal year. [yahoo!finance]

India: Vedanta seeks global partner for USD 20 billion expansion across metals and energy

(wyn) Indian conglomerate Vedanta is seeking a global partner to support a USD 20 billion investment drive spanning zinc, aluminum, copper, iron, steel, oil, gas, and power sectors, according to a recently released tender document. The expansion aligns with Vedanta's broader restructuring plan to split into four entities—Vedanta Aluminium, Oil and Gas, Power, and Iron and Steel.

Led by billionaire Anil Agarwal, Vedanta is preparing to invest heavily in core industries over the next three years. Key projects include a USD 2–2.5 billion expansion of Hindustan Zinc and a USD 5 billion plan by Cairn India to increase oil output fivefold. The group also aims to double its current 5-gigawatt power portfolio and expand into nuclear energy and distribution. In February, Vedanta announced plans to partner with firms to build and operate 5 GW of nuclear power for captive use in India.

Vedanta Limited is one of India's largest diversified natural resources companies, with a significant presence in metals, mining, oil, gas, and power production. [Reuters]

India: Steel import rules to be tightened

(rt) India has tightened steel procurement rules to favor domestic manufacturing. This comes at a time when mills are struggling with lower prices of iron and steel due to a sharp influx of cheaper imports. The new rules under the “Domestically Manufactured Iron And Steel Products Policy 2025” mandates all ministries, departments and agencies under the Indian government to prioritize locally manufactured iron and steel products. The policy is valid for five years and may be extended at the discretion of the Ministry of Steel. This moves also comes a few weeks after the Directorate General of Trade Remedies, which functions under the trade ministry, recommended a temporary 12 percent tax for 200 days on certain steel imports to curb “serious injury” to the domestic industry. [Economic Times] [Reuters]

India: India appoints new central bank Deputy Governor

(wyn) India has appointed economist Poonam Gupta as the new deputy governor of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) for a three-year term, at a time when the country faces growing economic uncertainty. Gupta, who replaces Michael Patra, brings extensive experience from the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the Prime Minister’s Economic Advisory Council. She also serves as Director General of the National Council of Applied Economic Research. Her appointment comes amid slowing growth, with India’s GDP estimated to have risen by only 6.5 percent in the fiscal year ending March 2025, down from 9.2 percent the previous year.

As a member of the RBI’s six-member Monetary Policy Committee, Gupta is expected to adopt a reform-minded approach. She has previously called for changes to India’s inflation-targeting framework and more flexible exchange rate policies—topics gaining traction amid ongoing economic headwinds. [Reuters 1] [Reuters 2][LM1]

India's overnight indexed swap (OIS) markets—used to gauge interest rate expectations by allowing investors to exchange fixed and floating interest rate payments—suggest that the RBI may adopt a more aggressive monetary easing stance. OIS rates have recently fallen to their lowest levels since May 2022, signaling expectations of not only rate cuts but also a shift in the central bank’s policy stance to “accommodative.” While

the RBI is expected to proceed cautiously, some traders anticipate that the central bank could surprise markets with a larger-than-expected cut or more dovish guidance to counter the negative effects of global trade disruptions.

Amid this environment, market participants and bankers are also seeking reassurance regarding liquidity conditions. Money market rates have already started to decline, which analysts interpret as a form of stealth easing ahead of the RBI's official policy moves. Despite concerns, India's official growth target for 2025–26 remains at 6.3 to 6.8 percent. [Reuters 3]

India: Central bank maintains foreign investor limits on bonds for FY 2025–26

(wyn) The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has decided to maintain the existing investment caps for foreign portfolio investors (FPIs) in government and corporate bonds for the fiscal year 2025–26. The caps remain at 6 percent for central government securities, 2 percent for state government securities, and 15 percent for corporate bonds.

For the first half of the fiscal year (April–September), the general investment limit for government bonds will stay at INR 2.79 trillion (USD 32.71 billion), increasing slightly to INR 2.89 trillion for the second half (October–March). For corporate bonds, the respective limits are INR 8.22 trillion and INR 8.80 trillion. As of now, FPIs have used 22.3 percent of their permitted quota. [Reuters]

India: Meitei and Kuki-Zo groups hold first formal talks amid Manipur crisis

(lm) For the first time since ethnic violence erupted in Manipur in May 2023, representatives from the Meitei and Kuki-Zo communities held direct talks on April 6 in New Delhi, facilitated by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA). The meeting followed the imposition of President's rule in the state and aimed to ease the nearly two-year-long conflict.

The Meiteis, the majority community concentrated in the Imphal Valley, have historically dominated Manipur's political and administrative landscape. The Kuki-Zo groups, predominantly tribal communities based in the surrounding hill districts, have long expressed grievances over political marginalization

and demanded a separate administrative arrangement.

The talks were attended by valley-based groups like the All Manipur United Clubs' Organisation (AMUCO) and Federation of Civil Society Organisations (FOCS), along with the Kuki-Zo Council and Zomi Council. Officials from the MHA presented a six-point draft agreement, which called for ending inter-community violence, supporting the return of displaced people, recovering illegal arms, and reopening highways. It also proposed that long-term issues be addressed through dialogue with the central government.

Meitei representatives agreed to the proposals, while Kuki-Zo delegates said they would need to consult their communities before making commitments, citing security concerns and demands for separate governance.

The dialogue was welcomed as "historic" by Kuki-Zo leaders but criticized by Meitei group COCOMI, which declined participation and accused the government of staging talks for political appearances.

Union Home Minister Amit Shah previously attributed the conflict to misinterpretations of a Manipur High Court order on Scheduled Tribe status for Meiteis and had announced plans for such dialogue in Parliament. [The Indian Express]

India: New nuclear submarine base to enhance sea-based deterrence by 2026

(rt) India is set to operationalize a dedicated base for nuclear-powered submarines, INS Varsha, near Rambilli in Andhra Pradesh by 2026. Part of the long-planned Project Varsha, the high-security facility is designed to support India's expanding fleet of nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) and bolster the survivability of its sea-based nuclear deterrent.

Located around 50 kilometers south of Visakhapatnam, INS Varsha includes underground pens, a network of subterranean tunnels, and inner and outer harbor facilities. The inner harbor is already complete, while work on breakwaters and jetties for the outer harbor is ongoing. The facility will allow submarines to discreetly enter the Bay of Bengal, minimizing exposure to surveillance and reducing vulnerability to preemptive strikes.

The underground design enhances second-strike capability, allowing India's SSBNs to remain concealed and protected even in the event of a counterforce attack. This positions India to respond credibly in the event of a nuclear first strike, reinforcing the country's nuclear triad.

The operationalization of INS Varsha coincides with the expected commissioning of INS Aridhaman later this year. The 7,000-ton submarine will be India's third SSBN and is designed to carry more K-4 missiles—with a range of 3,500 kilometers—than its predecessors, INS Arihant and INS Arighat. A fourth SSBN, with approximately 75 percent indigenous content, was launched in late 2024, and future SSBNs—planned to be significantly larger—are under development.

India's Cabinet Committee on Security has also approved the construction of two 9,800-ton nuclear-powered attack submarines (SSNs), intended for conventional strike and escort roles. The long-term goal is to field six SSNs, forming a parallel undersea force alongside SSBNs. [The Times of India] [SWARAJYA]

Meanwhile, India is upgrading its Karwar naval base on the western coast under Project Seabird, which complements INS Varsha in creating dispersed and resilient basing infrastructure. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh recently inaugurated over USD 240 million in new facilities at Karwar. When complete, Karwar will host up to 50 warships and submarines and 40 auxiliary vessels, easing congestion at Mumbai harbor and expanding India's maritime operational depth. [moneycontrol]

India: Government to sell up to 4.83 percent stake in Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders

(wyn) India's government plans to offload up to a 4.83 percent stake in Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders, according to a stock exchange filing on April 3. The sale includes an initial offer of 2.83 percent, or 11.4 million shares, with the option to sell an additional 2 percent.

The offering will be made at a floor price of INR 2,525 (USD 30.30) per share—an 8 percent discount compared to the previous day's closing price. The government currently holds 84.83 percent of the company. Shares of Mazagon Dock have risen by nearly 23 percent in 2025.

Mazagon Dock Shipbuilders Limited is a state-owned defense public sector enterprise headquartered in Mumbai. It specializes in constructing warships and submarines for the Indian Navy, including vessels under Project-75, such as the Scorpene-class submarines. [Reuters]

India: Home Minister visits Jammu and Kashmir territory on a 3-day tour to review terrorism issues

(rt) Union Home Minister Amit Shah arrived in Jammu on April 6 for a three-day visit to the Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) union territory, focusing on counter-terrorism efforts, the region's security situation, and ongoing development initiatives. Shah's visit comes ahead of the expected inauguration of the Vande Bharat train to Kashmir by Prime Minister Narendra Modi around April 19. [The Economic Times 1]

On April 8, Shah traveled to Srinagar, J&K's largest city and summer capital, to review development projects and chair high-level meetings with local officials. He met with J&K Lieutenant Governor Manoj Sinha and Chief Minister Omar Abdullah to assess progress on infrastructure initiatives. Additionally, Shah led two key security review meetings, which involved top security and intelligence officials, to evaluate preparations for the Amarnath Yatra, a major religious pilgrimage. The meetings also focused on strategies to address cross-border infiltration and bolster counter-terrorism efforts. [Yes Punjab]

Shah also visited the border outpost in Kathua, where he praised the Border Security Force (BSF) for its role in securing India's borders. He assured BSF personnel of enhanced support, including advanced technologies such as drone surveillance and border detection systems. During his visit, Shah expressed optimism about the region's security, stating that terrorism has been significantly reduced, though not fully eradicated.

A significant moment during his visit was the public renunciation of separatism by three prominent separatist leaders, who pledged their allegiance to the Indian Constitution and distanced themselves from the Hurriyat Conference. The Hurriyat Conference is a coalition of pro-independence political and separatist groups in J&K that has historically advocated for either autonomy or complete independence from India. [The Hindu]

Shah also reassured the people of J&K that the region's statehood would be restored at an "appropriate time."

[The Economic Times 2]

India: Four convicted in 2008 Jaipur blasts case

(lm) A special court in Jaipur on April 5 found four individuals guilty in connection with a live bomb discovered near a temple in Chandpole Bazar during the 2008 Jaipur serial bombings. The court convicted the four individuals under the Indian Penal Code, the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, and the Explosive Substances Act—offenses carrying a maximum penalty of life imprisonment.

The bomb, which was defused, was one of nine devices planted across Jaipur on May 13, 2008, eight of which exploded, killing 71 people and injuring over 180.

The same four were previously sentenced to death in eight related cases, but the Rajasthan High Court acquitted them in March 2023, citing serious investigative lapses. That acquittal is now under appeal in the Supreme Court. Defense counsel argued the facts of this case mirrored those in which the accused were acquitted and plans to challenge the new convictions in the High Court. [The Indian Express]

Maldives: Supreme Court Judge Azmiralda files case against ACC President, disputes allegations

(lm) Supreme Court Judge Dr. Azmiralda Zahir has filed a petition with police for a criminal investigation against Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) President Adam Shaamil, accusing him of providing false testimony. This case follows a letter Shaamil sent to the Judicial Service Commission (JSC), claiming a criminal investigation was underway against Azmiralda, a statement her legal team argues was false, constituting deliberate disinformation. Azmiralda's lawyers also allege that Shaamil attempted to influence her. [the edition 1]

This action comes after the ACC suspended Azmiralda along with two other judges, Mahaz Ali Zahir and Husnu Su'ood, on February 26, as the Supreme Court was preparing to hear a petition on a constitutional amendment. The ACC has not disclosed the specific allegations, even after a request was made under the Right to Information (RTI) Act. The commission has

declined to reveal details, citing potential obstruction of the investigation. [the edition 2]

Azmiralda also filed a separate complaint with the ACC last month, accusing Shaamil of abusing his authority and spreading false information, which the commission is investigating. Meanwhile, the Judicial Service Commission has summoned the judges for questioning. Judge Su'ood, citing government interference, resigned from his post.

Supreme Court Judge Hussain Shaheed has been appointed to the Judicial Service Commission (JSC), filling the position left vacant after Judge Su'ood's resignation. Shaheed, who was appointed to the Supreme Court in March, previously served as Chief Judge of the High Court. His appointment strengthens the JSC, which now includes two Supreme Court judges, alongside other judges from the High Court and lower courts. [the edition 3]

Meanwhile, Judges Mohamed Faisal and Mohamed Niyaz have submitted nominations for Chief Justice of the High Court, following Shaheed's elevation to the Supreme Court. Both judges have served on the High Court since 2018, with Judge Niyaz currently overseeing the High Court and also serving as JSC Vice-Chairperson. [the edition 4]

Maldives: Former Immigration chief Shamaan remanded in custody pending trial

(lm) Former Immigration Controller Mohamed Shamaan Waheed has been remanded in custody by the Criminal Court until the conclusion of his trial, following his arrest last month on charges of extortion. Shamaan, who was removed from office after the allegations, is accused of colluding with immigration officials to extort over MVR 500,000 (approximately USD 32,400) from an expatriate. The money was reportedly delivered to Shamaan's residence after the expatriate's release from immigration detention.

The Criminal Court initially remanded Shamaan for 15 days, but his legal team's appeal to the High Court was dismissed, resulting in extended detention as the case proceeds. Four other individuals have also been arrested in connection with the case, and their remands have been extended. Police have imposed travel bans on additional individuals and seized Shamaan's wife's phone as part of the investigation. The expatriate involved was initially arrested during an Immigration operation and allegedly coerced into

handing over the money, which was then delivered to Shamaan. [the edition]

Maldives: President nominates Mohamed Mujuthaz for Civil Service Commission

(mmv) President Dr. Mohamed Muizzu has nominated former Hanimaadhoo MP Mohamed Mujuthaz to fill the vacancy in the Civil Service Commission (CSC) following the resignation of Vice-President Ibrahim Rasheed. Mujuthaz, who previously served as a Member of Parliament and State Minister at the President's Office under former President Abdulla Yameen, is the sole nominee for the position. The nomination is now under consideration by Parliament, which will decide whether to approve his appointment to the five-member independent commission responsible for overseeing the country's civil service. [the edition]

Maldives: Parliament rejects emergency motion on Israeli passport ban delay

(lm) The Maldivian Parliament has rejected an emergency motion criticizing delays in enforcing a ban on Israeli passport holders. Deputy Speaker Ahmed Nazim, who presided over the April 7 sitting, ruled that the motion—submitted by Kendhoo MP Mauroof Zakir—did not meet the criteria for emergency consideration under parliamentary regulations.

The motion followed the recess and aimed to highlight the government's inaction on implementing a Cabinet-approved proposal to ban Israeli passport holders, which had stemmed from an earlier submission by opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) MP Michael Ahmed Naseem. The motion argued that aside from statements condemning violence in Palestine, no concrete steps had been taken more than two years since hostilities began.

Nazim cited regulations requiring emergency motions to address urgent issues directly affecting citizens or national security. The proposed ban was initially accepted by Parliament on May 29, 2024, and referred to the Security Services Committee, but remains stalled despite multiple deadlines, including a February 2025 target.

Meanwhile, several other government-backed bills submitted by ruling People's National Congress (PNC)

MPs have been swiftly passed and ratified, further drawing attention to the lack of progress on the Israeli passport ban. [the edition]

Maldives: Nasheed urges unity as competition intensifies over MDP's 2028 presidential ticket

(lm) Former Maldivian president Mohamed Nasheed has urged the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) and The Democrats to form an alliance, stating that uniting the two factions would be in the best interest of the country and both parties. In a post on X, Nasheed wrote that an alliance is “the best option for Maldives, MDP and The Democrats at the moment.”

Nasheed's comments come as speculation grows over the MDP's 2028 presidential primary. Several senior figures from The Democrats are reportedly rejoining MDP, intensifying interest in the party's nomination process. Although former president Ibrahim Mohamed Solih is rumored to be considering a bid, he has yet to confirm his candidacy. In late 2024, Solih noted that “four or five” individuals had already expressed interest in the race, calling it a positive sign for internal democracy. [the edition 1]

South Hulhumale MP Dr. Ahmed Shamheed is among those eyeing the MDP ticket. In a message to party members, he expressed interest in ongoing and proposed meetings to discuss his path forward. Shamheed, who served as transport minister in 2012 under a Jumhooree Party quota, has not made a formal announcement, but several MPs have confirmed receipt of his message. Meanwhile, MDP chairperson and former Economic Minister Fayyaz Ismail has officially declared his candidacy. [the edition 2]

Nasheed, a founding member of both MDP and The Democrats, split from MDP in 2023 following a fallout with Solih and vowed to “dismantle” the party. He later led The Democrats into unsuccessful presidential and parliamentary campaigns. Although currently removed from daily politics, Nasheed now serves as Secretary General of the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF) and resides in Ghana. He recently reaffirmed his emotional ties to MDP, calling it “like a child” to him and wishing for its continued strength. [the edition 1]

In response to Nasheed’s suggestion of a potential collaboration, Imthiyaz Fahumy, President of The Democrats, expressed support for the idea, welcoming it on social media. [the edition 3]

Maldives: Petition urges cuts to MPs' pay as PNC lawmaker calls for changes in next term

(lm) A public petition demanding the reduction of salaries and allowances for Maldives' Members of Parliament (MPs) has gained momentum amid concerns over rising public debt and government spending. The petition, hosted on change.org, criticizes MPs' high salaries, MVR 20,000 (USD 1,300) committee allowances, and premium health insurance, calling them excessive given the nation's economic challenges. It also seeks to eliminate service allowances granted to former MPs, which have cost the state MVR 33.8 million (USD 2.2 million) over the past decade.

Currently, MPs earn MVR 82,500 (USD 5,360) per month in total. The petition argues that such benefits, including healthcare superior to the Aasandha public scheme, are unfair and unsustainable. [the edition 1]

In response, MP Ibrahim Falah of the ruling People's National Congress (PNC) stated that salary reductions should be implemented only at the start of the next parliamentary term, not mid-term, citing the financial burdens of campaign debts. He also criticized the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) for previously pushing a salary hike to MVR 100,000 (USD 6,500), which President Mohamed Muizzu had opposed. Falah suggested the petition's scope should include salaries of former presidents and judges. [the edition 2]

Maldives: President Muizzu proposes generation-based tobacco ban and urges traders to shift business

(pn) President Mohamed Muizzu has put forward a proposal for a generational smoking ban as part of his broader public health initiative aimed at reducing tobacco use among younger Maldivians. Speaking during the second episode of the President's podcast Rayyithunnaa Eku, Muizzu outlined three potential cut-off dates for the ban—targeting individuals born on or after January 1 of either 2000, 2004, or 2007. The aim is to prevent nicotine dependence before it becomes ingrained, with a particular focus on the 18-25 age group.

The decision will be made following consultations with health experts and a review by the Cabinet, led by

Health Minister Abdulla Nazim Ibrahim. In line with this proposal, President Muizzu also stressed the importance of tobacco vendors transitioning to alternative livelihoods, noting that the Maldives' small population cannot support a tobacco industry. He has directly called on traders to shift away from the tobacco business to healthier economic activities. [the edition 1] [the edition 2]

In addition to the generational ban, the government has recently taken strong measures to combat nicotine addiction. This includes a crackdown on vaping, which has resulted in fines exceeding MVR 160,500 (approximately USD 10,412) since the nationwide ban on December 15, 2024. Furthermore, the government has implemented substantial tax hikes on tobacco products, more than doubling the price of a pack of cigarettes from MVR 110 to MVR 240. While this has led to a decrease in tobacco revenue, it has also contributed to the rise of illegal tobacco imports. [Sun Online 1]

The opposition has criticized the tax hikes on tobacco by arguing that the measure's goal is to boost state revenue. In response, the administration has reiterated that the policy's primary goal is to protect public health and reduce smoking rates. [Sun Online 2]

To gauge public opinion, President Muizzu launched an online poll via his official Facebook page, asking citizens for their input on the smoking ban's proposed age limit. Out of 4,281 respondents, 72 percent favored implementing the restriction for individuals born on or after January 1, 2000. [Atoll Times] [Dr Mohamed Muizzu's Facebook page]

Maldives: Malé City Council to assist residents with flat list complaints amid rising protests

(lm) Malé City Council has announced it will assist residents in submitting complaints related to the government's recently published flat list, following mounting public dissatisfaction and opposition protests. The government opened the complaints process after releasing the list in late February, which outlines recipients of social housing flats.

Support will be provided until April 15, the deadline for filing grievances. The council's general services section will offer assistance during extended hours, adjusting schedules for Ramadan. The move follows demonstrations outside the Housing Ministry over submission regulations and transparency concerns.

So far, 2,843 complaints have been lodged—2,079 regarding three-bedroom flats and 764 concerning two-bedroom units. The Housing Ministry has pledged to address the concerns.

Of 4,939 applicants reviewed, 1,820 were deemed eligible for flats—1,423 for three-bedroom units and 397 for two-bedroom units—while 2,695 applications were disqualified and 424 lost eligibility due to changes in scoring. The opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) has also criticized the process. [the edition]

Maldives: Kaadevaarehaa removed from Hoadedhoo's jurisdiction for tourism development

(lm) President Dr. Mohamed Muizzu has removed the uninhabited island of Kaadevaarehaa from the jurisdiction of Gaafu Dhaalu Hoadedhoo—a populated island in the southern Maldives—to facilitate its development for integrated tourism. The decision, aligned with a presidential pledge, was formalized through a decree issued under the Decentralization Act and published in the Government Gazette. A revised jurisdiction map was included in the decree. [the edition]

Maldives: Prosecution appeals murder ruling to Supreme Court

(lm) The prosecution has appealed to the Supreme Court following the High Court's decision not to detain suspects charged in the 2017 murder of Mohamed Anas. Anas was killed in Male' by a group of men inside the Litus Service Centre. Seven individuals have been charged with the crime, some facing charges of intentional homicide.

Previously, the prosecution had appealed the Criminal Court’s acquittal of the suspects and requested their remand. However, the High Court ruled there were no grounds to detain them. The case is now with the Supreme Court, which has yet to decide whether it will accept the appeal.

A minor involved in the case was sentenced to 18 years in prison, a sentence that was later reduced during former President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih’s administration. [the edition]

Maldives: Virtual autopsy conducted on Zakiyya Moosa's body

(lm) A virtual autopsy has been conducted on Zakiyya Moosa, who was found dead in Noonu Atoll Holhudhoo on September 10, 2024. The procedure, carried out in India with police oversight, used CT scans and MRIs to create a 3D model of her body for forensic analysis. The results have not yet been released.

Zakiyya's death, attributed to neck injuries, sparked accusations against her husband, though her family has remained silent. Local residents have questioned whether the injuries could have been self-inflicted, leading to sporadic protests in Holhudhoo, with residents calling for justice and transparency in the investigation.

Minister of Homeland Security Ali Ihusan acknowledged that the decision not to conduct an autopsy abroad was a mistake, expressing regret that it led to ongoing public concerns. [the edition]

Maldives: Criminal Court frees man after detention exceeds possible sentence

The Criminal Court has released a 29-year-old man held in an assault case after ruling that his time in custody exceeded the sentence he would have received if convicted. The suspect had pleaded guilty at the preliminary hearing, and the court determined his sentence would have been one month and 24 days. However, he had already spent two months in remand.

Judge Ibrahim Ihusan criticized the Prosecutor General's Office for requesting repeated 15-day extensions without clearly stating whether it intended to detain him until trial's end. The court ruled that such a practice could result in unfairly prolonged detention beyond sentencing terms. [the edition]

Maldives: President Muizzu highlights the nation's duty to support children with autism

(sl) President Dr. Mohamed Muizzu said in a message posted on his official X account on World Autism Day (April 2) that every Maldivian child is invaluable to the nation and deeply valued. [President Dr. Mohamed Muizzu on X]

Reiterating his message, the President highlighted that children with autism possess unique talents and skills that the country needs. He stressed the national duty to support and care for these children. [The President's Office – Republic of Maldives]

Maldives: Minister encourages vaccination to prevent diseases

(lm) Health Minister Abdulla Nazim Ibrahim urged the public to prioritize vaccination, especially for children, during his World Health Day address. He highlighted the importance of maternal health before, during, and after pregnancy, and encouraged healthy lifestyles in the first 1,000 days of a child's life.

Nazim praised the Maldives for significantly reducing infant mortality and eliminating diseases like polio and malaria. He also noted the country's success in preventing mother-to-child transmission of HIV and syphilis, and controlling rubella and hepatitis-B.

Efforts to streamline maternal and child health data through digital platforms were also discussed, ensuring healthcare workers have easy access to vital information. [the edition]

Maldives: Government signs agreements to develop battery energy storage systems in 18 islands

(lm) The Maldives government has signed agreements with three Chinese companies to develop battery energy storage systems (BESS) in 18 residential islands as part of the Accelerating Sustainable System Development Using Renewable Energy (ASSURE) project. The Chinese firms involved are Shijiazhuang Kelin Electric, Gordian Nanjing Automation, and Sino Soar Hybrid.

The project will include the installation of 38 MW of solar battery storage and energy management systems. For context, 38 MW is equivalent to the electricity needed to power about 9,500 homes for a year, based on average consumption in the Maldives. Key islands such as Hanimaadhoo, Milandhoo, and Velidhoo will see significant energy capacity increases, with the goal of boosting renewable energy use. This project aligns with President Mohamed Muizzu's aim to achieve 33 percent renewable energy consumption by 2028.

The installation is expected to save approximately 8.4 million liters of diesel and MVR 125 million (USD 8 million) annually in fuel costs. Additionally, the “Magey Soloar” program will support solar PV installation on residential buildings. [the edition]

Maldives: Leadership changes in key fisheries and marine research roles

(lm) Mohamed Shimal has been appointed the new Director General of the Maldives Marine Research Institute (MMRI), succeeding Shafiya Naeem, who resigned in January after six years in the role. Shimal, who has been with MMRI since 2015 and previously served as Senior Research Officer, has contributed significantly to the institute's research programs. MMRI, under the Ministry of Fisheries, conducts studies related to the marine environment of the Maldives. [the edition 1]

In parallel, Fisheries Deputy Minister Ahmed Shafiu and Maldives Industrial Fisheries Company (MIFCO) Deputy Manager Ibrahim Saeed have both resigned from their positions. MIFCO is a state-owned enterprise involved in the processing, exporting, and distribution of fish and seafood products. [the edition 2]

Maldives: Tourism to be expanded via new lagoon resort projects

(db) On April 2, the Maldivian Ministry of Tourism unveiled plans to expand the country’s resort portfolio further, focusing on the construction of three new resorts within the lagoons of Kaafu Atoll’s Kaashidhoo and Haa Alifu Atoll’s Kelaa.

In Kaashidhoo Lagoon, a single resort will be developed that is to encompass a land area of 10 hectares. The stipulated minimum land acquisition cost for this site is USD 2.2 million. Notably, this announcement represents the second attempt by the Ministry of Tourism to build a resort within the Kaashidhoo area.

The plan for Keela Lagoon includes the development of two separate resorts with a combined area of 12.2 hectares. The Ministry has established minimum land acquisition costs of USD 1.9 million for Lagoon 1 and USD 2 million for Lagoon 2. The Ministry has issued a

call for bids, requiring interested developers to hand in their proposals by June 5, 2025.

This bidding process follows the Ministry's allocation of roughly 25 islands for the purpose of resort construction, announced in 2024. This initiative has already generated USD 33 million in acquisition fees from 11 successful bids. With 180 resorts already in operation, providing 70 percent of the Maldives' tourist beds, this sector plays a crucial role in the national economy. [The edition]

Maldives: 18 companies' contracts canceled for failing to start education projects

(lm) The contracts of 18 companies have been canceled for not initiating education-related projects, Education Minister Dr. Ismail Shafeeu announced. The move comes after delays in several projects, which were hindered by unpaid dues totaling MVR 280 million (approximately USD 18 million) when the current government took office.

Minister Shafeeu explained that while much of the backlog was cleared last year, many projects still failed to start despite the government's settlement of outstanding payments and set start dates. As a result, the contracts were reassigned to other firms.

In addition, the Minister revealed that 20 companies failing to meet performance standards would have their agreements terminated, with new companies set to take over those projects. President Dr. Mohamed Muizzu had previously stated that agreements from the previous administration, which were not implemented, would be canceled due to poor budgeting and the inconsistent awarding of contracts. [the edition]

Maldives: Government spends MVR 79 million on canned tuna gifts for Ramadan

(lm) The Maldivian government has distributed over 108,000 cases of canned tuna as Ramadan gifts this year, continuing an initiative introduced by President Dr. Mohamed Muizzu in 2024. According to the Finance Ministry, a total of 108,801 cases were provided to households nationwide, with the government spending MVR 79.4 million (USD 5.1 million) on the program. [the edition]

Maldives: Minimum spending threshold for sovereignty projects raised to USD 100 million

(lm) President Mohamed Muizzu has increased the minimum expenditure threshold for projects tied to national security and sovereignty from USD 15 million to USD 100 million (MVR 1.54 billion). The revised policy aims to channel resources into larger, more strategic initiatives to strengthen the Maldives' independence and sovereign capacity.

While this new threshold applies to sovereignty-related ventures, infrastructure projects such as airport development, housing, and land reclamation will continue under the previous financial requirements. The government stated that the move ensures that the most critical projects receive appropriate funding for effective execution. [the edition]

Maldives: President Muizzu vows to make police service region's most trusted

(lm) President Mohamed Muizzu has pledged to transform the Maldives Police Service into the most trusted and capable law enforcement agency in the region by its 100th anniversary in eight years. Speaking at the 92nd anniversary celebrations on March 29, he emphasized the professionalism and diverse expertise of the force and laid out a vision for it to become modern, reliable, and compassionate.

President Muizzu underscored the importance of ongoing education and practical training to meet evolving security challenges. He praised officers for their dedication and sacrifice in protecting lives and property and stressed the need for greater public engagement, urging officers to foster awareness and guide citizens toward lawful behavior.

He also called on police to uphold religious values, maintain integrity, and deliver a service that inspires national pride, while acknowledging the essential support provided by officers' families. [the edition]

Maldives: Police issue urgent warnings on currency exchange and online fraud

(db) Amidst a reported surge in fraudulent activities, the Maldives Police Service issued a public alert on April 6, urging citizens to be highly cautious when conducting foreign currency exchanges and online financial transactions. The Cyber Crime Department recommended verifying the legitimacy of foreign exchange dealers through the Maldives Monetary Authority (MMA). To prevent damage, the police advised citizens to consult the MMA's official website for a list of authorized vendors.

Furthermore, the police highlighted a concerning trend with regard to compromised Viber accounts. Scammers are reportedly gaining access to these accounts and impersonating the legitimate owners to deceive friends and family into transferring money. The policy warned against sharing one-time passwords with anyone to mitigate this risk. Instead, verifying the identity of anyone requesting money would be crucial before making the respective transactions. The police also cautioned against scams concerning compromised social media accounts and impersonation calls.

In response to the escalating number of fraud cases, the Maldives Police Service recently established a dedicated call center to streamline the reporting process. The Anti-Scam Center is meant to coordinate actions with the competent authorities and financial institutions. This shall allow swift responses upon receiving a report to protect transaction data from involved institutions and pursue the necessary prosecutions.

Citizens who have fallen victim to or suspect fraudulent activities are encouraged to report incidents via the Anti-Scam Hotline 125 with the extension 2020, the Anti-Scam Centre's official email address, or the National Emergency Number 911. [Avas]

Nepal: Pro-monarchy protest sparks legal, political, and public fallout after deadly violence in Kathmandu

(lm) The March 28 pro-monarchy protest in Kathmandu's Tinkune area has escalated into a wide-ranging political, legal, and human rights controversy after the demonstration turned violent, resulting in the deaths of two people and injuries to over 120. Protesters—led by monarchist groups demanding the reinstatement of Nepal as a Hindu kingdom—clashed with police, engaging in vandalism, looting, and arson across Tinkune, Koteshwar, and Jadibuti.

The violence claimed the lives of video journalist Suresh Rajak, who died in a fire, and Sabin Maharjan, a 29-year-old driver killed by police gunfire. In response, the government has announced NPR 1 million (USD 7,300) in financial compensation to each victim's family. [The Kathmandu Post 1]

The Kathmandu District Court has extended the remand of 41 individuals—including Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP) leaders Rabindra Mishra and Dhawal Shamsher Rana—for six more days to allow further investigation under charges including offenses against the state, criminal disturbance, and organized crime. They were among the 112 arrested following the protest. While 81 individuals have been released, 31 remain under custody. [The Kathmandu Post 2]

The RPP, while not officially a participant in the March 28 demonstration, has come under scrutiny after several of its senior leaders joined the protest. The party has condemned the charges against its leaders, demanded the resignation of Home Minister Lekhak, and called for an impartial investigation led by a former Supreme Court judge with human rights and civil society representation. It has also urged the government to declare the deceased protestors martyrs and release all detained party members. [The Kathmandu Post 3]

The protests triggered a heavy-handed response from security forces. Nepal Police admitted firing 58 live rounds, 746 tear gas shells, and two pistol shots to control the crowd. While police defended their actions as proportionate, victims and witnesses have accused authorities of excessive force, including firing at bystanders. The police also denied using expired tear gas or firing from elevated structures, as alleged. [The Kathmandu Post 4]

The House State Affairs and Good Governance Committee has summoned Home Minister Ramesh Lekhak to clarify the government's response and ordered a full investigation. On April 4, the committee directed the government to prosecute those responsible for the violence and to prohibit future demonstrations in the Tinkune area. It also called for better resourcing of security forces to handle instability. [The Kathmandu Post 5] [The Kathmandu Post 6]

Meanwhile, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) has struggled to initiate an independent probe after several retired judges declined to lead a high-level inquiry, citing political sensitivities. The NHRC's internal investigation is ongoing, with plans to

incorporate forensic and security experts to maintain impartiality. [The Kathmandu Post 7]

Nepal: Nepal: RSP chief Lamichhane remanded in fraud case; Speaker rejects reinstatement request

(lm) Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP) President and former Home Minister Rabi Lamichhane has been remanded in custody after the Butwal bench of the Tulsipur High Court overturned a prior bail decision in the Supreme Cooperative fraud case. Lamichhane, accused of embezzling millions of Nepali rupees through the now-defunct Gorkha Media Network during his tenure as managing director, was arrested from his residence in Kathmandu on April 4 and transferred to Bhairahawa on April 5. [The Kathmandu Post 1] [The Kathmandu Post 2] [The Kathmandu Post 3]

The court ruled that Lamichhane and former Deputy Inspector General of Nepal Police Chhabilal Joshi—also a Gorkha Media Network official—must be held in custody for further investigation. Both face charges of organized crime and financial misconduct, with allegations that NPR 20 million (USD 146,000) was deposited into Lamichhane's personal account and NPR 25 million (USD 183,000) into Joshi's. An audit report revealed that NPR 109.9 million (USD 804,000) had flowed through Gorkha Media Network's accounts, implicating the two and a third associate, GB Rai, who remains at large. [The Kathmandu Post 4]

Lamichhane, suspended as a lawmaker since December 24, 2024, had earlier requested reinstatement. However, Speaker Devraj Ghimire rejected the appeal, citing Clause 27

Despite these setbacks, Lamichhane resumed party leadership on April 1 and is pushing ahead with RSP's first national convention scheduled for May 8–10. The party has only completed conventions in five of Nepal's 753 municipalities and is racing to meet internal requirements amid mounting legal and political pressure. [The Kathmandu Post 5]

Nepal: Ex-NEA director alleges political interference in dismissal; Supreme Court declines interim reinstatement

(lm) Former Managing Director of the Nepal Electricity Authority (NEA), Kulman Ghising, has accused top government officials of using state power to remove him from office. In a press conference on April 4, Ghising indirectly blamed Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli and Energy Minister Deepak Khadka for orchestrating his dismissal through attacks from the parliamentary floor. Ghising maintained he had served the NEA in line with the law and accused the government of targeting him for holding industrialists accountable for unpaid electricity bills. [The Kathmandu Post 1]

Ghising was removed from his position on March 24, just four months before his term ended, and replaced by Hitendra Dev Shakya. He subsequently filed a petition at the Supreme Court challenging the government's decision and seeking reinstatement. However, on April 3, the court declined to issue an interim order, opting instead to prioritize the case for a final judgment. [The Kathmandu Post 2]

The conflict between Ghising and Energy Minister Khadka centers on the NEA's move in October 2024 to cut power to several industrial firms for unpaid dues accrued during the 2015–2020 load-shedding period—estimated in the billions of rupees. The government strongly criticized the action, further straining ties between Ghising and the ministry. Despite the setback, Ghising said he remains committed to serving Nepal as a responsible citizen.

Nepal: Winter session of Parliament prorogued on Cabinet's advice

(lm) Nepal's winter session of the Federal Parliament was formally prorogued by President Ramchandra Paudel, effective from midnight on April 1, following a Cabinet recommendation in line with Article 93(2) of the Constitution.

The session, which began on January 31 and lasted 61 days with 27 sittings, concluded with only five bills and five replacement ordinances passed out of 13 registered. Crucially, lawmakers failed to endorse the federal civil service and school education bills—two key laws necessary for the full implementation of the Constitution of Nepal.

The school education bill, in particular, is vital for devolving educational authority to local and provincial governments, as mandated by the constitution. However, nearly a decade after the charter's promulgation, the law remains unpassed, reflecting

continued delays in establishing a federal legal framework for education.

The legislative inaction has sparked renewed protests by the Teachers' Federation Nepal, which began mass demonstrations in Kathmandu on April 2. The teachers accuse the government of failing to implement a six-point agreement reached in 2023, which promised to address their concerns through bill revisions. Central to the dispute is the issue of administrative control: while local governments seek authority over school staff, teachers fear politicization at the local level and are calling for federal oversight.

A parliamentary subcommittee is currently reviewing the bill, but conflicting suggestions—particularly over teacher governance—continue to stall progress. [The Kathmandu Post 1] [The Kathmandu Post 2]

Nepal: Seven parties form Federal Democratic Front to push for constitutional reform

Seven political parties have formed a new alliance, the Federal Democratic Front, to advocate for (lm) constitutional amendments and broader reforms in Nepal. The alliance, announced in Kathmandu on April 3, brings together the Janata Samajbadi Party-Nepal, Loktantrik Samajbadi Party-Nepal, Rastriya Madhesh Samajbadi Party-Nepal, Janamat Party, Nagarik Unmukti Party, Tamang Liberation Party, and Janata Pragatisheel Party.

These parties broadly represent the political aspirations of historically excluded groups in Nepal, particularly those from the Madhesh and Tharu regions, and have long advocated for greater federalism, inclusion, and identity-based rights. Their common denominator is dissatisfaction with the 2015 constitution, which they argue fails to guarantee proportional representation, equitable federal structures, and justice for past state abuses.

The alliance pledged to pursue 26 objectives, including amending the constitution, securing proportional electoral representation, completing long-delayed infrastructure projects like the Hulaki (Postal) Highway, and implementing the Tarai Madhesh Infrastructure Development Program. They also called for reforms in budget allocation based on population and human development indices and demanded the public release of the Lal Commission report on past human rights violations.

Hridayesh Tripathi, chair of the Janata Pragatisheel Party, led efforts to form the alliance, which is intended as a loose but unified front to amplify the demands of marginalized regions and communities in Nepal's political discourse. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Madhesh provincial assembly resumes after deal on corruption probe

(lm) The Madhesh Provincial Assembly has resumed proceedings after a prolonged deadlock triggered by opposition accusations of corruption. The stalemate was resolved during a cross-party meeting led by Speaker Ramchandra Mandal, which resulted in an agreement for the implicated ministers to address the allegations in the assembly session scheduled for April 9.

Opposition parties—including the Janata Samajbadi Party-Nepal, Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) (Maoist Centre), and CPN (Unified Socialist)—had been obstructing the assembly, accusing ministers of awarding contracts in exchange for commissions and misusing public funds. Lawmakers also agreed that if the ministers' explanations are unsatisfactory, a parliamentary investigation committee will be formed. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Audio leak exposes sal logging scandal in Sudurpaschim, minister resigns

(lm) A leaked audio recording has triggered a political scandal in Nepal's Sudurpaschim Province, revealing collusion between provincial leaders and timber traders to profit from sal (shorea robusta) tree logging. The recording features Minister for Industry, Tourism, Forest and Environment Laxman Kishore Chaudhary—who has since resigned—and former forest minister Narad Muni Rana discussing efforts to fast-track guidelines allowing logging from registered private forests. Rana, a senior figure in the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist), or CPN-UML, reportedly urged Chaudhary to replicate rules from Lumbini Province and spoke of the need for funds to contest elections.

Chaudhary, affiliated with the Nagarik Unmukti Party, admitted to the conversation but claimed it predated his ministerial tenure, calling the leak a politically motivated attack amid party infighting. The

conversation also referenced a financial deal worth NPR 3 million (USD 21,900).

The guidelines, titled “Utilisation and Monitoring of Sal Trees in Registered Private Forests-2024,” had received preliminary approval but are now on hold due to mounting backlash. Critics argue that such policies, enabled by a 2023 federal provision, risk accelerating deforestation under the guise of private forestry. Environmental activists warn that logging rights for private landowners could lead to widespread exploitation by timber smugglers. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Red Cross leaders dismissed for breaching neutrality with political deals

(rs) The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) has dismissed five top officials from the Nepal Red Cross Society, including its president Sudarshan Prasad Nepal, for violating core principles of neutrality and independence. The officials are accused of striking a political deal to distribute Red Cross leadership positions among three major parties —the Nepali Congress, Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) (Maoist Centre), and CPN (Unified Socialist)— ahead of the organization's last election.

Along with the president, the IFRC also removed General Secretary Bhupati Lal Shrestha, Treasurer Binod Kumar Basnet, Deputy General Secretary Manoj Kumar Thapa, and member Narayan Timilsina. All five have been barred from contesting future elections within the organization. Further investigations are ongoing, and additional disciplinary measures may follow. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Teachers reject talks, demand School Education Act be passed immediately

(lm) Nepal's public school teachers, organized under the Teachers' Federation Nepal, have continued their mass protests in Kathmandu, rejecting repeated government calls for dialogue. Their primary demand is the swift enactment of a new School Education Act that incorporates earlier agreements reached with successive governments.

The protests began on April 2 following the prorogation of Parliament on April 1 without endorsing

the long-delayed School Education Bill, which has been under consideration in a House committee for over a year and a half. While the Ministry of Education and senior government figures, including the acting prime minister and key ministers, invited the Federation for talks, the teachers refused, saying that sufficient agreements had already been made in the past and only legal implementation was now needed.

Key demands include keeping teachers under federal jurisdiction rather than local governments, which teachers fear may bring political bias. Other demands involve pay parity with civil servants, a dedicated hospital for teachers, monthly salary disbursement, inclusion in the official order of precedence, and raising the entry age for teachers to 40.

Although Nepal's constitution grants local governments control over school education, the matter remains contested, with over 150 amendments submitted to the bill. A sub-committee is still holding provincial-level consultations on the issue. Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli has expressed optimism that the dispute will be resolved through dialogue but stopped short of confirming immediate legislative action.

Federation chair Laxmi Kishor Subedi said the government could either call a new House session or issue an ordinance to pass the bill. Nearly a decade after Nepal's federal constitution was promulgated, the lack of a corresponding School Education Act remains a major governance gap. [The Kathmandu Post 1] [The Kathmandu Post 2]

Nepal: Rights groups demand gender-sensitive justice for conflict-era sexual violence survivors

(hgk) Twelve human rights organizations in Nepal have called on the government to urgently address the needs of survivors of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) as the transitional justice process moves forward. The appeal comes amid the selection of new officials for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and the Commission of Investigation on Enforced Disappeared Persons (CIEDP), which were reconstituted following amendments to the transitional justice law in August 2023.

Groups including the Conflict Victim Women National Network submitted an 18-point set of recommendations to Law Minister Ajay Chaurasia. They criticized the current framework for lacking

gender sensitivity, confidentiality protections, and inclusive mechanisms that would encourage survivors to come forward.

A key issue raised is the Act's classification of only "serious" sexual violence as a grave crime, which excludes many survivors from seeking justice. The rights groups argue that international law recognizes all forms of sexual violence as serious human rights violations and urged the removal of this qualifier.

They also criticized the three-month time limit for filing CRSV complaints with the TRC, calling it inadequate. Out of more than 63,000 cases filed with the TRC, only 314 concern sexual violence—far fewer than rights advocates believe exist. The groups demand either the elimination or extension of the deadline, citing international legal standards that impose no statute of limitations on such crimes.

Additionally, the rights groups stressed the need for female representation within transitional justice mechanisms and urged the inclusion of gender-sensitive experts, better training, and safe environments to support victims. They also demanded guarantees of victims' privacy and security throughout the process.

The current selection committee, led by former Chief Justice Om Prakash Mishra, has made its procedures public and is seeking input before beginning formal recruitment. Previous commissions included two female members, and rights advocates insist this precedent be upheld.

Despite Nepal's constitutional commitment to gender equity, critics say the amended law falls short of ensuring meaningful participation of women and fails to prioritize justice for victims of conflict-era sexual abuse, who remain largely excluded from past relief programs. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Stock exchange index drops by 16.95 points as trading volume declines

(lm) The Nepal Stock Exchange (NEPSE) index fell by 16.95 points on April 1, closing at 2,676.17—marking a 0.62 percent decline from the previous session. Share prices of 201 companies dropped, while only 42 saw gains. The trading volume also declined, with 56,548 transactions totaling NPR 5.79 billion (USD 42.3 million) involving over 10.6 million shares.

All sub-indices except the trade subgroup recorded losses. Notable decliners included Guardian Micro Life Insurance, Radhi Hydropower, and NRN Infrastructure & Development Bank. Investors in several microfinance and hydropower firms also faced losses. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Nepal: Karnali produces 258,876 MT of maize, highest among grains

(rs) Karnali Province has produced 258,876 metric tons (MT) of maize this year, making it the highest-produced food grain in the region, according to the Province Government's Ministry of Land Management, Agriculture, and Cooperatives. Maize is cultivated across 82,808 hectares of land in the province.

Wheat ranks second in production, with 151,990 MT harvested last year from 71,769 hectares, followed by paddy, which yielded 146,679 MT from 41,304 hectares. Salyan district recorded the highest maize production, with 74,700 MT, while other districts such as Surkhet, Dailekh, Jajarkot, and Rukum West also contributed significantly to the province's maize yield.

The province also produced 18,826 MT of millet, 9,709 MT of barley, and 2,633 MT of buckwheat. Millet and buckwheat are mainly cultivated in the mountainous regions, with millet grown on 13,704 hectares and buckwheat on 2,377 hectares. [The Himalayan Times]

Nepal: Owner of USD 1.83 million seized foreign currency identified, arrest warrant issued

(lm) The Department of Revenue Investigation (DRI) has identified the owner of foreign currency worth approximately NPR 250 million (USD 1.83 million) that was seized in Kathmandu's Tokha area on March 17. The money, consisting of U.S. dollars and euros, was found in a truck allegedly headed to China under the pretense of purchasing clothes.

Based on mobile call records, vehicle movements, and intelligence from multiple sources, officials confirmed the identity of the individual and issued an arrest warrant on March 30. A search of the suspect's residence in Kathmandu revealed attempts to conceal evidence. The truck's driver was arrested on March 18 and handed over to the DRI for further investigation. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Kathmandu chokes under thick haze as air quality hits ‘very unhealthy’ levels amid wildfires

(rs/hgk) Kathmandu is grappling with severe air pollution, as thick haze from widespread wildfires and stagnant weather conditions has pushed the Air Quality Index (AQI) to 242, classified as "Very Unhealthy." On April 3, PM2.5 levels soared past 178 $\mu g/m^3$, significantly exceeding the World Health Organization’s safe limit of 15 $\mu g/m^3$.

The wildfire season, which typically begins in March, has intensified due to climate change, exacerbating the annual problem of air pollution. Experts warn that the pollution is not just a short-term issue; it is expected to reduce the average life expectancy of Nepalese citizens by 3.4 years, according to the Air Quality Life Index. [The Himalayan Times] [The Star]

Pakistan: March blocked and tensions rise in Balochistan as crackdown on rights activists and separatists intensifies

(sn/lm) Tensions in Pakistan’s Balochistan province continue to escalate as the government cracks down on both nationalist protests and separatist militancy.

On April 6, police blocked a planned march by the Balochistan National Party-Mengal (BNP-M) toward Quetta to demand the release of prominent Baloch Yakjehti Committee (BYC) leader Dr. Mahrang Baloch and others arrested in March. The protest, which began near Lakpass, followed two failed negotiation rounds with the provincial government.

BNP-M chief Sardar Akhtar Mengal condemned the government’s heavy-handed approach, citing the deployment of troops and the imposition of Section 144 — a legal provision barring public gatherings. Mengal warned that the government would be responsible for any fallout and called on supporters to shut down national highways in protest. Authorities, however, barred the party from entering Quetta’s Red Zone, offering an alternative protest site which the BNP-M rejected. [Arab News 1]

The Balochistan government has linked BYC activists to the separatist Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), which claimed responsibility for a deadly train siege last month that killed 26 passengers and 33 militants. The

BNP-M and BYC deny ties to armed groups and insist their movement is peaceful. The military, meanwhile, accused “foreign-backed proxies” of destabilizing the province and has pledged to prevent further unrest. [Arab News 2] [Arab News 3]

In a parallel development, human rights defender Sammi Deen Baloch was released from detention following public criticism. She and others had been arrested after protesting the earlier detentions of Dr. Mahrang Baloch and BYC members. Activists accuse the government of arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, and excessive force, while Islamabad maintains the protests violate public order and national security.

Amid the crackdown on dissent, militancy continues in the province. Pakistan’s security forces reported the killing of two militants in Kech District during an intelligence-based operation on April 4. The military said the militants were involved in several attacks against civilians and law enforcement. Separately, the Counter-Terrorism Department foiled an attack in Quetta, seizing explosives and ammunition. [Arab News 4] [DAWN] [ISPR]

Defense Minister Khawaja Asif ruled out any negotiations with the BLA, stating that Pakistan would “deal with” the group rather than talk to it. Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif echoed the government’s hardline stance, saying Balochistan’s development and security were top federal priorities. He also praised recent security operations and pledged continued counterterrorism efforts. [Arab News 5] [Business Recorder]

Balochistan, Pakistan’s largest province by area and rich in natural resources, has witnessed a decades-long separatist insurgency fueled by grievances over perceived resource exploitation and marginalization. While the federal government claims to be investing in development, local communities and activists continue to demand justice, transparency, and an end to rights abuses.

Pakistan: Sindh's opposition to Cholistan Canal project intensifies as political tensions rise

(mra) The controversy surrounding the Cholistan Canal project has escalated with Sindh's leadership taking a stronger stance against the federal government's plans. Sindh Chief Minister Syed Murad Ali Shah has warned that the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) is

prepared to confront the federal government if necessary. Shah criticized Punjab's decision to move forward with the project despite objections from Sindh, accusing the Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA) of falsifying water scarcity assessments. He claimed that independent research contradicted the official findings used to justify the project's approval. [DAWN]

The Cholistan Canal project, part of the Green Pakistan Initiative (GPI), aims to build six canals along the Indus River to irrigate the Cholistan desert in south Punjab. The project, which will cost USD 76 million, has provoked growing opposition from the PPP, Sindh nationalist parties, and environmental activists. Critics argue that it will exacerbate Pakistan's already strained water resources, particularly affecting Sindh, a lower riparian province heavily dependent on the Indus River system. [AiR No. 13, April/2025, 1]

Sindh's opposition has been vocal, with Shah urging Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif to officially distance the federal government from the project. He warned that failure to do so would lead to stronger political opposition from Sindh. The growing opposition from Sindh has led to verbal confrontations with Punjab's leaders, with Punjab Information Minister Azma Bokhari accusing the PPP of politicizing the issue and calling for a resolution through dialogue rather than conflict.

The controversy has also attracted criticism from federal government figures, including Adviser to the Prime Minister on Political and Public Affairs Rana Sanaullah, who accused the PPP of turning the canal issue into a political tool. The Grand Democratic Alliance (GDA) has added to the criticism, accusing the Sindh government of misleading the public and failing to take effective action. [DAWN]

Pakistan: Prime Minister orders probe into failure to utilize private Hajj 2025 quota

(sn) Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has formed a three-member committee to investigate why Pakistan failed to utilize its full private quota for Hajj 2025, citing non-compliance with requirements set by Saudi Arabia. The committee, led by the Cabinet Division secretary and including the Federal Board of Revenue chairman and Gilgit-Baltistan's chief secretary, will examine the religious affairs ministry's handling of the revised Saudi Hajj policy.

Pakistan was allocated 179,210 Hajj seats this year, to be split equally between public and private schemes. However, the private quota was not fully used, depriving thousands of Pakistanis of the opportunity to perform the pilgrimage.

The panel will determine why private Hajj operators did not complete required formalities on time and will recommend accountability measures. The move follows earlier warnings by Sharif in January that any negligence in Hajj arrangements would not be tolerated. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Journalist arrested over disinformation released on bail

(lm) Farhan Mallick, the founder of the Pakistani online news channel Raftar, was released on bail on April 7, 2025, after being arrested over two weeks ago for allegedly spreading disinformation. Mallick was charged under a revised disinformation law introduced in January 2025, which imposes punishments of up to three years in prison. His charges include generating and disseminating anti-state publications and videos, with the intent to incite public violence.

He was released on bail after paying PKR 100,000 (approximately USD 354) for each of the two charges. In addition to the disinformation charges, Mallick was also accused of credit card fraud. His case has drawn criticism, with opponents of the law arguing that it is being used to stifle dissenting voices and control online media.

Another journalist, Muhammed Waheed Murad, was arrested shortly after Mallick for similar charges of online disinformation, but was also granted bail. Both Mallick and Murad had reported on the alleged involvement of Pakistan's military, a powerful institution often shielded from public criticism. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) has raised concerns over the increasing state pressure on media freedom in Pakistan, which ranks 152nd out of 180 countries on RSF's press freedom index.

Social media platforms like X are officially banned, but are accessible through VPNs, and YouTube and TikTok have faced previous bans in Pakistan. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Balochistan records first Congo virus-related death, 41 cases in 2025

(sn) Pakistan's Balochistan province has recorded its first Congo virus-related death of 2025. The patient, an 18-year-old, was admitted to a hospital in Quetta and later isolated after testing positive for Crimean-Congo Hemorrhagic Fever (CCHF), a tick-borne disease that infects the blood and tissue of victims.

A separate case was reported in Balochistan, raising the 2025 total to 41, as the disease spreads throughout the province. CCHF was particularly problematic during the late 1980s and mid-1990s, while health officials pleaded for individuals to take precautionary measures to stop the spread. [The Nation]

Pakistan: Prime Minister announces reduction in electricity tariffs

(sn) Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has announced an electricity tariff reduction, with domestic consumers receiving a USD 0.026 (PKR 7.41) discount per unit. In contrast, industrial consumers received a USD 0.027 (PKR 7.59) reduction per unit. Sharif made the announcement during a ceremony in Islamabad while reflecting on the financial challenges faced by his government.

Sharif referred to the External Fund Facility (EFF) loan program by the IMF, stating that the loan costs Pakistan USD 2.8 billion annually, pleading for all forms of government to implement cost-saving strategies. Sharif noted that subsidies cannot be provided while the EFF is in place and that privatization will be key to further reducing pressure on Pakistan's financial situation.

The PM commented on the reduction in national petroleum prices and shared that the government aims to increase revenues by 35 percent in the coming financial year. In addition, his government plans to wipe out Pakistan's troubling circular debt, which currently stands at USD 8.5 billion, within the next five years.

Pakistan continues to struggle with expensive electricity costs fueled by imported fossil fuels, distribution losses, chronic debt and inefficiencies, and a heavy reliance on imported fossil fuels. The news highlights the government's continued effort towards economic progress and revival. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Government braces for impact of U.S. tariffs, prepares delegation and policy response

(lm/sn/mra) Pakistan is preparing to send a high-level delegation to Washington following the United States' decision to impose a 29 percent reciprocal tariff on Pakistani goods, a move financial analysts and officials warn could severely impact Pakistan's export-led recovery efforts. The new tariffs were part of a broader measure by President Donald Trump targeting multiple countries to address what he described as long-standing trade imbalances. [Arab News 1]

The U.S. is Pakistan's largest export destination, importing USD 5.44 billion worth of goods in 2024. In the first eight months of the current fiscal year alone, Pakistan earned USD 4 billion from U.S. exports—a 10 percent year-on-year increase. Around 90 percent of these exports are textiles, which analysts say will be hardest hit.

Financial analysts describe the impact of the tariffs as "mixed." While Pakistani products will remain more competitive than goods from countries hit with higher tariffs—such as China, Bangladesh, Vietnam, and Cambodia—they may become less competitive against goods from India, Jordan, and Turkiye, which face lower tariff hikes. Textile and food exports are expected to bear the brunt of the new duties.

Topline Securities, a Karachi-based brokerage, noted that Pakistan may also face stiffer competition in the European market, as countries like China and Bangladesh divert their exports away from the U.S. Sana Tawfiq of Arif Habib Ltd. emphasized the need for Pakistan to lower energy costs, negotiate tariff relief, and diversify export markets to mitigate the fallout. [Arab News 2]

In response, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif formed a steering committee chaired by Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb to assess the economic implications and craft a policy strategy. Aurangzeb stated the situation posed both "a challenge and an opportunity," and that a "win-win" package was being finalized for talks with U.S. counterparts. The delegation is expected to present Pakistan's case for long-term strategic partnership and economic cooperation. [Arab News 3]

The tariff announcement comes as Pakistan works to stabilize its fragile economy with support from International Monetary Fund programs. Analysts warn that the new duties could undermine these efforts by undercutting export revenue. Meanwhile, global

markets have reacted nervously, with fears of a deepening trade war escalating after China retaliated with 34 percent tariffs on U.S. goods.

Pakistan: Sharif hails Ramadan relief rollout, calls for digital wallet model in future welfare schemes

(lm) Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif praised the successful implementation of Pakistan's Ramadan Relief Package 2025, which used digital wallets to distribute financial aid across the country, including in Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Kashmir, self-governing territories administered by Pakistan in the broader Kashmir region. In a meeting on April 4, he ordered that the model be adopted for future government programs.

The initiative delivered assistance directly into mobile wallets linked to national ID numbers, enabling access via apps, ATMs, or authorized agents — even without traditional bank accounts. According to official data, over 951,000 digital wallets were used and 1.9 million payments made, with 79 percent of funds disbursed so far.

More than 823,000 women and over 2,500 persons with disabilities accessed the aid. The effort included robocalls, SMS alerts, and outreach by 2,224 staff, who also resolved more than 1,200 complaints. The government highlighted the program as a milestone toward building a "Digital Nation Pakistan." [Arab News]

Pakistan: Inflation drops to 0.7 percent in March, lowest in 60 years

(lm) Pakistan's annual inflation rate fell to 0.7 percent in March 2025, marking the lowest level in six decades, according to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (PBS). This follows 1.5 percent inflation in February and 20.7 percent in March 2024, signaling a significant shift amid broader economic recovery.

On a month-on-month basis, inflation increased by 0.9 percent in March compared to a 0.8 percent decline in February. Items driving the monthly increase included tomatoes (36.4 percent), fresh fruits (18.7 percent), eggs (14.9 percent), sugar (11.5 percent), and chicken (10.9 percent). Non-food items such as readymade

garments, tailoring, and education services also saw modest price rises.

Officials attribute the sharp decline in annual inflation to recent interest rate cuts by the central bank and economic reforms implemented under Pakistan's ongoing International Monetary Fund (IMF) program. Inflation had previously peaked at 38 percent in May 2023 following subsidy withdrawals under the IMF bailout terms.

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif welcomed the development as evidence of his government's effective policy direction, noting that even during Ramadan—a typically inflationary period—prices remained historically low. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Non-textile exports see modest rise amid diversification push

(lm) Pakistan's non-textile exports have grown by 2.3 percent to USD 9.8 billion during the first eight months of the current fiscal year, according to official figures cited by state media. This modest rise comes as the country ramps up efforts to diversify beyond its traditionally dominant textile sector, which contributes around 60 percent of exports and 8.5 percent of GDP.

The Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC), a civil-military body established to streamline investment and export processes, has spearheaded initiatives to broaden Pakistan's export base. As a result, sesame exports to China surged by 179 percent, crude petroleum exports doubled, cement exports rose by 26 percent, and jewelry exports climbed by 66 percent.

Pakistan also recorded its first exports from the Gwadar Free Zone, including a 10,000-ton consignment of potassium sulfate fertilizer. In a notable milestone, 40 locally manufactured cars were shipped to Japan — a first for the country's auto industry. The government has hailed this as a "golden opportunity" and pledged continued support for export-led growth. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Binance founder Zhao appointed as strategic adviser to Pakistan Crypto Council

(lm) Changpeng Zhao, the billionaire founder and CEO of Binance, one of the world's largest cryptocurrency exchanges, has been appointed as a strategic adviser

to the newly formed Pakistan Crypto Council (PCC), a move set to advance the country's integration of blockchain technology and digital assets into its financial landscape. The announcement was made during Zhao's meeting with Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb and other key government officials.

The PCC, launched in March 2025, is part of Pakistan's broader efforts to regulate and adopt emerging digital currencies, with the aim of positioning the country as a regional leader in Web3, digital finance, and blockchain-driven growth. Zhao's role will involve advising on regulation, infrastructure, education, and adoption, with a focus on creating a compliant, inclusive, and globally competitive crypto ecosystem.

Pakistan's embrace of digital finance comes as the government seeks to leverage the country's young population—over 60 percent of whom are under the age of 30—to foster innovation. [DAWN]

Pakistan: Premier directs speedy container clearance, attractive tariffs at ports as part of maritime reforms

(lm) Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has directed officials to expedite container clearance processes and introduce attractive trade tariffs at Pakistan's ports as part of broader maritime sector reforms aimed at enhancing the country's economy. The initiative comes as Pakistan seeks to recover from its economic crisis, aided by a USD 7 billion International Monetary Fund (IMF) program.

Sharif emphasized the importance of optimizing operations at ports, instructing authorities to speed up the installation of scanners to reduce container clearance times. He also called for the auction of containers to maximize port space utilization. In addition to these measures, Pakistan has established a maritime taskforce to drive sustainable reforms in the sector.

The government is working on a National Dredging Plan (NDP), which includes the creation of a National Dredging Company to maintain and enhance port infrastructure over the next decade. A 25-year plan for the rehabilitation of the Pakistan National Shipping Corporation (PNSC) via public-private partnerships is also underway. Further developments include a plant in Gadani, Balochistan, for the disposal of hazardous waste and the finalization of the Pakistan Maritime

Port Act, which will introduce uniform regulations across ports.

Sharif linked economic development to the efficient use of marine resources, stressing the need for competitive ports and a comprehensive approach to improving the country's maritime infrastructure. [Arab News]

Pakistan: March 2025 was deadliest month for militant violence in nearly a decade

(lm) Pakistan experienced its highest number of militant attacks in over nine years in March 2025, according to the Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (PICSS). The group recorded 105 attacks across the country, resulting in 228 deaths — including 73 security personnel, 67 civilians, and 88 militants — and 258 injuries. An additional 107 people were killed in security operations, bringing the total death toll for the month to 335.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan provinces were the most affected. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa reported 206 deaths, largely in its former tribal districts, while Balochistan witnessed 122 fatalities, including during three suicide bombings and the deadly hijacking of the Jaffar Express. Punjab saw a spike in attacks, mainly in Dera Ghazi Khan, marking its highest monthly toll in a decade. Sindh reported three low-intensity attacks, including one claimed by Daesh.

The month also saw six suicide bombings nationwide, making it one of the deadliest months for such attacks in recent years. Pakistan continues to blame cross-border militant sanctuaries in Afghanistan for many of the incidents — a claim Kabul denies. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Militancy in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa prompts curfew in South Waziristan and Tank districts

(sn) Provincial officials in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) have established curfews for the South Waziristan and Tank districts, which are imposed from 6 a.m. until 6 p.m. The measures were implemented to address prevailing security concerns, with officials requesting cooperation from locals.

While roads will be closed through Dera Ismail Khan and South Waziristan, all forms of movement have been prohibited in Jandola and Karri Wam. Security officials will be deployed to impose the curfew while KP officials find ways to address militancy in the province. [Pakistan Today]

Militancy continued to challenge the KP province, with Pakistani security forces killing eight militants and injuring four others. The exchange occurred when Pakistani forces located a group of militants as they attempted to cross through the border with Afghanistan. Pakistan continues to plead with the Interim Afghan Government to execute effective border management strategies to reduce such acts of militancy. [ISPR]

Seychelles: Presidential and legislative elections set for September 27

(lm) The Electoral Commission of Seychelles has announced that the country's presidential and National Assembly elections will take place on September 27. Provisional nomination dates have been set for August 12 for presidential candidates and August 14 for National Assembly candidates, with the official confirmation pending gazette publication.[Seychelles Nation]

Sri Lanka: Special committee to assess UK sanctions

(lm) The Sri Lankan government has formed a special committee to assess the implications of the United Kingdom's recent sanctions on four Sri Lankan individuals and to recommend further action.

These individuals are: Shavendra Silva, the former Chief of Defence Staff, who has been implicated in extrajudicial killings and attacks on civilians during the civil war; Wasantha Karannagoda, the former Commander of the Sri Lankan Navy, accused of the abduction and forced disappearance of 11 civilians; Jagath Jayasuriya, the former Commander of the Sri Lankan Army, linked to torture and enforced disappearances at the Joseph Camp detention center; and Vinayagamoorthy Muralitharan (Karuna Amman), a former LTTE commander who later led a pro-government paramilitary group, accused of recruiting child soldiers and committing summary executions.

The committee includes Vijitha Herath, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Employment and Tourism; Harshana Nanayakkara, Minister of Justice and National Integrity; and Aruna Jayasekara, Deputy Minister of Defence. The Cabinet of Ministers has granted the committee authority to conduct a thorough investigation and consult experts in relevant fields regarding the sanctions. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Bail rejected for Deshabandu Tennakoon; further remanded until April 10

(lm) Deshabandu Tennakoon, a controversial former Inspector General of Police (IGP), has had his bail application rejected by the Matara Magistrate's Court, with his remand extended until April 10. Tennakoon, the primary suspect in the Weligama shooting incident, was accused of misleading investigators regarding his whereabouts, hindering the investigation. The prosecution argued that releasing Tennakoon on bail could obstruct ongoing inquiries into the case. [Daily Mirror 1]

Tennakoon's involvement in the Weligama shooting incident, which occurred in December 2023, has led to his being charged with conspiracy to commit murder. The operation, initially deemed unauthorized by the Matara Magistrate's Court, resulted in the death of a Colombo Crimes Division (CCD) officer and injuries to another. Following the incident, arrest warrants were issued for Tennakoon and eight other police officers. Tennakoon's surrender to the court followed nearly 20 days of evasion.

In parallel, the Sri Lankan parliament has scheduled a resolution to appoint a Committee of Inquiry for the removal of Tennakoon from his position as IGP. This motion will be presented on April 8. The decision follows growing concerns over his handling of the shooting incident and the ongoing legal proceedings against him. The Committee's inquiry could result in further scrutiny of his actions and lead to his potential removal from office. [Daily Mirror 2]

Sri Lanka: Court suspends LG election process for some councils; NEC pushes ahead with May polls despite legal challenges

(lm) Sri Lanka's Local Government (LG) elections are scheduled to proceed on May 6, according to the National Election Commission (NEC), despite legal challenges and court rulings that have affected parts of the electoral process. The NEC, led by Chairman R.M.A.L. Rathnayake, confirmed that preparations for regions not impacted by the court's interventions, including the printing of ballot papers and polling cards, will continue as planned. Rathnayake emphasized the Commission's commitment to adhering to court decisions while ensuring that the elections take place on time. [Daily Mirror 1]

Meanwhile, the Court of Appeal issued an interim injunction preventing any further steps in the election process for several councils, including the Colombo Municipal Council (CMC), due to writ petitions filed by political parties and independent groups contesting the rejection of their nominations. The suspensions, initially extended until April 3, were further complicated when the Court ordered on April 4 that election officials accept nearly 37 nominations that had previously been rejected, including those from the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA), the Sarvajana Balaya alliance, and independent groups seeking to contest in the CMC. [Daily Mirror 2] [Daily Mirror 3] [Daily Mirror 4]

Despite the legal delays, the Commission is continuing its broader election preparations. At the same time, over 600 complaints related to the LG polls have been filed between March 20 and April 4. Most complaints involved legal violations, including four incidents of electoral violence. [Daily Mirror 5]

Separately, the government has confirmed that Provincial Council (PC) elections will not be held in 2025. Minister Nalinda Jayatissa explained that following three elections within six months—including the presidential and parliamentary contests—Sri Lanka must now prioritize economic recovery and development programs. He added that pending legal reforms and funding allocations have also contributed to postponing the PC elections. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Ongoing cases against Rajapaksas related to exam fraud and money laundering

(lm) (lm) Investigations into two high-profile cases involving the Rajapaksa family are underway, with Member of Parliament Namal Rajapaksa and his brother Yoshitha Rajapaksa both facing legal scrutiny.

On April 7, Namal Rajapaksa, a member of the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP) and son of former President Mahinda Rajapaksa, appeared before the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) to provide a statement. [Daily Mirror] [Daily Mirror]

The CID is investigating allegations that he fraudulently obtained his Attorney-at-Law qualification, specifically regarding his conduct during Sri Lanka Law College examinations. The probe was initiated following a complaint filed by the Citizens' Power Against Bribery and Corruption. The CID is reviewing official records and has been instructed by the Colombo Chief Magistrate's Court to present a progress report. [Daily Mirror]

In a separate development, indictments have been filed against Yoshitha Rajapaksa, Namal's brother, along with his grandmother, Daisy Forrest, for money laundering involving LKR 73 million (USD 219,000). The charges stem from transactions related to money laundering, with the accused facing charges under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act. The Colombo High Court granted bail to the accused on two sureties of LKR 500,000 (USD 1,450) each, with a pre-trial conference scheduled for May 30. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Supreme Court dismisses 59 petitions over local election nomination rejections

(lm) Sri Lanka's Supreme Court on April 4 dismissed 59 petitions—53 writs and six fundamental rights applications—filed by political parties and independent groups challenging the rejection of their nomination papers for local government elections. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Supreme Court denies bail for former immigration chief over visa deal contempt case

(lm) Sri Lanka's Supreme Court has rejected a bail application by Harsha Ilukpitiya, the former Controller General of Immigration and Emigration, who has been in remand custody for nearly six months. The case relates to his failure to implement a court order concerning a controversial visa deal. On September 25, 2024, the Court ordered Ilukpitiya's remand under Section 9(7) of the Contempt of Court, Tribunal, or Institution Act No. 08 of 2024, pending the conclusion of contempt proceedings. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Supreme Court not going ahead with determination on VAT Amendment Bill

(lm) The Supreme Court has informed Speaker Jagath Wickramaratne that it will not issue a determination on the Value Added Tax (VAT) Amendment Bill, as the petitioners who challenged the Bill in court have decided not to proceed with the case. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: CID probes USD 290,000 fund disbursement to 22 ex-Ministers and MPs from Presidential Fund

(lm) The Criminal Investigation Department's (CID) Financial and Commercial Crime Investigation Division (FCCID) has launched an investigation into 22 former Ministers and Members of Parliament (MPs) regarding funds they allegedly received from the Presidential Fund between 2008 and 2024. Preliminary findings indicate that over LKR 100 million (USD 290,000) was disbursed among the 22 individuals in varying amounts, prompting an inquiry into potential irregularities in the transactions.

The Presidential Fund is a government-managed fund allocated for various welfare and development projects, often used for disbursing financial assistance to individuals, organizations, or government programs under the direction of the president.

As part of the investigation, the CID has requested approval from the Fort Magistrate's Court to access details of the checks issued from the Presidential Fund account. In Parliament, Minister Nalinda Jayatissa revealed that 36 former Ministers and MPs had received a total of LKR 112.5 million (USD 327,500) from the fund during this period.

Among those named are former Minister Keheliya Rambukwella, who received LKR 11 million (USD 31,900), former Minister Dr. Rajitha Senaratne who received LKR 10 million (USD 29,000), the late Prime Minister D.M. Jayaratne who received LKR 30 million (USD 87,000), and former MP Ranjith De Zoysa who received LKR 18 million (USD 52,200). Other recipients include Vasudewa Nanayakkara, Widura Wickremanayake, Wimala Dissanayake, and several others. The investigation is ongoing to determine if any wrongdoing occurred in the disbursement of these funds. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: New MP to replace deceased Kegalle District representative

(lm) Parliament has officially notified the Election Commission that a seat has become vacant following the death of NPP Kegalle District MP Kosala Nuwan Jayaweera on April 6, 2025. As per Clause 66(A) of the Constitution, the Election Commission will proceed with the process of filling the vacancy.

NPP candidate Samantha Ranasinghe, who was next in line on the party's Kegalle District list, will replace Jayaweera. Ranasinghe, who secured over 40,000 preferential votes during the general elections, will be sworn in after his name is gazetted by the Election Commission. [Daily Mirror 1] [Daily Mirror 2]

Sri Lanka: Cabinet approves purchase of ID card materials

(lm) Sri Lanka's Cabinet has approved the purchase of LKR 15 million (USD 45,000) worth of pre-printed polycarbonate cards for the issuance of National Identity Cards. This decision was made following a proposal submitted by President Anura Kumara Dissanayake, who also serves as Minister of Digital Economy.

The plan involves the procurement of 17 million cards required for the issuance of new identity cards. The Department for Registration of Persons began using smart cards for National Identity Cards in 2017. Under the upcoming Electronic National Identity Card Project, all Sri Lankan citizens aged 15 and above will need to re-register.

To meet the demand for the new ID cards, the Cabinet has decided to invite international competitive bids for procurement of the necessary materials. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Chamara Sampath Dasanayake granted bail while facing multiple charges

(lm) Chamara Sampath Dasanayake, a former Uva Provincial Councilor and current Badulla District MP, was granted bail on April 8, 2025, by Colombo Chief Magistrate Thanuja Lakmali. Dasanayake, who had been remanded in custody, was released on five sureties of LKR 2 million (USD 5,800) each, along with a

cash bail of LKR 50,000 (USD 140). The Bribery Commission confirmed that the preliminary investigations into his case were concluded, and the court was asked to issue an appropriate order regarding the suspect. A travel ban was also imposed on him, with the case set to be reviewed on June 17, 2025.

Dasanayake's remand stems from allegations that he prematurely withdrew six fixed deposits in 2016 from the Uva Provincial Council at the National Savings Bank in Badulla. He was previously further remanded by the Badulla Magistrate's Court on April 7, 2025, regarding the alleged misappropriation of LKR 1 million (USD 2,800) from a provincial council fixed deposit at a state bank. [Daily Mirror 1] [Daily Mirror 2]

Sri Lanka: Former ministry official remanded over alleged bribery in medical certificate case

(lm) Sri Lanka's former Secretary to the Minister of Indigenous Medicine, Chandana Kumara Siriwardena, was further remanded until April 8 by the Colombo Chief Magistrate in connection with a bribery case. Siriwardena is accused of soliciting LKR 1 million (approximately USD 3,400) and accepting LKR 500,000 (USD 1,700) in exchange for facilitating the issuance of an Ayurvedic medical registration certificate.

According to the Bribery Commission, the suspect allegedly attempted to bypass the standard evaluation process of the Ayurvedic Medical Council, offering the certificate to an applicant without due procedure. The incident came to light following a complaint from a female indigenous medical practitioner in Panamure. Authorities claim the bribe was requested with the purported knowledge of the department's commissioner. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Ex-Chief Minister and Secretary sentenced to prison for corruption

(db) Former Chief Minister of the North Central Province, S.M. Ranjith, and his private secretary, Shanthi Chandrasena, have been sentenced to 16 years of rigorous imprisonment by the Colombo High Court for corruption. The two were found guilty of facilitating the unlawful acquisition of a fuel allowance amounting to LKR 2.68 million (USD 8,900) between 2012 and 2014. Despite receiving a salary-based fuel

allowance, Chandrasena allegedly used undue influence to secure an additional allowance for her official vehicle.

Both Ranjith and Chandrasena were also fined LKR 200,000 (USD 685) each, with additional prison time imposed for non-payment. They have filed an appeal against the judgment, challenging the convictions and seeking an order for their acquittal. The appellants claim that the Colombo High Court judge failed to properly consider certain pieces of evidence, including documentation, during the trial. The case was initiated by the Commission to Investigate Allegations of Bribery or Corruption (CIABOC). [Ada Derana] [Daily Mirror 1] [Daily Mirror 2]

Sri Lanka: High Court upholds first-ever conviction over illegal pyramid scheme

(lm) Sri Lanka's Anuradhapura High Court has upheld the first-ever conviction related to an illegal pyramid scheme, affirming the Magistrate's Court's decision against two Development Officers from the Department of Agriculture Research. The case, which spanned 15 years, involved the promotion of a pyramid scheme by the suspects while they were government employees.

The High Court confirmed the Magistrate’s sentence of two years of rigorous imprisonment, suspended for ten years, and a fine of LKR 500,000 (USD 1,700) each. The charges stemmed from a pyramid-style business seminar held in December 2005, where the suspects recruited members into the unlawful scheme. Investigations by the Central Bank of Sri Lanka revealed that the first suspect earned LKR 1.16 million (USD 3,900), and the second earned LKR 2 million (USD 6,800) through their involvement.

The High Court dismissed the appeal filed by the convicts, emphasizing that they violated banking regulations under Section 83(C)(2) of the Banking Act No. 30 of 1988, as amended, and had been proven guilty beyond reasonable doubt. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: COPE to file complaint against Gem and Jewellery Authority

(lm) The Committee on Public Enterprise (COPE) has decided to file a complaint against the Gem and Jewellery Authority (GJA) for allowing illegal gem mining

and engaging in financial mismanagement. During a recent meeting, COPE, led by MP Nishantha Samaraweera, questioned the GJA's involvement in illegal mining activities in Heraniyawaka, where operations were conducted without the necessary licenses. The committee also scrutinized the activities of a certain company and the GJA officers' failure to provide satisfactory explanations regarding the issue.

COPE has requested that the complaint be lodged with the Bribery Commission, following revelations that the GJA had released a consignment of gems worth approximately LKR 250 million (USD 685,000), which was undervalued for export, after imposing a fine of just LKR 10,000 (USD 27). The correct fine for such an offense is believed to be approximately LKR 33 million (USD 90,000). Additionally, COPE uncovered that GJA officers spent LKR 6.1 million (USD 16,700) to attend a gem and jewellery show in Las Vegas, USA, which the authority justified as essential for promoting Sri Lanka's gems abroad.

Moreover, the GJA spent LKR 2 billion (USD 5.5 million) on leasing a building, despite the possibility of renovating an existing property it owned for only LKR 21 million (USD 57,500), as advised by the Central Engineering Consultation Board. COPE has expressed concerns over the wasteful use of public funds, considering the significant financial discrepancies involved. The committee has criticized the GJA for failing to effectively perform its regulatory role and primarily focusing on business activities, rather than fulfilling its public duties. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Government loses USD 8.2 million from electric vehicle permit scam

(lm) Sri Lanka’s Committee on Public Accounts (COPA) has revealed that a tax revenue loss of LKR 2.42 billion (USD 8.2 million) resulted from a scam involving permits issued for importing electric vehicles by Sri Lankans working abroad.

According to the Auditor General, 1,077 permits were granted between May 2022 and September 2023 under a scheme linked to foreign remittances, with 77 later canceled. Two institutions facilitated imports for 640 of the permit holders, suggesting a commercial operation was created under the guise of permit issuance. The increase of the luxury tax exemption threshold from LKR 6 million (USD 20,400) to LKR 12 million (USD 40,800) for 921 vehicles was also cited as a major contributor to the revenue loss. The Auditor General also raised concerns about potential money

laundering tied to the vehicle permit process. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: No more extensions on 'Parate execution' suspensions

(lm) The Government has announced that there will be no further extensions on the suspension of 'Parate executions,' and the law is now effective. Deputy Minister of Finance Harshana Suriyapperuma confirmed in Parliament on April 8 that the suspension, which was in place until March 31, 2024, will not be extended further. He made this statement in response to a question from Opposition Leader Sajith Premadasa.

'Parate executions' refer to a legal procedure in Sri Lanka where a creditor can seize and sell a debtor's property to recover outstanding debts without going through a full court process. The suspension of this practice, typically used to enforce judgments, had been in place for a period, but it is now lifted, making the law once again applicable. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Press Council gains new leadership

(db) On April 2, the Sri Lanka Press Council underwent a significant leadership change, with the appointment of a new Chairman and three board members in a ceremony at the Ministry of Mass Media in Colombo overseen by Nalinda Jayatissa, the Minister of Health and Mass Media.

Priyan R. Wijebandara, an acclaimed author and journalist, has assumed the role of Chairman. His extensive academic background includes a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science from the University of Kelaniya, a Master of Arts in Journalism acquired at the University of Colombo, and a Diploma in Advanced English from the same institution. Additionally, he is furthering his studies in cinematography at the National Film Corporation. Against the backdrop of his media career spanning over a quarter of a century, Wijebandara has also repeatedly contributed to initiatives financed by the World Bank by working in the fields of research and communication.

Joining the council as board members are Anushka Kahandagamage, Mahisha Mudugamuwa, and Devadasan Sendilwelawar. Kahandagamage, a

Supreme Court Advocate, obtained a Doctor of Philosophy degree in Social Sciences at the University of Otago and has experience in working with organizations like the Advisory Task Force on Reconciliation Mechanisms in Sri Lanka as well as the Law and Society Trust.

Mahisha Mudugamuwa is a journalist with more than ten years of media experience working for The Sunday Morning. Additionally, she is an attorney-at-law at the Supreme Court of Sri Lanka. Mudugamuwa has also participated in the International Visitor Leadership Program as well as the Yokohama City Journalist Fellowship Program.

Devadasan Sendilwelawar, the chief editor of Thinakaran Daily and Thinakaran Varamanjari Weekly, will contribute with over three decades of media expertise to the Press Council. His globally oriented journalistic education, as well as his leadership role as President of the All Ceylon Tamil Journalists Association, are to be noted as further qualifications. [Daily Mirror] [Daily News]

Sri Lanka: Police under scrutiny after youth dies in Welikada custody

(sl/lm) Sri Lankan authorities have launched multiple investigations into the death of 26-year-old Sathsara Nimesh, who died on April 2 after being held in police custody at the Welikada Police Station. The incident has sparked public concern and demands for accountability.

Nimesh was arrested on April 1 following a complaint of unauthorized entry into a house in Nawala. According to police, he showed signs of mental distress and was detained for his own safety. Officers allege that he exhibited erratic behavior, including self-harm by banging against the walls of his cell. He was subsequently transferred to Mulleriyawa Mental Hospital, where he died hours later.

The Bar Association of Sri Lanka (BASL) has called for an immediate and impartial probe, stressing the need for zero tolerance on custodial deaths. BASL warned that repeated incidents of this nature erode public trust in the justice system and risk fostering a climate of impunity. [Daily Mirror 1]

The Acting Inspector General of Police has recommended the transfer of the Officer-in-Charge of the Welikada Police Station to ensure a fair investigation and has suspended two officers

connected to the case. The Criminal Investigation Department (CID) is now handling the inquiry.

Attorney Senaka Perera, representing the Committee for Protecting Rights of Prisoners, has formally urged a full investigation, citing statements from the victim's mother and discrepancies in the police's account of events, including reports that Nimesh's clothing was found inside the police station.

Authorities have pledged to pursue a transparent process, but human rights advocates stress that meaningful institutional reform is essential to prevent future custodial deaths. [Daily Mirror 2] [Daily Mirror 3]

Sri Lanka: Rajangana Saddharathna Thera warned over use of obscene language

(lm) Fort Magistrate Nilupuli Lankapura issued a warning to Rajangana Saddharathna Thera, instructing him to refrain from using obscene and indecent language in his public speeches. This warning follows the senior monk's continued use of inappropriate remarks, despite being granted bail with the condition to avoid such language. The magistrate had previously noted that the thera had violated bail terms but chose to release him on the original conditions, emphasizing that he must cease using such language.

Rajangana Saddharathna Thera is a former Buddhist monk of the Ramangna Nikaya, a major Buddhist order in Sri Lanka, who has been involved in controversial public speeches. He was arrested for making remarks that were seen as prejudicial to societal and religious harmony, following a complaint by Ven. Pahiyangala Ananda Sagara Thera. Saddharathna Thera had been disrobed by the Ramangna Nikaya but continued to wear religious robes without the Nikaya's consent. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Death sentence for underworld figure in murder case

(lm) On April 1, Colombo High Court Judge Navaratna Marasinghe sentenced underworld figure S.F. Sarath to death for the murder that occurred at the Yoga Salon in Borella Vanathamulla on August 1, 2014. Sarath, also known as Kovila Gedara Dissanayake Mudalige Sarath Bandara, was found guilty of the crime beyond reasonable doubt and was sentenced accordingly.

Three other individuals involved in the case were acquitted and released from all charges due to insufficient evidence presented by the prosecution. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Man sentenced to death for heroin trafficking

(lm) On April 3, Colombo High Court Judge R.S.S. Sapuwida sentenced an individual to death after convicting him on two charges: possession of 16 grams and 882 milligrams of heroin, and trafficking the substance. The court found the prosecution's case to be proven beyond reasonable doubt.

The accused was arrested by the Organized Crimes Prevention Division on February 26, 2019, while in possession of heroin. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Two gem miners die after falling into pit

(lm) Two workers died while digging a gem mine in Dambuluwana, Elapatha, near Ratnapura on April 3, after the excavation intersected with an abandoned mine shaft. The victims, both local residents aged 42 and 37, reportedly fell into the pit and were buried under a mound of earth.

Police believe one of the men initially fell, prompting the other to attempt a rescue before both were overcome—possibly due to inhaling toxic gas inside the mine. Authorities confirmed the mine was operating under a valid permit. An investigation is ongoing. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Government faces mounting pressure over U.S. tariffs; apparel exports threatened

(lm) Sri Lanka is confronting a major economic setback following the United States' decision to impose a 44 percent reciprocal tariff on Sri Lankan exports, effective April 9. The tariff—part of a broader protectionist trade policy introduced by U.S. President Donald Trump—primarily targets Sri Lanka's apparel sector, the country's largest export industry. In 2023, Sri Lanka exported over USD 5.5 billion in apparel, with

more than 40 percent of those shipments going to the U.S.

The new duties are expected to cut Sri Lankan apparel exports to the U.S. by around 20 percent, potentially costing the sector over USD 300 million and severely undermining its competitiveness. Other major exports, including tea, spices, seafood, and coconut-based goods, are also vulnerable under the revised tariff regime. [Daily Mirror 1] [Daily Mirror 2] [Daily Mirror 3]

In response, the Sri Lankan government has established a high-level committee of economic, finance, and trade officials to assess the impact and propose relief strategies. During a meeting at the Presidential Secretariat, President Anura Kumara Dissanayake and the committee reviewed possible responses, including early diplomatic engagement with Washington. The President stressed the need to mitigate the damage through negotiations and maintain momentum in Sri Lanka's ongoing post-crisis recovery under the International Monetary Fund's Extended Fund Facility. [Daily Mirror 4] [Daily Mirror 5]

In a public statement, the government expressed concern over the timing of the tariffs and pledged to reduce both tariff and non-tariff barriers to promote trade and investment. Officials also recognized the U.S. as a longstanding partner, especially in debt restructuring efforts. [Daily Mirror 6] [Daily Mirror 7]

In parallel, Foreign Minister Vijitha Herath met with U.S. Ambassador Julie Chung to discuss the tariffs. The Minister stressed the need for a review of the tariffs to ensure the continuation of Sri Lanka's IMF programme and recovery efforts from the 2022 economic crisis. Furthermore, President Dissanayake wrote a letter to U.S. President Donald Trump, requesting a reduction in the tariffs and proposing collaboration to lessen the impact. [Daily Mirror 8] [Daily Mirror 9]

Domestically, the tariff issue has sparked a call for unity. Opposition leader Sajith Premadasa described the tariff as a "wake-up call" for Sri Lanka's economic policy, criticizing the government for not having a strategic trade plan. He urged for a shift towards strengthening regional partnerships, particularly with India, ASEAN, and Bangladesh, and for moving away from a reliance on tariffs toward production-led economic growth. Premadasa also emphasized the need for a more aggressive and mature approach to international trade negotiations, criticizing what he perceives as a passive stance on the issue. [Daily Mirror 10] [Daily Mirror 11]

SLPP MP Namal Rajapaksa echoed these concerns, urging political unity and adjustments to budget allocations if negotiations with the U.S. fail. [Daily Mirror 12]

Sarath Kalugamage of the Ratata Hetak Organisation, a Sri Lankan advocacy group focused on national development and policy reform, proposed either reducing Sri Lanka's own tariffs to six percent or eliminating them altogether in response. He also urged export diversification and preparation for the possible expiration of the GSP+ trade preferences. [Daily Mirror 13]

Meanwhile, SJB MP Harsha De Silva urged the suspension of the planned removal of the SVAT (Simplified Value Added Tax) scheme for exporters. De Silva emphasized a need for pragmatic economic reforms, calling for the dismantling of "tariff walls" and the building of "trade bridges" as part of a broader strategy to reorient Sri Lanka's trade policies amid growing global uncertainty. [Daily Mirror 14]

Sri Lanka: Panic selling grips market as US tariffs trigger sharp decline

(lm) Sri Lanka's stock market experienced a sharp downturn on April 3, following the U.S. decision to impose steep tariffs, with rates rising from 12 percent to 44 percent. The sudden move rattled investor confidence, particularly among export-driven firms, which are bracing for a significant revenue loss due to the tariff increase.

The All Share Price Index (ASPI) plummeted by 351 points during the morning session, driven by heavy selling in export-oriented stocks. Retail investors were the primary drivers of the panic-driven sell-off.

The S&P SL 20 index mirrored the broader decline, with blue-chip stocks experiencing significant losses. Hayleys PLC saw a notable drop of 5.25 percent on heavy volumes of 1.27 million shares, with a turnover of LKR 178.39 million (USD 488,900). In a significant transaction, John Keells Holdings PLC sold its entire 37.62 percent stake in Tea Smallholders—11.29 million shares at LKR 35 (USD 0.09) per share—raising LKR 395 million (USD 1.08 million) in an off-market deal. This sale, executed at a critical price level, could trigger a mandatory offer for the remaining shares. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Central Bank Governor reports steady economic recovery to President

(lm) Central Bank Governor Dr. P. Nandalal Weerasinghe has presented the Annual Economic Review for 2024 (AER 2024) to President and Minister of Finance Anura Kumara Dissanayake, highlighting signs of steady recovery in Sri Lanka's economy after the nation's worst financial crisis in decades.

The presentation took place at a ceremony at the Presidential Secretariat, where Dr. Weerasinghe outlined key findings from the review. The report consists of four core chapters: macroeconomic developments, financial system conditions, a review of Central Bank policies, and the macroeconomic outlook.

According to the Central Bank, Sri Lanka's economic activity improved significantly in 2024. The review cited a partial rebound in consumer purchasing power, reduced economic uncertainty, and a faster-than-expected recovery trajectory compared to other debt-distressed nations. These developments mark a critical stage in the country's effort to stabilize and rebuild its post-crisis economy. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Excise Department earns record USD 208 million in Q1 2025 revenue

(lm) Sri Lanka's Excise Department, which regulates the liquor industry, reported record revenue of LKR 61.3 billion (approximately USD 208.4 million) in the first quarter of 2025. The figure significantly surpassed the department's Q1 target of LKR 42 billion, marking a 127 percent achievement rate.

The Excise Department is the third-largest revenue-generating body under the Ministry of Finance, following the Inland Revenue Department and Sri Lanka Customs. For the full year, the department has been assigned a revenue target of LKR 242 billion (about USD 823.6 million).

Excise Commissioner General U. L. Udaya Kumara credited the increase to staff efforts and the introduction of security stickers on liquor bottle caps, which helped curb the circulation of counterfeit alcohol. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Prime Minister promotes investment opportunities at Bangkok

forum

(lm) Sri Lankan Prime Minister Harini Amarasuriya called on regional and international investors to support the country's recovery and transformation, declaring that Sri Lanka is on track to become “the world’s next success story.” Speaking at the ‘Invest Sri Lanka’ Business Forum in Bangkok on April 3, held alongside the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) summit, Amarasuriya highlighted recent signs of political and economic stabilization since her administration took office in September 2024.

She emphasized that Sri Lanka, still recovering from the political and economic crisis of 2022, has seen a significant surge in tourist arrivals in early 2025 and is optimistic about a record tourism year. The premier underscored the country's strategic position and market access, being the only nation with free trade agreements with both India and Pakistan, offering duty-free access to over 1.5 billion consumers.

Aiming to deepen ties with Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, Amarasuriya noted the shared Buddhist heritage between Sri Lanka and Thailand as a foundation for closer relations. Thailand has contributed USD 97 million in foreign direct investment to Sri Lanka between 2008 and 2024, and both countries have an FTA that includes services and investments.

Dilan Samarakoon, president of the Thai-Sri Lanka Chamber of Commerce, echoed the prime minister’s optimism, citing ongoing infrastructure development and workforce improvements. He also promoted Port City Colombo, a flagship multi-services special economic zone, as a key investment opportunity, particularly in sectors like pharmaceuticals, electronics, and automotive components. [Bangkok Post]

Sri Lanka: Labour Ministry to raise private sector minimum salary to LKR 27,000

(lm) Sri Lanka’s Cabinet has approved an increase in the private sector minimum wage, with the monthly minimum wage set to rise from LKR 17,500 (USD 50) to LKR 27,000 (USD 81), effective April 1, 2025. The daily minimum wage will also increase from LKR 700 (USD 2) to LKR 1,080 (USD 3).

Additionally, the Labour Ministry has announced that the wage increase aligns with the year's budget proposal, with plans for a second phase set for January

1, 2026. The monthly minimum wage is expected to rise to LKR 30,000 (USD 88), while the daily wage will increase to LKR 1,200 (USD 4). Ministry Secretary S.M. Piyatissa confirmed that these amendments will be presented to the Cabinet before being submitted to Parliament in May. [Daily Mirror 1] [Daily Mirror 2]

Sri Lanka: Population growth hits all-time low

(lm) Sri Lanka is experiencing its lowest population growth rate since 1871, with the rate falling to just 0.5 percent in 2024, according to the Department of Census and Statistics (DCS). This decline has led to an increasing number of social challenges, including a shrinking working-age population and a growing elderly population. The country's population in 2024 stands at 21,763,170, an increase of 6.9 percent (1.4 million people) from 2023. However, the long-term trend shows a consistent decrease in growth rates, with the annual growth rate declining from 2.8 percent in 1953 to the current 0.5 percent.

Key factors contributing to this decline include a 30.8 percent decrease in births since 2019, a 14.7 percent decrease in marriages, and a 17.2 percent increase in deaths. The Colombo District, in particular, has seen the most significant declines. The aging population is expected to continue rising, with projections suggesting that by 2041, one in four Sri Lankans will be over the age of 60.

In response to the demographic shifts, experts are raising concerns about the economic and social impact of a rapidly aging population, especially given Sri Lanka's lower per capita income and less developed social institutions compared to other countries facing similar trends. The report also highlights the migration of young people, who are often reluctant to marry or have children due to the ongoing economic crisis.

The elderly population, particularly those aged 80 and above, remains steady, while the working-age population (ages 20-54) has decreased by 3.35 percent. These trends are contributing to the ongoing challenges in addressing healthcare, social welfare, and economic growth. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: CAA issues gazette setting maximum retail prices for bottled water

(lm) The Consumer Affairs Authority (CAA) has issued a special gazette notification setting maximum retail prices for bottled water, effective from April 1. The new prices are as follows: LKR 70 (USD 0.23) for bottles between 500ml and 999ml, LKR 100 (USD 0.34) for 1 to 1.5 liters, LKR 130 (USD 0.44) for 1.5 to 2 liters, LKR 160 (USD 0.55) for 2 to 2.5 liters, and LKR 350 (USD 1.20) for bottles between 5 and 7 liters. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Health Minister announces government-led hospital digitization drive

(sl) During the official launch of the Health Information Technology System at the Lady Ridgeway Hospital for Children (LRH) in Colombo, Minister of Health and Mass Media, Dr. Nalinda Jayatissa, announced the government's plans to digitize the entire public hospital system in Sri Lanka.

According to the Minister, the government aims to provide the highest standard of care, create a patient-friendly environment, and make hospitals more accessible and comfortable for all citizens. The digital transformation will focus on several key areas, including managing data for over 150,000 healthcare professionals, developing integrated digital medical records, and optimizing the pharmaceutical supply chain through advanced technology.

Minister Jayatissa also highlighted the broader objective of digitizing all public services in Sri Lanka, with the goal of making them more efficient, transparent, and convenient for the population. [Ada Derana]

Sri Lanka: Adani Ports commences operations at Colombo West International Terminal

(lm) Adani Ports and Special Economic Zone Ltd (APSEZ), the largest private port operator in India and part of the diversified Adani Group conglomerate, has officially begun operations at the Colombo West International Terminal (CWIT) in Sri Lanka.

The terminal is developed through a public-private partnership between APSEZ, Sri Lanka's John Keells Holdings PLC, and the Sri Lanka Ports Authority under a 35-year Build, Operate, and Transfer (BOT) agreement. This project, with a significant investment of USD 800 million, features a 1,400-meter quay and a

20-meter depth, allowing it to handle about 3.2 million twenty-foot equivalent units (TEUs) annually. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Fourteen suspects further remanded in Ganemulla Sanjeewa murder case

(lm) Fourteen individuals arrested in connection with the high-profile murder of underworld figure Sanjeewa Kumara Samararathne, known as "Ganemulla Sanjeewa," were further remanded until April 11 by the Colombo Chief Magistrate. The suspects include both direct participants and those accused of aiding the killing, including a 14th individual who allegedly showed the perpetrators the court premises. He will appear at the next hearing via Skype.

The case stems from a dramatic courtroom assassination on February 19, when Sanjeewa was shot dead inside a Colombo magistrate's court by a gunman disguised as a lawyer. The shooter used a revolver concealed in a hollowed-out legal book and was reportedly promised LKR 15 million for the killing. The murder is believed to have been orchestrated from abroad by a criminal figure known as "Kehelbaddara Pathme." Several law enforcement officials have also been implicated in aiding the crime.

In court proceedings, a Honda Vitz vehicle used to transport the shooter and an accomplice was released on a bond of LKR 7 million. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: 1,700 armed forces deserters arrested in crime crackdown

(lm) Sri Lanka's Public Security Minister Ananda Wijepala announced that nearly 1,700 individuals who had deserted the armed forces and were involved in organized criminal activities have been arrested in the past two months. In addition to the arrests, more than 1,000 illegal firearms were seized during this period.

In response to growing concerns about deserters engaging in criminal activity, the Defence Ministry issued orders for the immediate arrest of such individuals. Many of those connected to recent crimes had either unofficially left or been discharged from the military after receiving weapons training.

Minister Wijepala, who visited the Maha Nayaka Theras in Kandy, emphasized that operations to combat organized crime were ongoing. He also announced that around 500 Special Task Force (STF) personnel, who recently completed their training, would be deployed to strengthen efforts against criminal activity.

In light of reports of certain forces and police officers being involved in underworld activities and narcotics trafficking, investigations are underway to identify those responsible. Several police officers have already been suspended for maintaining contacts with criminals and traffickers. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Police Commission cancels transfer of Bingiriya station chief

(lm) Sri Lanka's National Police Commission (NPC) has annulled the recent transfer of the Officer-in-Charge (OIC) of the Bingiriya Police Station, a local law enforcement unit in the Kurunegala District. The transfer had been ordered by the Acting Inspector General of Police without securing the required prior approval from the NPC or the Elections Commission. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Inmate hacked to death at Boossa Prison

(lm) An inmate at Boossa High Security Prison in Galle was killed on April 4 after reportedly being hacked to death with a sharp weapon by a group of fellow inmates. The motive behind the fatal assault remains under investigation. The victim's body has been transferred to Karapitiya Hospital for postmortem examination. Boossa Prison is one of Sri Lanka's most secure detention facilities, housing several high-risk detainees, including individuals linked to organized crime and terrorism. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Indian woman arrested with cocaine worth USD 221,000 at Katunayake airport

(lm) Sri Lankan authorities arrested a 29-year-old Indian woman at Katunayake International Airport on April 6 for attempting to smuggle LKR 65 million (USD 221,000) worth of cocaine. The woman had arrived from Chennai and was carrying 1.644 kilograms of

cocaine concealed in a hidden compartment of her suitcase. Acting on intelligence, police also arrested a 50-year-old Sri Lankan businessman in Malabe who was allegedly waiting to receive the drugs. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Alarming rise in road accidents; 292 deaths reported in first three months

(lm) In the first three months of 2025, Sri Lanka recorded 565 road accidents, resulting in 292 deaths, according to Traffic Control and Road Safety Director SSP Indika Hapugoda. He noted that the majority of accidents involved individuals aged 15 to 60, with hospital admissions expected to rise by 12 percent due to accident-related injuries. [Daily Mirror]

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

Brunei: Law maternal mortality maintained

(dql) Brunei Darussalam's maternal mortality ratio for 2018-2023 ranged from zero to 32.4 deaths per 100,000 births, with the 2023 figure standing at 15.9 per 100,000, or one death annually. This is in line with the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3.1, which aims to reduce maternal mortality to below 70 per 100,000 births.

While Brunei has made significant progress in reducing maternal and infant mortality, Isham pointed out

challenges, particularly with rising chronic diseases such as hypertension, diabetes, and obesity among young women. He warned that pregnant women with these conditions face higher risks of complications like birth defects, stillbirth, or premature birth, and that these health issues may predispose babies to future health problems. [Borneo Bulletin]

Cambodia: Opposition National Power Party elects new leadership

(dql) The opposition National Power Party (NPP) has elected Chea Mony, former acting president, as its new leader, replacing Sun Chanthy—currently imprisoned in Pursat province—and appointed Sok Kimseng, chairman of the Siem Reap Party Executive Committee, as vice-president. Thirty-five new directors were also named.

These appointments were made during a party congress in Siem Reap province, attended by around 2,000 members, as part of preparations for the 2027 commune and 2028 national elections. The NPP announced plans to complete the organization of its city, district, and commune structures by the end of 2025 and finalize its candidates for the 2027 commune elections by the end of 2026.

The congress reaffirmed the NPP's commitment to democratic, free, and multi-party politics through fair and just elections. Mony pledged to lead the party through majority-based decision-making and promote inclusive political participation, both domestically and internationally.

He also reiterated the NPP's stance on protecting national interests, defending sovereignty, combating corruption, and promoting social justice. Mony called on the Cambodian people to continue supporting the party through active engagement and contributions.

Sek Socheat, for his part, urged political leaders to compete lawfully under the election law, advocating for equal political participation and sustainable democratic practices. He stressed the need for unity and reconciliation in national politics, emphasizing the importance of the rule of law, inclusive governance, and the involvement of youth and civil society in preserving Cambodia's cultural and environmental heritage. [Khmer Times]

The NPP has only 77 out of 4114 provincial, municipal, town and district councillors, no Commune councillors, no Commune chiefs and is neither

represented in the National Assembly nor in the Senate.

Cambodia: Anti-government organizations dissolved

(dql) Sam Serey, president of the Khmer National Liberation Front (KNLF) and the Khmer Government-in-Exile, has announced the immediate dissolution of both organizations and requested a pardon to return to Cambodia.

In a letter dated April 3, addressed to Acting Head of State and Cambodian People's Party (CPP) president Hun Sen, as well as Prime Minister Hun Manet, Serey expressed his desire to return to Cambodia and declared the dissolution of the KNLF and the Khmer Government-in-Exile. He pledged to work towards uniting the Cambodian people, promoting peace, upholding multi-party democracy, and adhering to the country's constitutional laws.

Currently residing in Denmark, Serey, 45, sought forgiveness for his previous actions, which led to his conviction in absentia on charges of plotting and incitement. He had been sentenced to at least 30 years in prison by the Phnom Penh Municipal Court for his role in establishing the KNLF, an armed group aiming to overthrow the Cambodian government during 2014-2016.

On April 7, Acting Head of State Hun Sen issued a Royal Decree granting Serey amnesty as part of national reconciliation efforts. This decree annulled Serey's convictions, which included six charges with sentences ranging from 18 months to nine years. [Khmer Times]

Cambodia: Prime Minister Hun Manet establishes Jurists team to support cabinet on legal matters

(mfr) Prime Minister Hun Manet's newly established Jurists team aims to support the cabinet on legal affairs and other tasks. Formed following a directive signed by the Prime Minister on January 20, the Jurists team will advise the Prime Minister on legal matters, conduct investigations, and offer legal assistance to citizens without access to professional legal services.

The team will collaborate with various ministries, national institutions, and other relevant parties. The

Jurists team operates separately from the Royal Government Attorney Group (RGAG), established in November 2023, which focuses on safeguarding the rights of national leaders and government institutions and assisting with government policy implementation. Both groups serve distinct functions but share the goal of advancing Cambodia's legal and justice sectors. [Khmer Times]

Cambodia: Prime Minister directs authorities to take legal action against online scams

(sal) During a Cabinet plenary session on the morning of April 4, 2025, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet instructed law enforcement to intensify efforts to tackle and eliminate ongoing online scams affecting society.

In an official press release following the plenary meeting, the Prime Minister expressed his strong appreciation for the efforts of all involved ministries, institutions, and authorities—particularly the Ministry of Interior, National Police, Royal Cambodian Armed Forces, and the Unified Command of Capital and Provincial Administrations—for their dedicated and effective work in addressing the issue.

The Prime Minister highlighted that the Commission for Combating Cybercrime is designed to support, not replace, existing mechanisms. It serves as a collaborative platform for all relevant parties to work together in preventing and tackling illegal activities through ongoing cooperation.

It is worth noting that the Committee to Combat Online Scams was officially formed on February 20, 2025, with Prime Minister Hun Manet serving as its chairman. [Khmer Times]

Cambodia: Ministry of Women's Affairs and CARE Cambodia partner to empower marginalized women

(dql) The Ministry of Women's Affairs and CARE Cambodia have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to support marginalized women through three key initiatives, including strengthening inclusive services for indigenous communities; amplifying women's voices for worker well-being; and

enhancing the economic resilience of female garment workers.

The initiatives aim to improve services for vulnerable groups—particularly indigenous women, women with disabilities, and female workers—by promoting their participation, strengthening protection against gender-based and online violence, and improving service delivery at the sub-national level, especially in Ratanakiri province. [Khmer Times]

CARE International is a global humanitarian organization founded in 1945. Established in 1991, CARE Cambodia focuses on combating poverty and promoting social justice, with a focus on promoting the empowerment of marginalized and vulnerable women and girls.

Cambodia: Government targets 25 million air passengers by 2035

(mfr) The government has set a target of 25 million air passengers and 205,000 tons of cargo by 2035 under its National Aviation Policy 2025–2035, discussed during an April 4 plenary session led by Prime Minister Hun Manet. The policy focuses on expanding air traffic rights, increasing transport capacity, and allowing full foreign ownership of airlines operating in Cambodia.

The strategy includes liberalizing supporting air transport services such as airport operations, maintenance, and cargo handling while ensuring fair competition and integrating aviation with tourism, trade, and cultural policies. The initiative builds on the Open Skies policy introduced in 1999 and aims to enhance Cambodia's connectivity and economic sustainability.

As of 2024, Cambodia had direct air links with 12 countries and 34 major cities through 31 airlines. The country recorded 6.24 million air passengers last year, a 22 percent increase from 2023, along with a 40 percent rise in air cargo to 77,800 tonnes. The new Techo International Airport, set to open in July, is expected to further support these aviation goals. [Phnom Penh Post]

Cambodia: Ministry of Civil Service discusses AI integration for government functions

(ga) The Ministry of Civil Service (MCS) held a meeting on April 3 to discuss the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) functions within government institutions. Chaired by the MCS Permanent Secretary of State Youk Bunna, the session included representatives from various ministries, including the Ministry of Industry, Science, Technology, and Innovation, and the Ministry of Post and Telecommunications. The meeting aimed to gather input for defining and implementing AI functions, in line with a new government circular issued on March 26.

This circular focuses on public administration reform, modernizing state institutions, and ensuring the efficient allocation of responsibilities among ministries. AI's rapid development is being considered across multiple sectors, including healthcare, education, and public services, with the MCS supporting ministries in defining their core functions and preparing for the digital transformation. Further meetings are planned to refine the implementation process and produce a report for leadership review. [Khmer Times]

Cambodia: Chinese-built river bridge construction to be completed in two years

(dql) The Tonle Bassac River Bridge in Phnom Penh, constructed by the Chinese state-owned Shanghai Construction Group (SCG), has reached 30.95 percent completion after 13 months of work. Scheduled for completion by August 25, 2027, the USD 58.8 million project is expected to reduce local traffic congestion by up to 70–80 percent by improving connectivity between National Road 1 and Hun Sen Boulevard. [Khmer Times]

Cambodia: Prime minister orders enhanced security for Khmer New Year celebrations

(mfr) Prime Minister Hun Manet has directed authorities to enhance security and maintain public order during the upcoming Khmer New Year celebrations. Speaking at a cabinet meeting on April 4, he emphasized the need for strict local situation management to prevent any activities that could cause unrest or insecurity. Authorities are instructed to ensure the safety of leaders, international guests, and the public.

Additionally, the prime minister urged cooperation between local administrations and private businesses to keep prices for food, beverages, and services stable during the holiday period. He also commended the efforts of security forces, including the Ministry of Interior, National Police, and Royal Cambodian Military Police, for their dedication to maintaining order.

This year's Angkor Sangkranti festival will be celebrated on a larger scale nationwide to mark the New Year and attract tourists. [Khmer Times]

Cambodia: Officer suspended for Tiktok post

(sal) The Ministry of National Defence has suspended Brigadier General Chhev Monnin, a senior officer and Oknha titleholder (a lord for significant development contribution to the nation), after he shared an inappropriate video on TikTok that allegedly damaged the military's reputation.

In an April 1 statement, the ministry confirmed that Monnin, who serves as Deputy Chief of the Air Force Technical Department within the General Department of Technical Materials, posted the video, which was deemed harmful to the honor and dignity of both the ministry and the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF).

To maintain discipline and uphold military ethics, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of National Defence General Tea Seiha has ordered the formation of a disciplinary council to investigate Monnin's actions and determine an appropriate punishment in line with military regulations.

Oknha Hun Lak, spokesperson for the Cambodian Oknha Association, clarified that while Monnin holds the Oknha title, he is not a member of the association.

Meanwhile, the RCAF referenced a Royal Decree issued on October 23 last year, which requires civil servants, national police officers, and military personnel who hold the Oknha title to either relinquish it or resign from their positions. The Ministry of National Defence is currently reviewing Monnin's case under this decree. [Khmer Times]

Cambodia: Government introduces new format for national identity cards

(mfr) The government has introduced a new national identity card format, outlined in a sub-decree signed by Prime Minister Hun Manet on April 1. The new identity card, available in both plastic and electronic formats, will include biographical and biometric data, such as fingerprints, iris scans, facial recognition, and a personal identification code. It will also feature an embedded chip or QR code for secure digital interactions.

The cards will be issued to all Cambodian nationals aged 15 and above, with a validity of 10 years, and for individuals aged 60 and over, the card will be valid for life. Existing valid identity cards will remain in use until their expiration. The sub-decree also defines the process for registration, replacement, and issuance of new identity cards. [Khmer Times]

Indonesia: President Prabowo engages with journalists to discuss strategic issues

(th) President Prabowo Subianto convened a dialogue on April 6 with seven journalists representing seven different media outlets, aiming to deliver clear and comprehensive information to the public. The session took place in Hambalang, West Java, and was coordinated by Deputy Minister of Communication and Digital, Angga Raka Prabowo.

Throughout the discussion, Prabowo and the journalists shared perspectives and insights on pressing national strategic issues.

Angga Raka noted that this format represents a new direction in the government's communication strategy under Prabowo's leadership. [Antara]

Indonesia: Police deny requiring foreign journalists to obtain special permit

(th) On April 3, the National Police rejected claims that foreign journalists must secure a police-issued acknowledgement letter to operate in Indonesia. This clarification follows the recent implementation of a police regulation aimed at monitoring foreign nationals.

Inspector General Sandi Nugroho explained that the regulation aligns with the revised immigration law, which ensures oversight and protection for foreign nationals, especially in conflict prone regions.

Sandi further elaborated that the regulation is designed to improve collaboration among government bodies in safeguarding the well-being of foreign visitors to sensitive areas like Papua. He also emphasized, “The police acknowledgement letter is only provided if requested by a guarantor. Without such a request, the police will not issue the letter.”

He additionally clarified that accredited foreign journalists are permitted to travel freely across Indonesia, without needing additional police approval, as long as they adhere to existing laws and regulations. [Jakarta Globe]

Indonesia: 700 drug convicts eligible for amnesty

(th) Law Minister Supratman Andi Agtas has announced that the government had identified at least 700 drug-related offenders as eligible for amnesty.

Speaking in Jakarta, he clarified that these individuals were drug addicts rather than traffickers. They are part of the 19,000 prisoners selected for amnesty from an initial pool of 100,000 convicts. The minister emphasized that this figure could still change as the Ministry of Immigration and Corrections continues to finalize the list of eligible inmates. [Antara]

Indonesia: Highland Papua seeks to boost human development index

(th) The Highland Papua provincial government aims to raise the region’s Human Development Index (HDI) by fostering collaboration among various stakeholders. Based on data from Statistics Indonesia (BPS), Highland Papua recorded an HDI of 54.43 percent in 2024 – the lowest in the country.

On April 5, Acting Governor Velix V. Wanggai outlined several key areas that need attention to enhance the region’s HDI. This included education, healthcare, the economy, infrastructure, community empowerment, and partnerships with both government and international organizations.

In education, Wanggai stressed the importance of expanding access to primary and secondary schooling, improving teaching quality through training programs, and upgrading school facilities.

Regarding healthcare, he highlighted the need to boost public health awareness and ensure better access to basic medical services, such as clinics and hospitals. He also called for improved health infrastructure and more training for medical personnel to elevate the standard of care.

In terms of economic development, Wanggai emphasized the creation of more job opportunities, the enhancement of entrepreneurial skills, and the upgrading of infrastructure critical to economic activity – such as roads and ports. He also noted the need to improve access to clean water, bridges, and digital communication services.

Wanggai further stressed the value of involving local communities in the development process by building their capacity to manage natural resources effectively.

He expressed hope that by pursuing these strategies, both the HDI and the overall quality of life in Highland Papua will see meaningful improvement. [Antara]

Indonesia: Anti-corruption commission denies conflict of interest as chief joins sovereign wealth fund oversight committee

(dql) The Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) denied allegations of a potential conflict of interest after its chief, Setyo Budiyanto, joined the oversight committee of Danantara, Indonesia's sovereign wealth fund. Launched by President Prabowo Subianto, Danantara consolidates assets from state-owned enterprises (SOEs) to invest in strategic national projects, with assets expected to exceed USD 900 billion.

Under a presidential regulation, Prabowo is authorized to form an oversight committee, which includes Setyo and Attorney General ST Burhanuddin. KPK assured that Setyo's role in the committee would not affect KPK's operations, emphasizing the commission's commitment to independence and transparency in legal matters. Setyo's participation will represent KPK, with decisions made collectively by the organization.

The oversight committee also includes Supreme Audit Board (BPK) head Isma Yatun, Financial Intelligence Unit (PPATK) chief Ivan Yustiavandana, State Development Finance Controller (BPKP) head Muhammad Yusuf Ateh, and National Police chief Listyo Sigit Prabowo, among others. [Jakarta Globe]

Indonesia: President Prabowo condemns criticism as “Nazi”-like propaganda tactics

(dql) President Prabowo Subianto has condemned the rising spread of systematic disinformation in Indonesia, comparing it to Nazi Germany's propaganda tactics. Speaking at an economic forum in Jakarta on April 8, he rejected claims that the country is in a "dark" state, calling such narratives misleading and disconnected from reality.

Prabowo emphasized that while his government welcomes constructive criticism, it opposes orchestrated campaigns of falsehoods. He warned that repeated lies, particularly online, could become accepted as truth, describing such tactics as psychological warfare. Drawing on Nazi propaganda theory, he noted the danger of false narratives destabilizing the nation.

Addressing the claim that Indonesia's future is bleak, Prabowo expressed optimism, citing improvements in agriculture, rising productivity, and better farmer livelihoods as signs of progress. He acknowledged shortcomings in government communication but pledged to enhance transparency and data delivery.

The remarks followed protests by Indonesian youth in February and March, who voiced opposition to Prabowo's policies, including state budget cuts and the increased role of military officers in civilian government under revised military law (see AiR No. 12, March/2025, 4). [Jakarta Globe]

Laos: Former Lao leader Khamtai Siphandone dies at 101

(tas) Former Lao President Khamtai Siphandone passed away at the age of 101 on April 2 at his home in Vientiane.

Khamtai played a crucial role in Laos’ independence movement and later held key government positions, including Minister of Defense, Prime Minister (1991–1998), and President (1998–2006). His son, Sonexay Siphandone, is serving as the current Prime Minister. [Laotian Times]

Leaders from neighboring countries have expressed condolences, honoring his contributions to Laos and regional cooperation. On April 3, the Vietnamese government announced a national mourning period

from April 4 to 5, during which flags at government offices and diplomatic missions abroad would fly at half-mast, and public celebrations would be suspended.

Chinese President Xi Jinping praised Khamtai for his dedication to Laos' development and his role in strengthening China-Laos relations. Thai Prime Minister Paethongtarn Shinawatra sent condolences to Lao Prime Minister Sonexay Siphandone, highlighting Khamtai's pivotal role in modern Laos' foundation and his efforts to ensure national stability and prosperity. She also recalled his warm welcome to Thailand's royal family during their visit to Laos. Thai King Maha Vajiralongkorn also expressed deep sorrow, noting Khamtai's leadership in bringing stability and progress to Laos through economic and social reforms. The King extended his condolences to Lao President Thongloun Sisoulith, the Siphandone family, and the people of Laos. [The Star]

Laos: Prime Minister Sonexay unveils strategic vision for energy and mining growth by 2030

(tas) Lao Prime Minister Sonexay Siphandone has set forth an ambitious plan to boost the energy and mining sector's contribution to 25 percent of the country's GDP by 2030, targeting an annual growth rate of 10–12 percent while ensuring sustainable development and financial stability.

Speaking at the annual sector meeting on March 31, he emphasized strategic reforms to improve governance, expand electricity transmission, enforce sustainable mining practices, and reduce the debt of Électricité du Laos (EDL), the state-owned corporation responsible for the generation, transmission, and distribution of electricity throughout Laos. [The Laotian Times]

Malaysia: Death row inmates drop 87 percent by following abolition of Mandatory Death Penalty

(tl) Nearly two years after Malaysia repealed the mandatory death penalty, the number of death row inmates has dropped sharply by about 87 percent. Data presented in Parliament showed a rapid pace of resentencing, with over 860 death sentences commuted to prison terms, mostly between 20 and 40 years.

As of January 2024, there were 1,275 inmates on death row; by early 2025, only 140 remained. The most retained sentences were for murder cases, while drug trafficking convictions saw the highest rate of commutations, from 840 cases in 2024 down to just 40 by 2025.

Despite this progress, human rights groups noted ongoing concerns. They highlighted the lack of written judgments for resentencing, legal ambiguities surrounding juvenile and mentally ill offenders, and the continued use of whipping, which they regard as inhumane. Moreover, though this reform marks significant progress, activists emphasize the need for more comprehensive changes to fully move away from capital punishment. [Malaymail]

Malaysia: Penang government confirms no changes to Hindu Endowment Board leadership

(ga) The Penang Chief Minister's Office (CMO) has confirmed that the leadership of the Penang Hindu Endowment Board (PHEB) will remain unchanged until the end of its current term in July 2025. This statement comes amid speculation about a possible leadership reshuffle involving Chairman RSN Rayer and Deputy Chairman Dr. RA Lingeshwaran.

According to the CMO, the Penang State Executive Council has not discussed any leadership changes for PHEB. However, the state government will make any necessary decisions before the term concludes.

Established under the 1906 ordinance, PHEB oversees endowments for the benefit of Penang's Hindu community, including land, buildings, burial grounds, temples, and monetary donations. Commissioners serve a maximum of two terms, or two years, unless an extension is approved by the Penang governor. Rayer, a board member since 2008, was appointed chairman in 2023. [New Straits Times]

Malaysia: Minister Saifuddin demands apology over defamatory Kedah FC raid claims

(ga) Home Minister Saifuddin Nasution has issued a letter of demand to social media user Zubair Ismail over alleged defamatory claims regarding his

involvement with Kedah Darul Aman (KDA) Football Club (FC).

The letter demands a public apology for a Facebook post made on March 26, which accused Saifuddin of directing the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) and the Inland Revenue Board (IRB) to investigate the club. The post further alleged that this led to sponsors withdrawing their support and that Saifuddin was trying to portray himself as a “hero.”

The following day, Zubair reportedly uploaded a video on TikTok making similar claims. The letter states that these accusations have damaged Saifuddin’s reputation, particularly among football fans, and warns that legal action will be taken if no response is received within three working days.

Saifuddin, who also serves as Kedah Pakatan Harapan coalition chairman, has been in discussions about KDA FC’s financial difficulties. The club, currently ranked 11th in the Super League, has reportedly not paid players and staff for 10 months. On March 25, he presented MYR 200,000 (USD 44,600) in aid to the team, raised through a donation drive led by three NGOs. [Free Malaysia Today] [New Straits Times]

Malaysia: Former Prime Minister Muhyiddin seeks high court trial for Jana Wibawa case

(ga) Former Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin has applied for his abuse of power and money laundering trial to be heard in the High Court, citing complex legal issues under the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission Act. The case, involving allegations of MYR 232 million (USD 51.7 million) obtained for his party, Bersatu, has drawn significant public interest.

Muhyiddin is also accused of receiving MYR 195 million (USD 43.4 million) from Bukhary Equity and MYR 5 million (USD 1.1 million) in a separate charge, with the latter case transferred from Shah Alam to Kuala Lumpur for a joint trial.

The prosecution, led by the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission’s (MACC’s) Wan Shaharuddin Wan Ladin, confirmed receiving the application and expects up to 30 witnesses, including Minister Tengku Zafrul Aziz and businessman Syed Mokhtar Albukhary. The trial is scheduled for 11 dates between September 2025 and January 2026. [Free Malaysia Today]

Malaysia: Mohamad Yusri named BN candidate for Ayer Kuning by-election

(ga) Tapah United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) party's Division Secretary Mohamad Yusri Bakir has been selected as the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition candidate for the Ayer Kuning state by-election on April 26. The announcement was made by Perak BN Chairman Saarani Mohamad during the launch of BN's campaign machinery.

Mohamad Yusri, 54, holds a doctorate in Islamic Education and is a lecturer at the Teacher Education Institute in Ipoh. He expressed his gratitude for the trust placed in him and pledged to continue the late Ishsam Shahruddin's work. [New Straits Times]

BN and Pakatan Harapan (PH) coalition have joined forces to mobilize their campaign machinery. BN is targeting over 18,000 votes, leveraging support from both BN and PH voters in the previous general election. Amanah Party, a PH component, is also assisting BN's efforts, focusing on key polling districts to secure a victory. Additionally, Malay leaders from DAP have expressed their readiness to support the BN candidate, aligning with the MADANI Government's campaign strategy.

UMNO's Terengganu division has pledged support, sending campaign machinery to assist in key polling districts, with coordination ongoing between various UMNO divisions. The combined efforts from BN, PH, and Amanah are aimed at ensuring a strong showing for the BN candidate in the by-election. [Bernama 1] [Bernama 2] [Bernama 3]

The Ayer Kuning constituency has 31,897 registered voters, including 31,315 ordinary voters and 582 police personnel and their spouses. The by-election was called after the death of incumbent Ishsam Shahruddin in February. Nomination day will take place on April 12, with early voting on April 22, and polling on April 26. [Bernama 4]

Malaysia: PKR leaders announce candidacies for key division posts ahead of April elections

(ga) People's Justice Party (Parti Keadilan Rakyat, PKR) leaders are preparing for party elections, with several key figures announcing their candidacies for important division posts. The party's International Bureau chairman Shamsul Iskandar Mohd Akin is running for the Hang Tuah Jaya Division chief post, a position currently held by Mohd Rafee Ibrahim. Iskandar aims

to serve the Hang Tuah Jaya constituency and strengthen preparations for the upcoming Melaka State Election. [Bernama]

Fadhlina Sidek, the Women PKR Chief and Nibong Tebal Member of Parliament, has announced her candidacy for the Nibong Tebal division leadership. She seeks to lead the division, emphasizing unity within the party and gratitude to local supporters. [The Star]

Meanwhile, Akmal Nasrullah Mohd Nasir, the Johor Bahru PKR branch chief, will defend his post after initially assuming the role in 2014. Nasrullah stresses the importance of continuing to uphold the party's values and securing victory in Johor Bahru for the party's future success. [Malay Mail]

These elections for division, Women's Division, and Youth Wing leadership will take place from April 11 to 20, with the central leadership elections scheduled for May 24.

Malaysia: 54 officers involved in corruption cases in 2024

(ga) In 2024, 54 customs officers, representing 0.36 percent of the department's 14,872 personnel, were involved in corruption and abuse of power cases, according to Customs Director-General Anis Rizana Zainudin. She acknowledged that enforcement agencies handling revenue collection are vulnerable to corruption and stated that officers recently arrested by the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) had been reassigned to low-risk positions.

To strengthen its integrity, the department has implemented measures such as surprise inspections and office visits. These efforts allow leadership to assess field challenges, identify issues in work culture, and improve operations and staff welfare.

Additionally, technology is being used to reduce human interaction in processes, including the introduction of an import/export supporting documents system to minimize opportunities for corruption.

In January, MACC arrested six customs officers as part of a larger operation against a vape smuggling syndicate at the KLIA cargo center. The syndicate allegedly paid bribes of up to MYR 6,000 (USD 1,320) daily to customs officers and caused an estimated MYR 8 million (USD 1.76 million) in tax revenue losses. [Free Malaysia Today]

Malaysia: Paddy farmers yet to receive promised MYR 15 million aid

(ga) Paddy farmers have not yet received the MYR 15 million (USD 3.34 million) cash aid promised by the government ahead of Eid al-Fitr, Kota Siputeh Assemblyman Ashraf Mustaqim has claimed. The aid, part of a MYR 30 million (USD 6.72 million) contribution from rice wholesaler Bernas, was announced by Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim in February as a measure to support struggling farmers following the increase in the padi floor price from MYR 1,300 to MYR 1,500 (USD 334) per metric tonne.

Ashraf stated that the funds, intended as "green envelope" relief, have not been disbursed, leading to disappointment among farmers. He urged the government to act swiftly and ensure transparency in the distribution process. [Free Malaysia Today 1] [New Straits Times]

Agriculture and Food Security Minister Mohamad Sabu responded by confirming that the government received the full MYR 30 million from Bernas on March 28. He assured that the distribution of funds to over 200,000 farmers has begun and will be completed by mid-April. He attributed the delay to Bernas' internal financial procedures, which required compliance before the funds could be disbursed.

The MYR 15 million aid was expected to be distributed before Ramadhan month and Eid al-Fitr in late March, as initially announced by Anwar. However, concerns persist as farmers await financial assistance. [Free Malaysia Today 2]

Malaysia: MCMC probes racist social media posts after minister's complaint

(ga) The Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) is investigating a racist and provocative social media post following a report by the Ministry of National Unity. The ministry lodged the complaint on April 1, urging MCMC to take action under Section 233 of the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998, which prohibits offensive online content.

National Unity Minister Aaron Ago Dagang emphasized the government's commitment to preserving national harmony and urged social media users to act

responsibly to prevent racial and religious tensions. The reported posts, uploaded by X user @AmirRidhwann on March 5 and March 26, have since been deleted. [Bernama]

On April 3, MCMC recorded the statement of a customer service officer suspected of uploading offensive content related to racial sensitivities. The suspect's smartphone and SIM card were seized for forensic analysis. If convicted under Section 233(1)(a) of the Act, the individual could face a fine of up to MYR 50,000, a jail term of up to two years, or both.

MCMC reaffirmed its commitment to enforcing regulations against online content that incites hatred, particularly on issues related to royalty, race, and religion (3R). It also reminded the public to refrain from spreading such content and warned of continued enforcement in collaboration with the police. [Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission]

Malaysia: Investigation, aid, and recovery efforts underway for Putra Heights gas pipeline fire

(ga) Authorities have launched an extensive investigation into the Putra Heights gas pipeline fire, with 20 agencies, including the police, fire and rescue department, and Tenaga Nasional Bhd (TNB), assessing safety and damage at the site.

Subang Jaya police confirmed road closures for security operations and said investigations are ongoing. The fire, which erupted on April 1, saw flames reaching over 30 meters high, with temperatures hitting 1,000 degrees Celsius. Firefighters took nearly eight hours to fully extinguish the blaze. [Free Malaysia Today]

Fire and Rescue Department Director-General Nor Hisham Mohammad confirmed the completion of structural assessments on affected homes. Of the 235 houses impacted, 130 have been deemed safe for return, while 87 are beyond repair. The department is also working with TNB to assess electrical safety. [New Straits Times]

Additionally, police have recorded 118 statements from individuals linked to site operations but dismissed claims that fireworks the night before triggered the explosion. [Malay Mail]

Government aid distribution is underway, with MYR 1.4 million allocated, including emergency funds and contributions from Petronas. Families whose homes were destroyed received MYR 5,000, while those with partial damage were given MYR 2,500.

Authorities continue to urge corporate donors to contribute. Meanwhile, displaced residents remain in temporary shelters, awaiting further updates on rebuilding efforts. [Bernama]

Malaysia: Police crackdown on cross-border drug and child pornography crimes

(ga) Police have successfully dismantled a cross-border drug trafficking syndicate, arresting two men and seizing 519 kilograms of methamphetamine with an estimated street value of MYR 16.6 million. The raid occurred after the suspects led authorities to a homestay in Subang Jaya and a warehouse in Ampang, where the drugs were stored.

On March 27, officers apprehended two men in Subang Jaya, discovering 156kg of methamphetamine in their vehicle. They directed the police to the homestay, where 300 packets of the drug were seized, and to the warehouse, where another 50 packets were found.

The syndicate, active since September 2024, had been using homestays to store and distribute drugs. The suspects worked as transporters for the operation, earning MYR 5,000 to MYR 10,000 per delivery. Investigations are ongoing to identify the mastermind behind the syndicate. [Free Malaysia Today 1]

In another operation, authorities foiled an attempt to smuggle 5.7 kilograms of cocaine worth MYR 1.14 million at Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA). On March 27, a 38-year-old Indonesian man arriving from Brazil was arrested after police found the drugs in his luggage. The cocaine was packed into laptop bags, with two plastic packages in each bag.

Two days later, a 48-year-old Malaysian man was also arrested at KLIA for trafficking methamphetamine, with 15.9kg of the drug found in his luggage. Both cases are under investigation for drug trafficking. [Free Malaysia Today 2]

In a separate cross-border operation, the police arrested four men for possessing over 50,000 files of child sexual abuse material (CSAM). The suspects were apprehended as part of Operation Cyber Guardian,

which involved police from Singapore, Thailand, Hong Kong, Japan, and Korea.

They had obtained the CSAM through peer-to-peer interactions on social media platforms. Two suspects have already pleaded guilty and were fined MYR 3,000 and MYR 6,000, respectively. The operation resulted in 435 arrests across the six countries involved. [Free Malaysia Today 3]

Myanmar: Ceasefires declared amid relief efforts

(hw) The members of the resistance coalition, comprising the Arakan Army (AA), Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), and Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), collectively known as the Three Brotherhood Alliance (3BHA), and the military junta imposed a ceasefire to facilitate relief efforts following the devastating 7.7 magnitude earthquake that struck central Myanmar on March 28.

On April 1, the 3BHA announced their intention to cease all hostilities, stating that they would not engage in combat unless provoked. The ceasefire came one day after the National Unity Government (NUG) declared a two-week unilateral ceasefire. [Radio Free Asia 1, in Burmese]

Following the 3BHA and NUG announcements, the junta declared a ceasefire on March 2, although aerial bombardments of villages and towns have continued unabated. [Radio Free Asia 2, in Burmese]

The Kachin Independence Army (KIA) also declared a ceasefire. [BBC News, in Burmese]

Myanmar: Junta to compensate 200 USD to each earthquake victim

(hw) Myanmar's military leader, Senior-General Min Aung Hlaing, announced during a cabinet meeting on April 5 that his government plans to compensate USD 200 to each individual who died as a result of the earthquake. Min Aung Hlaing also stated that the government intends to provide compensation to those who were injured or lost property.

Furthermore, he emphasized that the government has a responsibility to stabilize the real estate market, which tends to rise following natural disasters. In addition, the junta has made further requests to the

international community for food, temporary shelters, sanitary supplies, and mobile hospitals. [DVB, in Burmese]

Myamnar: Junta personnel threaten Chinese humanitarian convoy in Shan State

(hw) The Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) reported that a Chinese convoy carrying humanitarian aid was threatened by junta personnel near a village in Nawnghkio Township, northern Shan State. The incident occurred on April 1, when the nine-vehicle convoy, en route to Mandalay in central Myanmar, was threatened with gunfire by the junta personnel.

Following the incident, the convoy retreated to the main town of Nawnghkio. This event came after the Arakan Army (AA) and its allies declared a ceasefire in response to the humanitarian crisis caused by the devastating earthquake in central Myanmar (see article above). The Chinese team accompanying the convoy later stated that they had already informed the military junta about their trip. [Radio Free Asia, in Burmese]

On April 2, the military regime confirmed the incident, but explained that the military personnel had fired three shots into the air because the convoy refused to stop at a checkpoint. [Tachileik News, in Burmese]

Myanmar: Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army to withdraw from Lashio

(hw) According to a source close to the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) leadership, the group is preparing to withdraw from Lashio, the capital of northern Shan State, which the MNDAA has controlled since August 2024.

The source states that following the withdrawal, the military will assume control of governance in Lashio by establishing offices, with Chinese representatives reportedly involved in the post-April 22 governance arrangements.

Another source adds that although the MNDAA has decided to withdraw from Lashio, it will continue to station its forces three miles from the town. The agreement for withdrawal was allegedly reached during a meeting between military and MNDAA representatives in Kunming. However, neither the

military nor the MNDAA has made an official statement yet. [Radio Free Asia, in Burmese]

Myanmar: Chin Brotherhood captures Falam after five-month siege

(anl) The ethnic Chin Brotherhood gained full control of Falam, a strategically important town in Chin State, after a five-month siege. The alliance, which includes the Zomi Federal Union, Chin National Organization, Mindat Chin National Council, Maraland and Kampelet Chin Defense Forces (CDF), and Matupi CDF Brigade 1, successfully defeated the junta's last remaining position in Falam, Infantry Battalion 268, on April 7.

Currently, they are clearing the town, while junta aircraft conduct reconnaissance. The siege began in November last year, with the alliance blocking supply routes to Falam. In response, the regime launched extensive airstrikes to defend the town.

Falam, the second largest city in Chin State after Hakha, is strategically located on the route linking the regime's Regional Operations Command in Sagaing Region's Kale to the north and its operations command in Hakha to the south. [Irrawaddy]

Philippines: Senate inquiry into Duterte's ICC arrest intensifies amid executive privilege standoff

(lm) Tensions are mounting in the Philippine Senate as it prepares to resume its inquiry into the arrest and transfer of former president Rodrigo Duterte to the International Criminal Court (ICC), amid a legal standoff between the legislative and executive branches over the scope of accountability and the limits of executive privilege.

The Office of the President has confirmed that selected Cabinet officials may attend the next Senate hearing on April 10, following a request from Senate President Francis Escudero. Those cleared include Justice Secretary Jesus Crispin Remulla, Foreign Affairs Secretary Enrique Manalo, and Philippine National Police Chief Rommel Marbil. However, the executive emphasized that attending officials may still invoke executive privilege—a legal principle allowing the president and top officials to withhold information from Congress or the public when it concerns sensitive

matters like national security, foreign policy, or internal Cabinet discussions. [PhilStar 1]

The Senate inquiry, led by Senator Imee Marcos—President Marcos' sister and a strong supporter of ex-president—as chair of the foreign relations committee, centers on Duterte's arrest under an ICC warrant for crimes against humanity linked to his controversial anti-drug campaign. The former president is currently detained in the Netherlands, with a confirmation of charges hearing scheduled for September 23, 2025.

In a move signaling legal caution, Escudero has referred subpoenas issued by Senator Marcos to the Senate's legal office for review, citing concerns about constitutional overreach. The subpoenas target figures such as Air Force Lt. Gen. Arthur Cordura and Prosecutor General Richard Anthony Fadullon. Escudero warned that compelling their appearance without legal clarity could trigger a constitutional crisis, given past Supreme Court rulings affirming the executive's right to invoke privilege. [GMA NEWS ONLINE]

Senator Ronald "Bato" dela Rosa, a key Duterte ally, criticized the absence of Cabinet members from the April 3 session as a "total snub" of legislative oversight. He called for expanded subpoenas to ensure accountability. Senator Marcos echoed the demand, arguing that not all absences can be justified by executive privilege. [The Inquirer.net]

Dela Rosa also urged the government to seek US sanctions against the owner of the private jet that flew Duterte to The Hague, citing an executive order by US president Donald Trump targeting those who assist the ICC. However, the presidential communications office dismissed this, stating that the order explicitly respects the sovereignty of US allies and does not apply to decisions made by the Philippine government under its domestic laws. [PhilStar 2]

Philippines: Vice President Sara Duterte returns from The Hague as impeachment proceedings intensify

(lm) Vice President Sara Duterte has returned to the Philippines after spending nearly a month in The Hague, where she had been managing the legal affairs of her father, former president Rodrigo Duterte, who faces trial at the International Criminal Court (ICC) for crimes against humanity linked to his war on drugs.

Her return on April 7 comes as she prepares to face her own impeachment trial following charges of corruption and betrayal of public trust. Duterte was impeached by the House of Representatives in February on charges including unconstitutional behavior, graft, and allegedly inciting violence against President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., her former running mate. Her Senate trial will proceed after the May 12 midterm elections, which will determine the composition of the Senate jury.

House Deputy Majority Leader Paolo Ortega welcomed her return but urged her to respond to the charges, including the alleged misuse of PHP 612.5 million (USD 10.4 million) in confidential funds. [NEWS.AZ] [PhilStar]

Philippines: Marcos-led coalition debuts revised 11-person slate amid growing Duterte rift

(lm) President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s coalition, Alyansa para sa Bagong Pilipinas, resumed its national campaign on April 4 with a rally in Antipolo City, Rizal, formally presenting its revised 11-person senatorial slate. The event marked Alyansa's return after a two-week hiatus and the first major sortie since Senator Imee Marcos—President Marcos' sister—officially withdrew from the lineup in protest over former president Rodrigo Duterte's arrest by the International Criminal Court.

Senator Marcos' absence follows increasing tensions between the Marcos and Duterte camps, which have come to define the political undercurrents of the 2025 midterm elections. Her departure has been downplayed by the coalition, which quietly updated campaign materials and social media graphics to reflect the revised slate.

Alyansa's updated roster includes former senator Panfilo Lacson, Senators Pia Cayetano, Ramon "Bong" Revilla, Lito Lapid, and Francis "Tol" Tolentino; Deputy Speaker Camille Villar; ACT-CIS Representative and former social welfare secretary Erwin Tulfo; former interior secretary Benhur Abalos; Makati City Mayor Abby Binay; Senator Tito Sotto; and former senator Manny Pacquiao.

Despite internal friction and the coalition's subdued public messaging on Duterte's arrest and the impeachment of Vice President Sara Duterte, most of Alyansa's candidates continue to perform strongly in voter preference polls. Still, some—such as Lacson,

Villar, Abalos, and Tolentino—are locked in tight statistical races.

The Rizal sortie, which President Marcos described as a "show of force," is strategically important. He and Vice President Duterte secured overwhelming victories in the province during the 2022 elections. However, amid Duterte's continued popularity and the growing public scrutiny of the ICC arrest, Alyansa's ability to sustain unity and electoral dominance remains uncertain ahead of the May 12 vote, in which over 68.4 million Filipinos are expected to cast ballots. [Rappler]

Philippines: PDP-Laban raises concerns about overseas online voting

(cm) The Partido ng Demokratikong Pilipino–Lakas ng Bayan (PDP-Laban), a major political party known for its affiliation with former president Rodrigo Duterte, has petitioned the Supreme Court to issue a temporary restraining order (TRO) against the Commission on Elections' (Comelec) plan to implement internet voting for overseas voters in the 2025 midterm elections. The petition argues that the online voting and counting system (OVCS) lacks a clear legal basis and urges Comelec to comply strictly with laws governing automated elections.

Comelec Chairman George Erwin Garcia responded by citing the Overseas Absentee Voting Act, which permits Comelec to "explore other modes or systems using automated election system." Under this mandate, online voting will proceed in 77 out of 90 Philippine diplomatic posts abroad.

Critics of OVCS, including petitioners and some overseas voters, raised concerns over its accessibility, particularly for those unfamiliar with digital platforms. The 122-page petition claims OVCS is not among the voting methods approved by Congress and questions its legality.

If the court grants the TRO, Garcia stated that Comelec is prepared to deploy 16,000 voting machines abroad to serve the approximately 1.2 million overseas Filipino voters. [Inquirer.net] [Rappler]

Philippines: DOJ rejects Tausug group's bid for BARMM appointments following Sulu exclusion

(lm) The Department of Justice (DOJ) has rejected a petition by the United Tausug Citizens of the Sultanate of Sulu (UTC) seeking the appointment of a regional chief minister and 50 other officials to the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), citing a 2024 Supreme Court ruling that excluded Sulu from the region.

Sulu, a province in the southern Philippines long associated with the historic Sultanate of Sulu, was originally included in the BARMM following a 2019 plebiscite on the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL), which created the region to replace the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). However, Sulu's inclusion was legally contested, and in 2024, the Supreme Court ruled to exclude it from BARMM, asserting that a province that votes against joining the region cannot be compelled to be part of it.

In their petition, the UTC claimed custodianship of the Sultanate's legacy and territory, including Sabah, and sought the appointment of Sharif Jubar Muhammad as chief minister of BARMM. They also demanded USD 15 billion from Malaysia in alleged cession payments for Sabah.

The DOJ ruled the petition moot, noting that under the Supreme Court's decision, members of the UTC are ineligible for BARMM leadership since Sulu is no longer part of the region. It clarified, however, that the Bangsamoro Organic Law allows any qualified individual to be elected to the Bangsamoro parliament, provided they belong to the region's constituent provinces. [Rappler]

Philippines: Government faces legal standoff over ownership of Porac POGO compound

(lm) The Philippine government is entangled in a legal battle over the ownership of a 10-hectare property in Porac, Pampanga, linked to alleged scam and human trafficking operations run by Philippine Offshore Gaming Operator (POGO) firm Lucky South 99. The compound, now secured by authorities, was raided in 2024 and is under the custody of the Presidential Anti-Organized Crime Commission and the police's Criminal Investigation and Detection Group.

However, the Cruz family—heirs of the original owner, Pampanga-based businessman Ruperto Cruz—have filed a contempt complaint against the government for retaining control of the site. The family had earlier won a writ of execution in August 2024 to repossess the

land after trying to eject Whirlwind Corporation, which had leased the property to Lucky South 99. Whirlwind is owned by Chinese national Duanren Wu, a central figure in the case, who is also under investigation for human trafficking.

Authorities have yet to begin formal forfeiture proceedings for the property, which includes a Thai-style hotel and is believed to be worth billions. The case remains complicated by overlapping claims, pending charges, and political ties—most notably to former Duterte spokesperson Harry Roque, who represented Whirlwind in the ejectment case and is now reportedly seeking asylum in The Hague. [Rappler]

Philippines: Sandiganbayan rejects ex-Customs chief's plea to dismiss graft charges in rice smuggling case

(lm) The Sandiganbayan, the Philippines' anti-graft court that handles cases involving public officials, has rejected former Bureau of Customs (BOC) Commissioner Nicanor Faeldon's motion to dismiss graft charges related to a 2017 rice smuggling incident.

The case involves the alleged illegal release of over PHP 34 million (USD 598,000) worth of rice shipments from Vietnam through the Port of Cagayan de Oro. The Sandiganbayan's Fifth Division ruled on April 4 that there is prima facie evidence showing Faeldon authorized the release of the rice despite the lack of valid import permits and unpaid taxes. The court denied Faeldon's request to file a demurrer to evidence — a legal challenge to the strength of the prosecution's case — stating that granting it would only delay the trial.

The complaint was initiated by former senator Panfilo Lacson, who accused Faeldon of abuse of authority. Faeldon contended that Lacson lacked firsthand knowledge and that his own endorsement letter did not constitute a crime. However, the court found these arguments insufficient to warrant dismissal.

Also charged in the case are former customs district collector Tomas Alcid and three officials from Cebu Lite Trading Inc. (CLTI), who are accused of conspiring with Faeldon to facilitate the release of the shipments. The co-accused argued the rice had valid export permits, but the court ruled they may still present a demurrer without leave of court.

The charges fall under Republic Act No. 3019, or the Anti-Graft and Corrupt Practices Act. [Rappler]

Philippines: Misamis Oriental governor's apology over anti-Bangsamoro remarks fails to quell backlash

(lm) Misamis Oriental Governor Peter Unabia's closed-door apology to local bishops and Muslim leaders on April 7 has failed to ease mounting criticism over his recent campaign remarks, which many viewed as discriminatory against Maranaos and residents of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM).

The apology, made during an interfaith dialogue, followed a wave of backlash after Unabia warned voters at campaign rallies against supporting candidates linked to BARMM and made sexist comments suggesting unattractive nurses could negatively affect patient recovery. He also joked about bringing in "sexy dancers" to energize campaign crowds, further fueling controversy.

While prominent religious figures present at the meeting, including bishops and imams, accepted the apology, civil society organizations—particularly from Lanao del Sur and youth groups—criticized the limited scope and lack of inclusivity of the dialogue. Some groups are reportedly collecting evidence to support potential legal action or a disqualification petition ahead of the May midterm elections and BARMM's first-ever parliamentary polls in October. [Rappler 1]

Calls for accountability have extended beyond the political arena. The multisectoral group One Bangsamoro Movement (1Bangsa) has demanded a sincere public apology, support for anti-discrimination measures, and a boycott of Unabia's family-owned businesses, including the popular Sr. Pedro roasted chicken chain. The group has also called for the issuance of a fatwa declaring his 2025 candidacy haram, or religiously forbidden, under Islamic law.

While a fatwa may not carry legal weight in predominantly Catholic Misamis Oriental, the economic impact of a boycott on Unabia's businesses —such as Sr. Pedro and Amaya View, a popular hilltop resort—could be significant, especially among Muslim consumers. [Rappler 2]

Philippines: Government aims to cut maternal mortality to 70 per 100,000 live births by 2030

(lm) The Philippines has committed to reducing its maternal mortality ratio (MMR) to 70 deaths per 100,000 live births by 2030, in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. According to a new World Health Organization (WHO) report, the country recorded 84 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births in 2023, down 28 percent from 117 in 2010, but still higher than the Western Pacific regional average of 35. [Inquirer.net]

Philippines: USD 17 million funding allocated for Child Development Centers in low-income areas

(jm) The Philippine government has allocated PHP 1 billion (USD 17 million) to establish 300 Early Childhood Development Centers (CDCs) nationwide, prioritizing low-income local government units (LGUs). The initiative, led by the Department of Budget and Management (DBM) in collaboration with the Department of Education (DepEd), aims to expand access to early education, healthcare, and nutrition services for young children in underserved areas.

The program was formally launched on April 3, when President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. presided over the ceremonial signing of a Joint Circular outlining guidelines for LGUs to implement CDCs through the Local Government Support Fund – Financial Assistance to LGUs.

A total of 328 disadvantaged LGUs are set to receive funding, including 89 in Luzon, 106 in the Visayas, and 133 in Mindanao, with coverage extending to the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM).[PhilStar] [Philippine Development Plan]

Philippines: Government eyes negotiation, not retaliation, in response to US tariffs

(jto/jm) The Philippines is responding to newly imposed tariffs by the United States with a strategy focused on negotiation and regional coordination, rather than retaliation. The 17-percent reciprocal tariff imposed by the Trump administration has prompted concerns about slower economic growth and export competitiveness, but officials and economists alike highlight the potential for investment gains and trade diversification.

The US remains the Philippines' largest export market, accounting for 17 percent of exports in 2024, with electronics, wiring sets, coconut oil, and transport equipment as key commodities. In return, the Philippines imports electronics, animal feeds, and agricultural products from the US.

Against this backdrop, Trade Secretary Ma. Cristina Roque confirmed that the Philippines is "definitely" open to reducing tariffs on U.S. goods to strike a mutually beneficial deal and avoid escalation. "We're really going to do that," she said, adding that the government's economic team will meet on April 8 to finalize its strategy. The Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) also confirmed that bilateral discussions with U.S. Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick are expected soon, focusing on enhanced access for key Philippine exports such as electronics, dairy, frozen meat, and soybeans. [Inquirer.net]

While the 17-percent duty on Philippine goods is among the lowest imposed by Washington in its global tariff sweep—compared to 46 percent on Vietnamese goods and 32 percent on Indonesian products—it still poses risks. Economists warn the new trade environment may lead to a slight reduction in Philippine GDP growth, with potential contractions in export growth and industrial output. [Bloomberg]

According to Bank of the Philippine Islands (BPI) lead economist Jun Neri, the Philippines may see a 4.2 percent contraction in export growth this year, reversing earlier expectations of a 6.1 percent increase. Electronics, which make up over half of Philippine exports to the US, are likely to be the most affected sector. He warned of possible volatility in the peso and inflationary pressures due to weakened exports and more expensive imports. [PhilStar 1]

Despite these headwinds, Neri and Rizal Commercial Banking Corporation (RCBC) Chief Economist Michael Ricafort emphasized that the Philippines' domestic-driven economy—where household consumption makes up around 75 percent of GDP—provides a buffer against external shocks. [Daily Tribune]

Finance Secretary Ralph Recto and Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. both underlined that the Philippines' relatively favorable tariff rate may attract foreign direct investments. Laurel pointed out that agricultural exports, such as coconut, seafood, and seaweed, could benefit from the new tariff structure, and that new markets are being identified through an interagency product review. [Philippine News Agency]

The DTI also stressed the Philippines' unique position compared to ASEAN peers and confirmed Manila's support for a unified regional response, following Malaysia's call for coordinated negotiations. Roque said cooperation within ASEAN could help shape future trade dynamics and enhance the bloc's collective leverage in global markets.

While Senate President Francis Escudero welcomed efforts to engage diplomatically, he warned of the dangers of a trade war and urged the government to take a measured but strategic approach. "The situation poses risks, but also new opportunities if managed well," he said. [PhilStar 2] [Rappler]

Philippines: Jobless rate drops to 3.8 percent in February as labor conditions improve

(lm) The Philippines' unemployment rate fell to 3.8 percent in February 2025, down from 4.3 percent in January, according to the Philippine Statistics Authority. This decline reflects an increase in both job creation and labor force participation, which rose to 64.5 percent from 63.9 percent in the previous month. The number of unemployed Filipinos dropped to 1.94 million, from 2.16 million in January. Meanwhile, the underemployment rate—which measures those seeking additional work—improved significantly, falling to 10.1 percent from 13.3 percent, signaling an increase in job quality. [Inquirer.net]

Philippines: NPA burns cassava facility in Bukidnon over alleged ancestral land dispute

(lm) Suspected members of the New People's Army (NPA) set fire to a cassava milling facility in Barangay Siloo, Malitbog town, Bukidnon on April 5, allegedly targeting a businessman accused of seizing Indigenous ancestral land. The NPA is the armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines and has waged an insurgency against the government since 1969.

Twelve armed fighters raided the facility, overpowered its guards, and torched cassava chip stocks, a milling machine, and a building, causing an estimated PHP 3 million (USD 51,300) in damages. They also reportedly seized an air rifle and two radio units. No injuries were reported.

The group claimed responsibility in messages sent to media—its first such communication in years following major military setbacks, including the deaths of senior rebel figures in 2021. Military officials estimate only around 100 NPA combatants remain active in Bukidnon and Misamis Oriental, after the collapse of most guerrilla fronts in the Mt. Pantaron range. [Rappler]

Philippines: 31 police officers accused of robbing Chinese businessman in USD 1.4 million raid

(jm) A major police corruption scandal has erupted in the Philippines after 31 officers from the Eastern Police District's (EPD) Special Operations Unit allegedly robbed a Chinese businessman during an unauthorized operation in Las Piñas City on April 2. According to authorities, the officers served a fictitious arrest warrant and seized PHP 85 million (USD 1.4 million) in cash and valuables.

The businessman and his relatives claimed that the officers disabled CCTV systems, broke into vaults, and failed to use body cameras—violating multiple police protocols meant to ensure accountability. The accused officers claimed the businessman attempted to bribe them, a defense now under investigation.

In response, National Capital Region Police Office (NCRPO) chief Maj. Gen. Anthony Aberin condemned the raid and immediately removed the entire unit from duty, placing eight officers in restrictive custody. Administrative and criminal charges are being prepared, including against higher-ranking personnel. [Philippine News Agency] [Philippine Information Agency]

Philippines: Immigration uncovers trafficking scheme using fake missionary cover

(lm) The Bureau of Immigration (BI) has uncovered a new human trafficking scheme in which victims are instructed to pose as missionaries to evade airport security checks. On April 1, three women—two licensed teachers and their alleged recruiter—were stopped at Ninoy Aquino International Airport Terminal 3 while attempting to fly to Thailand via Singapore. They falsely claimed to be part of a church

mission but later admitted to seeking illegal employment abroad.

The recruiter, who claimed to be a church leader, was arrested by the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) after it was confirmed she was unlicensed to recruit overseas workers. The BI said this case resembled the "bitbit" or tag-along scheme, in which repeat travelers escort unsuspecting victims under false pretenses.

This incident adds to a growing list of trafficking cases, including catfishing scams, fake pilgrimages, and illegal surrogacy. In 2024, the BI referred nearly 1,000 trafficking victims to authorities and warned of rising online recruitment scams targeting vulnerable Filipinos with fake job offers. [Inquirer.net]

Philippines: Kanlaon Volcano erupts, remains at Alert Level 3

(lm) Kanlaon Volcano on Negros Island erupted early on April 8, producing a "voluminous" ash plume that reached 4,000 meters and generated pyroclastic density currents (PDCs) down its southern slopes, according to the Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology (Phivolcs). The explosive eruption has prompted continued precautions as Phivolcs maintains Alert Level 3—indicating heightened unrest and the possibility of further hazardous eruptions.

Kanlaon, which straddles the provinces of Negros Occidental and Negros Oriental, is one of over two dozen active volcanoes in the Philippines, a country situated on the Pacific "Ring of Fire," known for frequent seismic and volcanic activity. The volcano has been on Alert Level 3 since December 2024. [Reuters] [Rappler] [PhilStar]

Singapore: Senior Minister Lee calls for unity amid tariffs, warns against 'soft solutions' ahead of GE2025

(lm) Former Prime Minister and incumbent Senior Minister Lee Hsien Loong has urged Singaporeans to remain united and avoid being swayed by "strange ideas or soft solutions," as the country faces global challenges including newly imposed tariffs by the United States. Speaking on April 6 at a community event, he echoed Prime Minister Lawrence Wong's call for resilience in the face of an increasingly turbulent global trade environment.

The remarks come days after US President Donald Trump announced a 10 percent baseline tariff on countries including Singapore, with steeper rates targeting key economies such as China, the European Union, Japan, and India. Lee warned that the move signifies “a complete change in the world” and will inevitably impact Singapore's trade, economy, and future.

The speech also marked Singapore's 60th year of independence (SG60), which Lee said should be seen not just as a celebration, but a recommitment to the country's success and security. [Channel NewsAsia]

Singapore: PSP to contest fewer seats in GE2025, focuses campaign on cost of living

(lm) The opposition Progress Singapore Party (PSP) has announced it will field fewer candidates in the upcoming 2025 General Election, confirming contests in West Coast–Jurong West and Chua Chu Kang Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs).

This marks a strategic shift from GE2020, when it fielded the largest slate opposition with 24 candidates. The PSP was founded in 2019 by former presidential candidate Tan Cheng Bock, a longtime Member of Parliament from the ruling People's Action Party (PAP). While the party did not win any constituencies in GE2020, it secured two Non-Constituency Member of Parliament (NCMP) seats and remains one of Singapore's most prominent opposition voices.

PSP chief Leong Mun Wai said the party aims to “focus more” this time, citing the complexity of campaigning and the need for dedicated resources. The announcement was made during the launch of the party's 78-page manifesto, which prioritizes cost-of-living issues, housing, jobs, social support, and governance reforms.

The party's proposals include reducing the Goods and Services Tax (GST) back to 7 percent, exempting essential goods from GST, introducing a minimum living wage of SGD 2,250 (USD 1,665) per month, and expanding housing access for singles aged 28 and above. PSP also advocates a 40-hour work week, increased annual leave, and the introduction of a through-train education track that makes the PSLE optional.

On governance, the manifesto proposes cutting ministerial salaries, reviewing the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act, and requiring

Members of Parliament to declare public assets. PSP claims its proposals are revenue-neutral, funded by changes to how land costs are treated in public housing and new levies on employment passes.

Chairman Tan Cheng Bock and first vice-chairperson Hazel Poa joined Leong at the press conference. Addressing US tariffs announced by President Donald Trump, the party dismissed Singapore's response as “overblown,” with Tan suggesting the government was using fear to influence voters. Poa added that evolving trade conditions required diverse perspectives rather than fewer. [The Straits Times]

Singapore: Government imposes tighter controls on 19 key transport firms under new law

(rt) Singapore has designated 19 major entities in the air, land, and sea transport sectors for heightened regulatory oversight under the new Transport Sector (Critical Firms) Act, which came into effect on April 1 and will be enforced from April 15. The law is intended to safeguard the continuity and integrity of essential transport services and shield critical companies from foreign interference or malicious control.

The designated firms include Singapore Airlines (SIA), its budget carrier Scoot, Changi Airport Group, Sats, SIA Engineering Company, and port operator PSA Corporation, as well as land transport operators like SBS Transit and SMRT. Two equity holders—SMRT Corporation and PSA International—were also named due to their controlling interest in key operating entities.

Under the new law, these firms must obtain prior approval from authorities for changes in ownership and leadership, such as appointing CEOs, chairpersons, or directors. They must also report events that may affect service continuity, including lawsuits or insolvency. In extreme cases, the transport minister is empowered to intervene directly and appoint external management.

The act empowers the Civil Aviation Authority of Singapore (CAAS), Land Transport Authority (LTA), and Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore (MPA) to enforce the regulations. Officials emphasized that the “step-in” powers are intended only as a last resort.

This legislation complements the Significant Investments Review Act, which allows national security screenings of major investments in strategic sectors.

Transport Minister Chee Hong Tat previously stated the law aims to ensure national resilience amid rising global uncertainty. [The Straits Times]

Singapore: Court rules doctors not required to obtain consent for every step in childbirth procedures

(lm) Singapore's High Court has dismissed a medical negligence lawsuit filed by a woman against her doctor, ruling that requiring explicit patient consent for each individual medical action during childbirth would be impractical.

The case involved procedures such as cervical sweeps, manual fundal pressure, and an episiotomy—common steps in natural deliveries. Justice Choo Han Teck acknowledged that while the doctor should have displayed better bedside manner by informing the woman prior to the episiotomy, his actions did not breach the medical standard of care.

Claims for SGP 48,600 (USD 35,964) in lost income were also rejected. The judge found the woman left her job for personal reasons unrelated to her injury and was capable of returning to work. He noted that her expenses and career choices were not tied to lasting disability. [The Straits Times]

Singapore: Sino Group chairman, children to be designated politically significant

(rt) Singapore's Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) has announced that property tycoon Robert Ng, chairman of Hong Kong-listed Sino Group, and his three children —Daryl Ng, Nikki Ng, and David Ng—are to be designated as "politically significant persons" (PSPs) under the Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Act (FICA). The designation follows their voluntary declarations in 2024 that they are members of foreign legislatures or political organizations, specifically China's top political advisory body, the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC).

Under FICA, PSPs are required to make annual disclosures to Singapore's Registry of Foreign and Political Disclosures, including details of political donations of SGD 10,000 or more, foreign affiliations, and migration benefits such as honorary citizenship or permanent residency. The designations aim to ensure transparency, particularly when individuals hold

political roles abroad that may intersect with domestic affairs. The four individuals have 14 days from the April 7 notice to submit representations, after which the registrar may finalize the designation. An appeal process is available through the Minister for Home Affairs.

Robert Ng, aged 72, has served on the 11th to 14th CPPCC National Committees and has held leadership roles such as deputy director of its Committee for Economic Affairs and vice-chairman of the China Overseas Friendship Association. His children have also held posts in local committees of the CPPCC. Daryl Ng, the deputy chairman of Sino Group, is a standing committee member of the 14th Beijing Municipal Committee and chairs the Hong Kong-ASEAN Foundation. Nikki Ng has served on the 12th to 14th Shanghai Committees, while David Ng was a member of the 12th and 13th CPPCC Fujian Provincial Committees.

Sino Group, affiliated with Singapore's Far East Organization, holds several high-profile assets in Singapore, including The Fullerton Hotel, One Holland Village, and the redevelopment of Golden Mile Complex. The Ng Teng Fong Charitable Foundation, managed by the family, has contributed to various causes in Singapore, mainland China, and beyond. The Ministry said the PSP designations would not restrict the Ngs' activities or business operations, but would subject them to enhanced transparency requirements under Singapore's foreign interference framework.

As of April 7, there are four designated PSP entities in Singapore—Think Centre, Maruah, the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC), and Philip Chan, the only previously designated individual. The MHA reported that, by the end of March 2025, seven Singaporeans had declared their membership in foreign political organizations, but only the four Ngs have been served with notices of intended designation. [The Business Times] [The Straits Times]

Singapore: Islamic association slams former MP's remarks on pro-Palestinian activists as 'deeply troubling'

(lm) The Singapore Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers Association (Pergas) has condemned remarks by former Nominated Member of Parliament Calvin Cheng about pro-Palestinian activists, calling them "deeply troubling" and potentially harmful to Singapore's multiracial harmony.

Cheng had sarcastically suggested on March 13 that members of the group Monday of Palestine Solidarity —accused of disrupting meet-the-people sessions—be sent to Gaza and not allowed to return. Pergas said such comments risk undermining social cohesion and urged authorities to act against speech that incites discord.

Cheng responded that his comments were not aimed at any racial or religious group but at three individuals, including a non-Muslim, whose disruptive actions he criticized using sarcasm. He added that he supports humanitarian aid for Palestinians and has filed legal action against those accusing him of Islamophobia.

The remarks drew rebukes from senior officials. Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs Masagos Zulkifli, Law and Home Affairs Minister K. Shanmugam, and Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan publicly stated their disagreement with Cheng's views. [Channel NewsAsia]

Singapore: Government pursues stability through task force and diplomacy amid U.S. tariffs

(vsq/lm) Singapore is responding with caution and strategic coordination after U.S. President Donald Trump imposed a sweeping 10 percent universal tariff on all imports, including those from Singapore—despite the city-state maintaining zero tariffs on U.S. goods and an existing bilateral free trade agreement with Washington.

While Singapore avoided the steeper tariff rates imposed on other countries, including China (54 percent), Vietnam (46 percent), and Cambodia (49 percent), policymakers and analysts warn that the broader global trade disruption could significantly strain the country’s export-reliant economy. The U.S. cited non-reciprocal trade arrangements and imbalances as justification, although Singapore’s Ministry of Trade emphasized that the U.S. enjoyed a substantial trade surplus of USD 30 billion with Singapore in 2024.

Rejecting retaliatory tariffs, Singapore has instead opted for diplomacy. Prime Minister Lawrence Wong described the U.S. decision as “very disappointing” and “not actions one does to a friend,” noting that the 10 percent universal tariff appears non-negotiable. However, he indicated there may still be a narrow window for dialogue before the full tariff regime takes effect on April 9. Wong also said that the city state’s

“growth will be significantly impacted”. [Reuters] [The Straits Times 1]

To mitigate the fallout, the Singaporean government has launched a national task force chaired by Deputy Prime Minister Gan Kim Yong. The task force brings together representatives from economic agencies, industry groups, and trade unions to support affected businesses and workers, while enhancing resilience and adaptability in the face of a rapidly changing economic landscape. Prime Minister Lawrence Wong emphasized in parliament that the measures announced in Budget 2025—including corporate income tax rebates and household vouchers—would provide short-term relief, with the government standing ready to expand support if necessary. [Channel NewsAsia 1]

Trade Minister Gan acknowledged the economic risks, noting that GDP projections for 2025—originally set between 1 and 3 percent—are under review. Economists from UOB and OCBC have warned that sectors such as manufacturing, semiconductors, pharmaceuticals, and logistics are already under stress and could be hit harder if the U.S. expands tariffs further. Maybank economist Chua Hak Bin flagged the risk of a deflationary shock should a 25 percent blanket tariff be imposed on specific sectors, potentially prompting downward revisions to Singapore’s 2.6 percent GDP growth forecast. [Channel NewsAsia 2] [Channel NewsAsia 3]

Despite these concerns, officials have stressed that Singapore’s situation remains comparatively favorable. The United States runs a trade surplus with Singapore —USD 2.8 billion in 2024, according to U.S. data, and up to USD 30 billion according to Singaporean officials —possibly explaining the lower tariff rate.

Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan cautioned, however, that the global shift away from multilateralism and toward bilateralism could be particularly hostile for small, trade-dependent nations. He warned that the U.S. tariffs undermine World Trade Organization principles and could unravel the rules-based trading system that has long safeguarded smaller economies. [Financial Times]

In the meantime, Singapore's financial markets have shown resilience. The Straits Times Index dipped only 0.14 percent after the announcement—less than declines in regional peers—helped by strong corporate earnings and limited exposure to high U.S. tariffs. The Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS) has pledged to manage foreign exchange volatility and maintain financial stability, while economists see potential long-

term advantages from supply chain shifts. [The Straits Times 2]

Singapore: Taiwanese chipmaker UMC opens advanced chip facility

(rt) Taiwanese chipmaker United Microelectronics Corp (UMC) has opened a new fabrication facility in Pasir Ris, Singapore, signaling a major boost to the country's semiconductor industry. The plant, which spans 111,800 square meters and sits adjacent to UMC's existing fab, is expected to generate 700 jobs over the next few years in areas such as R&D and process engineering.

UMC will invest up to USD 5 billion to bring the first phase of the new facility to full capacity of 30,000 wafers per month by 2026. It will manufacture 22- and 28-nanometer chips for applications in communications, automotive, and Internet of Things (IoT), expanding beyond the older 40-nanometer technology used at its current fab.

Deputy Prime Minister Gan Kim Yong emphasized that semiconductors are central to Singapore's long-term digital strategy, including AI, 5G, and electrification. He praised UMC's decision as a vote of confidence in Singapore's business environment, infrastructure, and geopolitical stability.

UMC President Shan Chieh Chien highlighted Singapore's growing role in global chip supply chains, noting that the new fab will produce advanced display driver and power-efficient memory chips. Singapore currently accounts for 14 percent of UMC's global output.

UMC's expansion comes amid a wider surge in semiconductor investment in Singapore. In January 2025, Micron Technology broke ground on a USD 9.5 billion packaging facility in Woodlands, while German wafer firm Siltronic launched a USD 2.15 billion (SGD 2.9 billion) advanced manufacturing plant in Tampines in mid-2024. According to the Economic Development Board, Singapore attracted over SGD 18 billion (USD 13.32 billion) in semiconductor R&D and manufacturing investments in the past two years. [The Straits Times]

Singapore: Ministry of Manpower to make 3 'strategic shifts' to better serve

Singaporeans

(rt) On April 5, Manpower Minister Tan See Leng announced that the Ministry of Manpower (MOM), responsible for managing Singapore's labor policies, will implement three strategic shifts to address the evolving landscape of jobs, skills, and business operations in Singapore. This initiative comes in response to the rise of artificial intelligence, technological advancements, and global uncertainty. The changes will focus on empowering the workforce with better job opportunities, fostering inclusive workplaces, and enhancing trust with both workers and businesses.

During MOM's 70th anniversary dinner at Shangri-La Singapore, Dr. Tan emphasized the importance of tackling new challenges like global competition and technological disruptions, which have led to anxieties among workers. To alleviate this, programs such as Workforce Singapore's Career Conversion Programmes and the SkillsFuture Jobseeker Support scheme will be rolled out to support workers before and after they face employment difficulties.

Tan also highlighted the need to address the implications of Singapore's "super-aged" society, noting that by 2030, one in four citizens will be aged 65 and above. The MOM is working to increase retirement and re-employment ages, alongside promoting flexible work arrangements, to ensure that more Singaporeans can continue to contribute to the workforce.

Furthermore, MOM's strategic shifts aim to make Singapore a hub for talent, aligning with the country's goal of creating robust economic growth that is also inclusive. Dr. Tan called for greater cooperation with employers and unions to maintain Singapore's competitive workforce. [The Straits Times]

Singapore: 17 HDB neighborhoods to be upgraded under USD 123 million renewal plan

(lm) Singapore's Ministry of National Development has announced that 17 Housing and Development Board (HDB) neighborhoods will undergo upgrading under the latest phase of the Neighborhood Renewal Program (NRP), benefiting over 25,000 households. The works will cost more than SGD 165 million (USD 123 million) and include amenities such as covered linkways, drop-off porches, playgrounds, and therapeutic gardens.

This 16th batch of NRP projects will, for the first time, include blocks built between 1996 and 1999. The projects are located across various towns, including Bukit Panjang, Sembawang, and Sengkang. The upgrading works will be fully government-funded and implemented by town councils, with an increase in the budget per flat from SGD 6,100 (USD 4,540) to SGD 6,600 (USD 4,910) to support more senior-friendly features in line with the Age Well SG initiative.

Separately, 12 older precincts will receive upgrades under the Silver Upgrading Program (SUP), which targets neighborhoods with higher proportions of seniors. These improvements, to be completed from 2027, include senior-friendly amenities to support aging in place. The SUP is also fully funded by the government.

Additionally, the Lift Access Housing Grant has been increased to help residents of blocks ineligible for the Lift Upgrading Program relocate to accessible flats. The maximum grant has been increased to help residents of blocks ineligible for the Lift Upgrading Program relocate to accessible flats. The maximum grant has been raised from SGD 30,000 (USD 22,310) to SGD 80,000 (USD 59,490) for families, and from SGD 15,000 (USD 11,150) to SGD 40,000 (USD 29,740) for singles. [Channel NewsAsia]

Singapore: Over 230 money mules jailed under new sentencing guidelines as scam losses hit record high

(lm) Singapore has charged more than 230 individuals for money mule activities under new sentencing guidelines introduced in August 2024, with all adult offenders receiving jail terms of at least six months. These measures follow a record spike in scam-related losses, which surged to SGD 1.1 billion (USD 813 million) in 2024—about 70 percent higher than the previous year.

The tougher penalties stem from amendments to the Corruption, Drug Trafficking and Other Serious Crimes (Confiscation of Benefits) Act and the Computer Misuse Act, both of which took effect in February. These changes introduced new offenses including rash and negligent money laundering, punishable by up to five and three years in prison respectively, as well as fines of up to SGD 250,000 (USD 185,000). Offenders who disclose their Singpass credentials may also face jail terms of up to three years.

Authorities say the legal reforms aim to deter would-be money mules and reduce the financial and emotional toll of scams on victims. The government is also considering the use of caning for some scam-related crimes. [The Straits Times]

Thailand: Investigations expand after building collapse reveals unsafe materials, foreign ownership violations

(msz/lm) Thai authorities have launched a multi-agency investigation following the collapse of the under-construction State Audit Office (SAO) building in Bangkok's Chatuchak district during the March 28 earthquake centered in Myanmar. At least 17 people have been confirmed dead, nine injured, and 77 remain missing, prompting an urgent reassessment of construction standards, corporate practices, and public sector accountability. [Bangkok Post 1]

The 30-story SAO building was the only high-rise in the capital to collapse during the quake. Search and rescue operations are ongoing, with heavy machinery deployed to accelerate debris removal. Only a small percentage of the estimated 15,000 cubic meters of rubble has been cleared so far, and full site clearance may take 30 to 60 days. The Ministry of Labor has announced that families of deceased victims will receive up to THB 2 million (USD 60,000) in compensation. Injured workers and those rendered unemployed will receive further assistance under Thailand's Social Security Scheme. [Bangkok Post 2] [Bangkok Post 3]

Early investigations have revealed that the building's collapse may have been caused by critical design flaws and substandard construction materials. Structural engineers raised concerns about the placement of the lift shaft and potential torsion forces that compromised the building's integrity. Steel bars used in construction failed to meet Thai industrial standards for mass, strength, and chemical composition, according to the Iron and Steel Institute of Thailand.

The faulty steel was traced to Xin Ke Yuan Steel Co., a Chinese-owned company whose Rayong factory had already been shut down in December 2024 for unrelated safety violations. Although Xin Ke Yuan has rejected the findings, it has requested additional testing from the Thailand Automotive Institute. [Bangkok Post 4] [Bangkok Post 5] [Bangkok Post 6] [The Nation]

However, authorities also uncovered over 43,000 tons of caesium-137 contaminated waste on site—well beyond the 2,245 tons previously reported—raising additional legal and environmental concerns. The Ministry of Industry has revoked Xin Ke Yuan's investment privileges and is investigating whether the company violated a shutdown order by relocating or selling confiscated steel. [Bangkok Post 7] [Bangkok Post 8]

Meanwhile, the Department of Special Investigation (DSI) is probing both Xin Ke Yuan and China Railway No. 10 Engineering Co. (Thailand)—a subsidiary of a Chinese state-owned enterprise—for possibly using Thai nominee shareholders to bypass Thai foreign ownership restrictions, which require at least 51 percent Thai ownership for companies operating in specific sectors. Chinese nationals reportedly hold 80 percent of Xin Ke Yuan and 49 percent of China Railway No. 10 (Thailand).

The DSI has summoned the three Thai shareholders urging them to cooperate and clarify their roles. Investigators are considering money laundering charges and possible bid-rigging, both of which fall under offenses linked to Thailand's anti-money laundering laws. The agency, working with the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) and the Department of Public Works and Town & Country Planning, plans to collect further evidence at the collapse site, including tests on reinforced steel and concrete. Former DSI director-general Pol Lt Col Korawat Panprapakorn has joined the advisory panel to support the investigation. [Bangkok Post 9]

The DSI is also expanding its investigation to include the companies' involvement in other state-funded construction projects, valued at more than THB 22 billion (USD 660 million) between 2019 and 2024, including the Narathiwat airport terminal and a hospital in Songkhla. [Bangkok Post 10] [Bangkok Post 11] [Bangkok Post 12]

Multiple agencies—including the Revenue Department, Anti-Money Laundering Office, and Department of Industrial Works—are now reviewing tax records, financial transactions, and factory operations linked to the companies involved. Xin Ke Yuan is also under criminal investigation for using over 7,400 fake tax invoices worth THB 200 million (USD 6 million), with potential penalties raising that total to THB 1 billion (USD 30 million). [Bangkok Post 13]

In response to public scrutiny, the Chinese government has pledged full cooperation. CREC, China Railway's parent company, has been instructed to assist Thai

authorities, while the Chinese embassy has called for a "scientific and fair" resolution. [Thai PBS World]

Meanwhile, Interior Minister Anutin Charnvirakul has denied allegations that his friendship with Auditor-General Montien Charoenphol could compromise the investigation. Critics questioned potential conflicts of interest via social media, but Anutin emphasized that Montien assumed office after the project contract was signed and is not involved in procurement. He assured that engineering experts and independent institutions are overseeing the inquiry. [Bangkok Post 14]

But beyond legal violations and corporate malpractice, the collapse has come to symbolize what many Thais see as deeper cracks in the country's bureaucratic system. Public anger intensified after revelations of lavish spending on the SAO headquarters, including Italian leather chairs priced at THB 97,900 (USD 2,938) each and carpets worth THB 165,000 (USD 4,950) apiece. These findings triggered a wave of outrage on social media, where critics questioned how an agency meant to audit government bodies could approve such expenditures—especially when smaller public entities are penalized for minor infractions. [Bangkok Post 15]

Editorial voices have echoed these concerns, criticizing not only the SAO but also broader bureaucratic failures in disaster preparedness, crisis communication, and institutional accountability. Commentators have described the government's response as trapped in outdated procedures and a blame game, highlighting how rigid administrative habits and resistance to modernization continue to jeopardize public safety. [Bangkok Post 16]

Thailand: Thaksin's influence questioned amid ethics probe delay and unofficial diplomacy with India

(bk/lm) Recent developments in Thailand have intensified scrutiny over the influence of former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra – widely seen as the de facto leader of the ruling Pheu Thai Party – on the current administration. These issues have come to the forefront following a recent censure debate where Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra, Thaksin's daughter, faced allegations of mismanagement and undue influence from her father.

The Medical Council of Thailand has indefinitely postponed a decision on whether doctors at the Police General Hospital (PGH) violated ethical standards during Thaksin's incarceration. The council had been

expected to deliver its findings on April 10, but the submission of late documents by PGH and the Department of Corrections on March 31 and April 1 led to the deferral. Thaksin spent the entirety of his six-month corruption sentence—from August 22, 2024, to February 18, 2025—receiving medical treatment at the Corrections Hospital and PGH, sparking widespread accusations of preferential treatment.

Critics, including former senator Somchai Sawangkarn, have warned that the delay could be perceived as a stalling tactic, undermining public confidence in the medical profession and the broader justice system. [Bangkok Post 1] [Bangkok Post 2] [Thai PBS World]

Thaksin's recent high-profile meeting with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on April 3 has further fueled debate over his continued political role. Although the Thai Foreign Ministry described the meeting as personal and unrelated to the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) Summit, the encounter has drawn criticism. Former Democrat MP Thepthai Senpong called Thaksin an "extra-constitutional influence," arguing that if he is to engage in diplomacy, it should be through formal appointment and with public accountability. [Bangkok Post 3]

Thailand: Anti-corruption oversight to begin earlier in state projects after building collapse

(lm) Thailand's Comptroller-General's Department, the agency responsible for overseeing government expenditure and procurement, has announced that anti-corruption oversight for public construction projects will now begin at the earliest stages of bidding. The reform follows scrutiny over the collapse of the State Audit Office (SAO) building, which was under construction when it fell during an earthquake on March 28.

Director-General Patricia Mongkhonvanit said the SAO project had only been included in the Integrity Pact (IP) program—an anti-corruption mechanism developed by Transparency International—after the bidding process was complete. Under new rules, such late inclusion will no longer be allowed. Instead, third-party observers must be involved from the beginning to ensure full transparency.

Although the project eventually joined the IP scheme in fiscal year 2021, the delay meant observers had no input during critical phases such as bid evaluation and

contract awarding. The selected observer, the Anti-Corruption Organization of Thailand (ACT), confirmed it was brought in after the contract had already been signed with the ITD-CREC joint venture in November 2020.

Under the updated policy, only projects valued at THB 1 billion (USD 29 million) or more will qualify for IP oversight, and only if observers are involved from the start. Project selection also depends on budget availability, as observers receive compensation for their role.

The Comptroller-General's Department emphasized that early oversight is critical. From 2015 to 2019, the IP program covered 53 projects worth THB 160 billion (USD 4.6 billion), leading to estimated budget savings of THB 73 billion (USD 2.1 billion) through greater scrutiny and accountability. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Cabinet defers tabling of casino legalization bill on short notice as public backlash grows

(lm/bk) Thailand's controversial Casino and Entertainment Complex Bill, originally scheduled to be presented in the House of Representatives on April 9, has been postponed on short notice. Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra stated that on April 8 that the Cabinet has decided to prioritize other pressing issues, including U.S. import tariffs. She stressed though that the bill has only been postponed, not withdrawn. [Thai Enquirer]

This decision comes after the bill faces mounting public and political resistance as the Pheu Thai-led government pushes it toward a final parliamentary debate on April 9—the last day of the current legislative session. Critics accuse the government of rushing the legislation without adequate public consultation or feasibility studies, while concerns over political pressure within the ruling coalition continue to grow.

Former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra – widely seen as the de facto leader of the ruling Pheu Thai Party - has reportedly warned coalition parties to support the bill or face expulsion, though Pheu Thai officials deny such threats. The Prachachat Party, whose members represent predominantly Muslim provinces in the Deep South, remains opposed on religious and moral grounds. The party's leader, Pol Col Tawee Sodsong, raised concerns over increased crime, corruption, and social harm, and called for further

study before legalizing gambling. Despite this, most coalition members—including Bhumjaithai and United Thai Nation—have pledged support. [Bangkok Post 1]

The government has come under further fire for replacing a planned debate on the recent Myanmar earthquake—which caused casualties and damage in Thailand—with deliberation of the casino bill. People's Party (PP) leader Natthaphong Ruengpanyawut accused the administration of manipulating the legislative agenda to ensure quorum and smooth passage. PP MP Parit Wacharasindhu called for the bill's delay until more comprehensive research can be conducted. [Bangkok Post 2]

Meanwhile, the Senate is expected to meet on April 8 to discuss two motions and form a committee to assess the bill's broader economic and social implications. Minister to the Prime Minister's Office Chousak Sirinil insisted the bill will undergo three readings in both houses and a formal review process expected to take at least eight months.

Despite those assurances, public backlash continues to escalate, with protesters, academics, former constitution drafters, and civil society groups havingunited in opposition to the bill, warning it could inflict deep and lasting harm on Thailand's social fabric. On April 2, hundreds of demonstrators rallied outside Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra's residence, criticizing the government's attempt to fast-track both the casino bill and a separate online gambling bill. Protesters accused the government of promoting vice under the guise of economic necessity while sidelining urgent concerns like the recent earthquake in Myanmar, which caused casualties and damage in Thailand. [Bangkok Post 3]

The movement has since gained momentum. Doctors from Chulalongkorn and Chiang Mai universities, the Catholic Education Council representing 387 schools, and the Network of Universities for Reform have condemned the bill. Fifty former constitution drafters—led by Jarun Pakdeethanakul, a former Constitutional Court judge and respected legal scholar—submitted an open letter urging parliament to reject the bill. They argued it violates the national strategy rooted in the sufficiency economy philosophy and hands over state land to private casino developers. Former red-shirt leader Jatuporn Prompan has called for mass protests on April 9, encouraging participants to wear white as a symbol of resistance. [Bangkok Post 4] [Bangkok Post 5] [Bangkok Post 6]

A group of 30 economists from Thammasat University issued a joint statement calling the proposal

"unsustainable and unsafe," arguing that legalizing gambling would worsen poverty, debt, crime, and addiction, particularly among youth. They stressed that short-term economic benefits from casino development would come at the expense of long-term investments in education and productivity, and warned that the legislation could facilitate corruption and money laundering. [The Nation]

Despite the backlash, Deputy Prime Minister Phumtham Wechayachai has defended the bill as a key revenue-generating measure amid rising economic pressure, particularly the recent imposition of steep US tariffs on Thai exports. He cited a recent public hearing in which 80 percent of respondents reportedly supported the bill and emphasized that the complex would include multiple business types—not just casinos. [Bangkok Post 7]

Still, criticism persists that the push for the bill—widely seen as influenced by former Prime Minister Thaksin—is outpacing both public support and institutional readiness. Kasetsart University's Faculty of Economics has announced plans to petition oversight bodies for an ethics probe into Prime Minister Paetongtarn's involvement in promoting the legislation. [Bangkok Post 8]

Thailand: Bhumjaithai denies political deal in prime minister's visit to Buri Ram

(lm) The Bhumjaithai Party, the second-largest party in the ruling coalition, has dismissed speculation of political deal-making during Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra's visit to Buri Ram, its stronghold, on April 3. Accompanied by Bhumjaithai party leader and Interior Minister Anutin Charnvirakul, she opened a provincial development workshop and toured local facilities, including Chang International Circuit.

Bhumjaithai secretary-general Chaichanok Chidchob emphasized that the visit was non-political and that Newin Chidchob—widely regarded as the party's de facto leader—acted only as a cordial host. The Chidchob family has long held deep political influence in Buri Ram, and the party aimed to share the "Buri Ram Model" of development, highlighting the circuit's success in hosting affordable and large-scale events.

Speculation about political motives intensified amid reports that the government might not renew its sponsorship of MotoGP at the circuit, which it has hosted since 2018. Under the current contract,

extended through 2025, Thailand pays THB 324 million (USD 9.4 million) annually. Officials have stated that any decision to renew the deal will be based on economic considerations rather than political interests.

The 2025 MotoGP event, held from February 28 to March 2, attracted more than 224,000 spectators and generated THB 5.04 billion (USD 146 million) in economic activity across Buri Ram and neighboring provinces.

Prime Minister Paetongtarn rejected suggestions of a rift between Bhumjaithai and the ruling Pheu Thai Party, stating that there had never been any conflict between the two coalition partners. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: First national census in 15 years begins to address demographic shifts

(lm) Thailand has launched its first national census in 15 years, aiming to update key demographic data to inform policies on welfare, education, labor, and infrastructure. The National Statistical Office (NSO) is focusing on issues such as declining birth rates, an aging population, labor shortages, and the growing number of foreign residents.

Running from April 1 to June 19, the census combines online submissions via the NSO website and Thang Rath app with in-person interviews starting April 21 in 11 provinces, including Bangkok, Chiang Mai, and Phuket. A total budget of THB 400 million (USD 11.6 million) has been allocated, including funding for over 40,000 Thailand Post staff to assist with face-to-face interviews.

For the first time, the census includes questions on LGBTQ+ demographics. Data will be analyzed using AI and big data tools, with the final report expected between October and December. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: DSI urges charges against two celebrities in iCon fraud case

(lm) Thailand's Department of Special Investigation (DSI) has urged the Attorney General to indict actor Yuranunt Pamornmontri and actress Pechaya Wattanamontree in connection with the iCon Group fraud case, contesting prosecutors' earlier decision to exclude them from charges.

The two were among 19 individuals accused under the 1984 Public Fraud Loan Act, but charges were initially filed only against 17 company executives. The DSI has submitted a dissenting opinion under the 2004 Special Case Investigation Act, with a final decision now pending.

The iCon Group scandal centers on a pyramid scheme disguised as a multi-level marketing business for health and beauty products. Founded in 2018, the company allegedly defrauded thousands of investors with promises of high returns, resulting in losses exceeding THB 649.9 million (USD 18.8 million) between August 2020 and August 2024. Over 2,000 complaints have been filed, and authorities seized luxury assets worth over THB 125 million (USD 3.6 million). [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: American lecturer faces arrest warrant over lèse-majesté

(bk) Paul Chambers, an American academic and lecturer at Naresuan University in Thailand, has had his bail request denied by the Phitsanulok Provincial Court. Chambers, a long-time resident of Thailand and expert on civil-military relations in Southeast Asia, faces charges of lèse-majesté and violating the Computer Crimes Act. The accusations stem from an online lecture in October 2023, during which he allegedly insulted the Thai monarchy. The charges were filed by the Third Army Region, which oversees security operations in northern Thailand, including Phitsanulok. [Thai Enquirer 1]

Chambers, who denies any wrongdoing, claims the remarks in question were routine academic commentary. He reported to the Phitsanulok Police Station on April 8, where he acknowledged the charges and was arrested, though no prior summons was issued. [Reuters]

Rights advocates have warned that the case could seriously undermine academic freedom in Thailand. Human Rights Watch called the prosecution “astonishing” and warned it may deter international researchers from working in the country. Chambers has said he feels intimidated but is receiving support from the U.S. embassy and colleagues. [Bangkok Post]

The case marks a rare use of Thailand’s lèse-majesté law—Section 112 of the Criminal Code—against a foreign academic. The law carries a sentence of three to fifteen years per count and is widely criticized for its vague wording and expansive scope. Charges under

the law have surged since student-led protests erupted in 2020 calling for monarchy reform. According to Thai Lawyers for Human Rights, more than 300 cases have been filed since then, including against at least 20 minors.

Rights advocates warn the case could severely damage Thailand's academic reputation. Human Rights Watch condemned the arrest warrant as an "astonishing and outrageous assault on academic freedom," while critics say it may deter international scholars from engaging with Thai institutions. [BBC]

Meanwhile, jailed Thai human rights lawyer and activist Arnon Nampa has published an open letter from prison calling on the global legal community to support efforts for judicial reform in Thailand. Arnon, who is serving over 21 years on lèse-majesté and sedition charges, argued that since 2020, Section 112 of the Criminal Code has been arbitrarily used to criminalize political expression. He criticized the filing of cases in remote provinces to obstruct defense efforts and warned that speaking about the monarchy has effectively become a punishable offense, even within court proceedings. [Thai Enquirer 2]

Thailand: Government approves salary hike for Islamic teachers in Deep South

(lm) Thailand's cabinet has approved a budget of THB 721 million (approximately USD 20.8 million) to raise salaries for Islamic teachers in the southern border provinces as part of a broader peace-building initiative.

The increase will benefit teachers in Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, and Satun, as well as in the Muslim-majority districts of Chana, Thepa, Saba Yoi, and Na Thawi in Songkhla province. Tadika (kindergarten) teachers will see monthly raises of THB 3,000–3,500 (approximately USD 87–101), while those teaching in pondok (boarding) schools will receive THB 2,000–4,000 (approximately USD 58–116).

Islamic teachers at government schools currently earn THB 30,000–35,000 (approximately USD 870–1,015) per month depending on experience and qualifications. Teachers in private schools that offer both the national and Islamic curricula will receive raises of THB 2,000–3,500 (approximately USD 58–101), while those in Islamic private schools outside the formal system will get increases of THB 1,000–3,000 (approximately USD 29–87).

The budget will be implemented in the next fiscal year beginning in October. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Trat residents oppose expressway plan over fears of economic bypass

(lm) Residents and business operators in Trat province have voiced strong opposition to a proposed 5.9-kilometer expressway linking Laem Ngob district to Koh Chang, arguing that the route—which bypasses Trat city—would deprive the local economy of key tourism revenue.

At a public hearing held on April 2 in Muang district, over 400 participants, including local officials, community members, and business representatives, criticized the project's planned starting point near the Ao Thammachat ferry pier. They argued that routing traffic directly to Koh Chang would divert the 2.2 million annual tourists away from Trat city and instead benefit neighboring provinces like Chanthaburi.

Although local residents in Koh Chang had supported the project during an earlier hearing, critics in Trat city —including the Trat Chamber of Commerce, the Association of Domestic Travel (ADT), and the Fisheries Association of Trat—warned that the expressway would undercut local businesses that rely on stopovers from island-bound travelers.

The Expressway Authority of Thailand (EXAT) acknowledged the economic concerns but defended the selected route as the most cost-effective option, estimating the project would take four years and cost THB 10 billion (USD 290 million). Alternative routes favored by locals could nearly double that cost. A final decision is expected by late 2025 following one more round of public consultation. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Tsunami warning ranked first among top 10 fake news

(msz) The Digital Economy and Society (DES) Ministry on April 5 released the list of viral fake news stories among the public in the previous week. Tsunami warnings in Phuket and Samut Prakan provinces following an earthquake under the category of natural disasters were the most circulated fake news stories. They were followed by government policies and official information, cyber crimes, health products, hazardous

substances and illegal objects and economic matters. The list was the result of the DES' Anti-Fake News Centre monitoring altogether 837,077 messages on social media from March 27 to April 3. Of these, 599 messages across 174 topics required verification with related agencies. [The Nation]

Thailand: Bangchak expects 5–7 year return on sustainable aviation fuel investment

Bangchak Corporation Plc, a Thai state-backed energy conglomerate known for its oil refining, retail fuel, and renewable energy ventures, projects a 5–7 year return on its THB 10 billion (USD 290 million) investment in a sustainable aviation fuel (SAF) facility. The new estimate revises the earlier 3–5 year projection following delays in regional mandates for SAF usage.

Despite the adjusted timeline, Bangchak remains confident in SAF's profitability, emphasizing the aviation industry's growing need to cut emissions. The new SAF plant, located near its refinery in Bangkok's Phra Khanong district, is set to begin test operations on April 25 using used cooking oil as the main feedstock.

Global air travel is projected to reach 12 billion passengers by 2030, doubling from 2024 levels. With battery-powered aircraft still commercially unfeasible, Bangchak anticipates a sharp rise in SAF demand. The EU requires a 2 percent SAF blend by 2030, while the US and U.K. mandate 10 percent.

Bangchak plans to begin commercial SAF production at 50 percent of its 1 million liters per day capacity. However, with SAF currently priced at THB 48 (USD 1.39) per liter—more than double the THB 21–22 (USD 0.61–0.64) for conventional jet fuel—the company suggests government subsidies may be needed to support market adoption. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Government unveils new trade strategy amid backlash over US tariffs and industry concerns

(lm/msz) Thailand is bracing for severe economic consequences following the United States' decision to impose a 36 to 37 percent reciprocal tariff on Thai exports under President Donald Trump's "Reciprocal Trade and Tariffs" policy, effective April 9.

The tariff, one of the highest in Southeast Asia, targets countries with significant trade surpluses against the US and threatens key Thai export sectors including electronics, processed food, and agriculture—particularly rice. The move threatens Thailand's export-dependent economy, with early forecasts suggesting GDP growth in 2025 could fall to just 1 percent.

The US was Thailand's largest export market in 2024, accounting for 18.3 percent of total shipments (USD 54.96 billion), much of it from US-owned firms operating in Thailand. The 37 percent tariff, second only to Cambodia's 49 percent, follows earlier US duties of 25 percent on steel, aluminum, automobiles, and components. [Reuters]

Early projections from the University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce suggest the economic toll could be substantial, with estimated losses of up to THB 359 billion (USD 10.4 billion). Factoring in earthquake-related disruptions, total losses could rise to THB 375 billion (USD 10.9 billion), prompting a downward revision of Thailand's 2025 GDP growth forecast to just 1 percent. Krungsri Securities and CGS International forecast GDP declines of 0.6 to 1.2 percentage points and anticipate potential interest rate cuts later in the year to ease pressure on exporters. [Bangkok Post 1] [Bangkok Post 2]

The rice sector is particularly vulnerable. The US is the main market for Thai hom mali rice, and the new tariffs could push prices up by 40 percent, severely affecting competitiveness against cheaper Vietnamese rice. Losses are projected to exceed USD 8 billion (THB 274 billion). Lawmakers and experts have called for urgent negotiations with the US, diversification of export markets, and domestic reforms such as cost reduction and promotion of organic rice. [Bangkok Post 3]

Other sectors at risk include semiconductors, which may face additional 25 percent duties. Food exporters, particularly those dealing in canned tuna, fruits, and vegetables, are also preparing for a drop in US market share. The auto industry is under pressure as well, with the Federation of Thai Industries (FTI) holding emergency consultations. [Thai PBS] [Bangkok Post 4]

In response, Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra has pledged to defend national interests and reduce the trade surplus with the US—which stood at USD 45.6 billion in 2024—to USD 20 billion. The government's strategy includes increasing Thai investments in the US, importing American energy and agricultural products, and stepping up food processing for export. Finance Minister Pichai Chunhavajira will lead a delegation to Washington this week for

negotiations with US officials and businesses. [Bangkok Post 5]

The government has also proposed offering interest-free loans and allocated a THB 3 billion (USD 87 million) budget to help affected businesses seek alternative markets. Officials emphasize a strategic, step-by-step negotiation process, and are working to strengthen ties with US states that have large agricultural sectors. [Bangkok Post 6]

However, the government has faced strong domestic criticism for a slow and uncoordinated response. Opposition leaders and economists have pointed to more proactive approaches by regional neighbors—Vietnam has launched direct negotiations with the US, Cambodia has cut tariffs on US imports, and South Korea has implemented relief packages. Confusion over who is leading Thailand's negotiations has added to the backlash, with multiple officials claiming responsibility. [Bangkok Post 7]

On top of that, the government is likely to face significant domestic backlash and limited policy space in responding to the new US tariffs, as already evidenced by mounting opposition from key industry groups. A major flashpoint is the proposal to import US pork to reduce the trade surplus, which the Swine Raisers Association of Thailand has strongly condemned. While they support the import of US animal feed, they argue pork imports would devastate the domestic supply chain and undermine food security—citing the Philippines as a cautionary example. Meanwhile, the Thai National Shippers' Council has urged the government to accelerate free trade talks, upgrade infrastructure, and provide targeted relief, while also warning against the risk of transshipped Chinese goods evading US tariffs through Thailand. [Bangkok Post 8] [Bangkok Post 1]

Thailand: Parliament backs 'retirement lottery' to promote savings

(lm) Thailand's parliament has unanimously approved in principle an amendment to the National Savings Fund (NSF) Act, clearing the way for a government-backed "retirement lottery" aimed at boosting financial security for the elderly. The proposal, raised during a session led by Deputy House Speaker Pichet Chuamuangpan, seeks to encourage savings by leveraging the country's widespread interest in lottery gambling.

Under the scheme, NSF members will be able to purchase digital lottery tickets for THB 50 (USD 1.45) through a mobile app. Weekly draws, coordinated with the Government Lottery Office, will award cash prizes to winners via automatic bank transfers, while non-winners will retain their ticket value as savings. Upon turning 60, participants will receive both their principal and accumulated returns.

Deputy Finance Minister Paopoom Rojanasakul said the initiative responds to Thailand's rapidly aging population and the lack of adequate savings among many retirees. The government will allocate THB 700 million (USD 20.3 million) annually for prize funds, with projections estimating THB 13 billion (USD 377 million) in annual savings generated over the next decade.

Lawmakers proposed improvements, such as allowing early access to funds for medical expenses, increasing prize amounts, and ensuring a guaranteed minimum return. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: State-run N3 lottery under threat as sales decline

(lm) Thailand's three-digit N3 lottery, launched in November 2024 to compete with illegal underground lotteries, is facing possible discontinuation as sales continue to decline, according to Deputy Finance Minister Julapun Amornvivat. The N3 lottery was intended to attract underground lottery players into the legal system, but has instead diverted buyers from the Government Lottery Office's (GLO) main six-digit lottery product without significantly denting the underground market.

N3 ticket sales dropped to 980,337 for the April 1 draw, down from over one million in earlier rounds. The tickets are priced at THB 20 (USD 0.58) and sold via the Pao Tang mobile app at 1,805 designated locations nationwide. However, underground alternatives remain more affordable and flexible, with consumers often favoring repeating number combinations—something the N3 allows but the traditional lottery does not.

The GLO is now considering developing a new product to better attract underground lottery players, as Thailand's underground lottery market is estimated to be worth between THB 100 billion and THB 300 billion (USD 2.9 billion to USD 8.7 billion) annually. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Chinese firm investigated for mislabeling substandard tires as Thai exports

(bk) Thailand's Industry Ministry is investigating a Chinese-owned tire manufacturer on allegations of smuggling defective tires from China, altering their branding, and exporting them as newly manufactured products labeled "Made in Thailand." The ministry fears the alleged scheme could damage Thailand's reputation as a global producer of high-quality rubber goods.

According to ministry sources, the unnamed company had been granted investment privileges to produce tires in Thailand using imported Chinese raw materials but allegedly employed only Chinese workers. Tip-offs suggested the firm smuggled in substandard tires that failed safety tests, stripped them of original branding, and rebranded them for resale.

Inspectors dispatched to the company's factory reportedly found modified tires stored alongside legitimately manufactured products marked "for export only." A formal response from the company is still pending. The Industry Ministry is preparing a report to be submitted to Industry Minister Akanat Promphan for further action. [The Nation]

Thailand: Government affirms safety of high-speed rail amid post-quake scrutiny

(lm) Thailand's Transport Ministry and the State Railway of Thailand (SRT) have reaffirmed their commitment to international safety and construction standards for the Thai-Chinese high-speed rail project following the March 28 earthquake that led to the collapse of the under-construction State Audit Office (SAO) building in Bangkok.

In response to public concerns, SRT has conducted urgent inspections of the first phase of the project, particularly Contract 3-1 covering the Kaeng Koi–Klang Dong and Phang Asoke–Bandai Ma sections. These are being constructed by Italian-Thai Development and China Railway No.10 Engineering Group Co—the same joint venture responsible for the collapsed SAO building. Steel samples from the Muak Lek and Thap Kwang depots were tested for yield and tensile strength, elongation, bending capacity, and chemical composition. All samples met the required safety standards, and no cracks or damage were found on-site. SRT emphasized that quality control is enforced at

every stage, from factory production to installation. [Bangkok Post 1]

Meanwhile, Transport Minister Suriya Jungrungreangkit confirmed that the second phase of the project—from Nakhon Ratchasima to Nong Khai—will also meet international benchmarks. Following the 32nd Thai-Chinese joint committee meeting, he announced that construction of the 356-kilometer stretch is expected to begin later this year, once the terms of reference are finalized. Unlike the first phase, the second-phase contract will rely entirely on Thai contractors in compliance with the 2017 Government Procurement Act, with no international bidding.

Suriya stressed that Thai engineers will supervise all aspects of design, safety inspection, and construction. In light of the recent earthquake, new safety protocols focusing on seismic and vibration resistance are being introduced. SRT Governor Veeris Ammarapala added that all materials for the second phase will be sourced domestically and will undergo quality testing throughout the construction process.

The high-speed rail line is a major part of Thailand's push to improve regional connectivity with Laos and China. The first phase, linking Bangkok to Nakhon Ratchasima over 252.3 kilometers, is now expected to be completed by 2029. [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: Narathiwat airport contractor faces dismissal over 631-day delay

(lm) Deputy Transport Minister Manaporn Charoensri is considering terminating the contract of CIS Joint Venture following a 631-day delay in the construction of the passenger terminal at Narathiwat Airport in southern Thailand. The project, valued at THB 639.89 million (USD 18.56 million), began in March 2022 and was originally scheduled for completion in January 2025. Although the contract was extended due to severe flooding in late 2024, progress has remained minimal.

As of March 2025, the terminal was only 39 percent complete, with construction advancing by just 0.51 percent that month—far below the minimum 5 percent monthly target set by the Department of Airports (DoA). The ministry has warned the contractor that failure to meet targets could lead to contract termination and blacklisting from future government projects.

CIS Joint Venture comprises ISO Engineering Co Ltd and China Railway No 10 Engineering Group. The latter is also involved in another project—the new State Audit Office building—which collapsed following an earthquake in Myanmar on March 28. The Transport Ministry has ordered a full inspection of materials and equipment used in the Narathiwat project, with a detailed report due within three days. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Industry federation calls for stricter controls on substandard steel imports

(lm) The Federation of Thai Industries (FTI) has urged the government to impose tougher checks on imported steel following concerns that low-quality materials may have contributed to the collapse of the State Audit Office's 30-story building. The FTI recommends mandatory inspections for imported steel—especially prefabricated structures, of which 700,000 tons were imported in 2024—as well as greater traceability, enforcement of industrial certifications, and public awareness campaigns.

The group also warned that around 30,000 tons of substandard steel, including misclassified aluminium-zinc coated products, have entered Thailand—largely through Laem Chabang Port—to avoid standards and anti-dumping duties. Legal action has been urged in cases of customs violations. The FTI further raised alarm over steel factories relocated from China since 2017, which it says have intensified quality concerns, environmental issues, and market distortion.

To promote fair competition, the FTI proposes that at least 50 percent of public sector projects use domestic steel and that this target be extended to large public-private partnership initiatives. Broader support for "green steel" and equal regulatory enforcement on labor, taxation, and environmental standards for all manufacturers were also highlighted as necessary steps to protect Thailand's steel industry. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Construction sector braces for stricter oversight, post-quake repair surge

(lm) Thailand's construction sector is expected to face both challenges and opportunities in the aftermath of the March 28 earthquake, according to the SCB Economic Intelligence Center. While real estate

development—especially condominiums—may slow down, contractors and material suppliers are likely to benefit from increased demand for repair and restoration work.

Although most construction sites were not severely affected, project owners are expected to impose stricter screening during bidding, with greater emphasis on seismic resilience, contractor qualifications, and material quality. This could raise costs but also improve industry standards over the long term.

The SCB EIC estimates the earthquake's initial economic impact at around THB 30 billion (USD 870 million), mainly affecting tourism, real estate, and construction. It emphasized the need for government action to restore confidence, including better emergency alert systems and systematic building safety inspections.[Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Government pledges stronger support to boost domestic EV demand and production

(lm) Thailand is stepping up efforts to stimulate demand for electric vehicles (EVs) while advancing its goal of becoming a regional EV production hub. Deputy Finance Minister Paopoom Rojanasakul said the country must align domestic consumption with local manufacturing to avoid becoming merely a consumer of imported EVs.

The government's EV3.0 and EV3.5 incentive schemes have driven early progress by offering excise tax cuts, import duty reductions, and subsidies. EV3.0 provided subsidies up to THB 150,000 (USD 4,500) per car and THB 18,000 (USD 540) per motorcycle, while EV3.5 scaled these back slightly. A total of 24 manufacturers joined EV3.0, and eight have joined EV3.5.

The government is also supporting hybrid electric vehicles (HEVs) and plug-in hybrid electric vehicles (PHEVs) to aid the transition. New excise tax rates—ranging from 5 to 10 percent based on CO_2 emissions, battery range, and fuel tank size—are expected to be submitted to the cabinet in April.

Officials aim to strike a balance between maintaining Thailand's internal combustion engine (ICE) vehicle industry and accelerating EV development, emphasizing both market demand and sustainable production. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Cabinet approves establishment of PM-chaired National AI Committee to boost competitiveness

(msz) The cabinet has reportedly approved the establishment of the National AI Committee headed by Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra to expedite the nationwide adoption of AI and enhance the kingdom's position in the global market. The Thai government also aims to develop and utilize AI in a tangible way by 2025 and position Thailand as ASEAN's AI hub. The committee's first meeting is set to be held in early April.

Membership includes representatives from government and private agencies, such as the Digital Economy and Society Ministry, the Higher Education Ministry, the Digital Economy Promotion Agency, and the National Innovation Agency. Committee vice-chairman and Digital Economy and Society Minister Prasert Jantararuangtong stressed the importance of a clear development strategy along with deep tech, a Thai large language model, and the integration of AI and data across sectors to boost efficiency and competitiveness.

The government commitments will include the allocation of science, research and innovation funds to back AI adoption with the emphasis on linking global foundation models with domestic innovations. The ministry will also support startups and SMEs in accessing AI while launching upskilling and reskilling initiatives to meet the growing demand for IT professionals in addition to upgrading digital infrastructure to attract investment from major tech firms. [The Nation]

Thailand: Border scam crackdown ramps up with new victim screening system

(lm) Thai police have intensified efforts to distinguish genuine human trafficking victims from willing scam participants at key border crossings with Cambodia and Myanmar, in a push to improve the country's standing in the US Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report.

Pol Maj Gen Songklod Krirkkitaya, newly appointed chief of the Central Investigation Bureau's Anti-Trafficking in Persons Division (ATPD), said a new 74-question screening process has replaced the previous 8-question format to better identify true victims. The

enhanced screening includes checks on travel history, accommodation, and activities, with mobile phone data used to verify claims.

Authorities recently found that 119 supposed victims were actually complicit in cross-border scam operations. Many had left Thailand voluntarily to work for criminal syndicates.

Mae Sot (on the Myanmar border) and Sa Kaeo (on the Cambodian border) remain hotspots for trafficking activity. While checkpoints like Huai Hin Fon in Mae Sot allow formal screening, informal crossings in Sa Kaeo are harder to control.

The crackdown is supported by real-time monitoring and big data systems, along with international cooperation on repatriation and intelligence sharing. Thai authorities aim to standardize procedures and strengthen victim protection in line with global best practices. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Kok River contamination linked to Myanmar gold mining sparks public health warning

(bk) Authorities in northern Thailand have issued urgent health warnings after hazardous levels of arsenic, lead, and cadmium were detected in the Kok River, which flows from Myanmar into Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai provinces. Residents have been advised not to use the river water for consumption or bathing due to severe health risks, including cancer, skin rashes, and gastrointestinal issues.

Initial tests conducted on March 19 in Mae Ai district of Chiang Mai found arsenic levels at twice the permissible limit, along with excessive turbidity and significant concentrations of lead and cadmium. Subsequent reports from Chiang Rai indicated similar conditions, with cloudy water and cases of skin irritation already reported.

Officials from the Chiang Mai Environmental and Pollution Control Office have attributed the contamination to upstream gold mining operations in Myanmar's Shan State, allegedly operated by Chinese companies. These operations reportedly use the Kok River in the extraction process and discharge untreated wastewater directly back into the waterway.

Local health authorities warned that long-term exposure to these toxins poses a particular threat to vulnerable groups, including children and pregnant

women. In response, the provincial health offices are coordinating with water utilities to ensure safe drinking water and have pledged to monitor the situation while offering medical support to those affected. [Bangkok Post] [Thai PBS World]

Thailand: Cell Broadcast system tested and ready for emergency alerts

(bk) Thailand's Cell Broadcast (CB) system is now fully prepared to send emergency notifications to both Thai citizens and foreign tourists in the event of natural disasters. The system was tested on Friday by True Corporation, the Department of Disaster Prevention and Mitigation (DDPM), the National Broadcasting and Telecommunication Commission (NBTC), and the Digital Economy and Society (DES) Ministry.

DDPM director-general expressed confidence in the CB system, stating that the test yielded positive results, with messages being quickly distributed to the specified areas. He emphasized the importance of the system in strengthening Thailand's disaster warning system, and mentioned that the Cell Broadcast Entity (CBE) is currently being developed to enable public agencies to issue timely warnings to the public. [The Nation]

Thailand: Thailand Post confirms data breach affecting 19 million customers

(bk) Thailand Post has confirmed a data breach involving 19 million customer records, which are being sold online. The exposed data includes names, phone numbers, and email addresses, but does not contain financial information. The company has revoked access to the compromised data and is working with the National Cybersecurity Agency and the Personal Data Protection Commission to address the breach, implement preventive measures, and pursue legal action. [Thai Enquirer]

Thailand: Civil society groups and safety panel warn alcohol policy may heighten Songkran risks

(lm) As Thailand prepares for the annual Songkran holiday, civil society groups and government bodies are voicing growing concern that recently eased

alcohol regulations could endanger public safety. At a seminar titled “Expanding Drinking Zones vs Increased Risks During Songkran”, networks including the Alcohol Prevention Network and the Women and Men Progressive Movement Foundation warned that the government’s relaxed stance on alcohol control—part of its broader tourism promotion strategy—could increase violent crime, road accidents, and sexual harassment during the holiday.

Survey data presented at the event, collected from 20 provinces, indicated that over 80 percent of respondents supported banning alcohol during Songkran to reduce violence and ensure public safety. Advocates pointed to the 2024 alcohol-free celebration on Bangkok’s Silom Road as a successful model that balanced tourism appeal with public order, featuring special emergency lanes and accountability for event organizers.

Critics have also targeted policies permitting alcohol sales in railway stations and during religious holidays, even though a new alcohol control bill—approved by parliament on March 19—has not yet taken effect. The Senate has accepted the bill in principle and three parliamentary committees are now reviewing it. If passed, the law would ease restrictions on alcohol advertising and expand venues for alcohol sales. [Bangkok Post 1]

In parallel, Thailand’s road safety committee has proposed a set of preventative measures for Songkran, aligning with the government’s push to promote the holiday as a “soft power” event. The plan includes enforcing zero-alcohol tolerance for drivers, suspending all road construction—including work on the heavily trafficked Rama II Road—and ensuring safety at railway crossings. Inspections of gas-powered vehicles and full staffing of checkpoints to prevent fatigue were also proposed. These recommendations have been submitted to Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra and Interior Minister Anutin Charnvirakul for urgent consideration. [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: No drought expected this year, but storm alerts issued for northern regions

(lm) Thailand is not expected to face drought this year, despite low reservoir levels in parts of the country, according to the Office of the National Water Resources (ONWR). The dry season is projected to end in April, with forecasts indicating summer storms and

increased rainfall, particularly across the North, the East, and parts of the Northeast.

ONWR Secretary-General Surasri Kidtimonton said no new areas were at risk of drought, but he urged residents to remain alert to storm warnings, especially in northern provinces. The South is also expected to see more rain, with one or two storms predicted to make landfall nationwide.

Reservoir levels remain concerning in some areas. For example, the Lam Takhong Reservoir in Nakhon Ratchasima currently holds only 18 percent of its total capacity, with just 12 percent available for use. Other key reservoirs, such as Lam Phra Phloeng, Mun Bon, and Lam Chae, are similarly below half capacity.

Despite low water volumes in 23 medium-sized reservoirs—currently at 43.54 percent overall—officials say there is no threat of widespread drought. However, the public and farmers have been encouraged to monitor water usage until rains arrive.

The ONWR is preparing to activate its flood warning system and water crisis communication plans to mitigate flood and landslide risks. A new Ping River Basin Water Management Plan is also being finalized for publication in the Royal Gazette. [Bangkok Post]

Timor-Leste: Prime minister formally delegates constitutional review representation to Agio Pereira

(lm) Prime Minister Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão has issued an order officially delegating authority to Minister for the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, Agio Pereira, to represent the government in all matters related to constitutional review proceedings. The delegation, formalized under Order No. 009/PM/III/2025 on April 3, applies whenever the 9th Constitutional Government is cited in such cases.

This decision consolidates previous temporary delegations and is based on powers outlined in the government's organizational structure, as defined in Decree-Law No. 46/2023 and amended by Decree-Law No. 36/2024. Under this structure, the minister is responsible for managing state litigation services and coordinating legal representation in court and alternative dispute mechanisms.

Under Article 150 of Timor-Leste's Constitution, key officials—including the President of the Republic, the Prime Minister, and one-fifth of parliament members—

are entitled to request constitutional reviews. The decision aims to strengthen the government's capacity to respond effectively in such proceedings while upholding constitutional integrity and the rule of law. [Government of Timor-Leste]

Vietnam: Truong My Lan case fuels push to abolish death penalty for economic crimes

(cmc/lm) Vietnam's Ministry of Public Security has proposed abolishing the death penalty for several economic and political crimes—including embezzlement and bribery—amid growing scrutiny of harsh sentencing and renewed debate following the high-profile conviction of property tycoon Truong My Lan.

A draft amendment to the Penal Code, expected to be presented to the National Assembly in October 2025, recommends replacing capital punishment with life imprisonment for eight offenses: embezzlement, receiving bribes, espionage, inciting war, sabotage, actions against the government, illegal transportation of narcotics, and trading counterfeit medicines. The ministry argued that the country's legal system must evolve to reflect modern standards and pointed to inconsistencies in the application of capital punishment. It emphasizes that the penalty death should be reserved only for crimes of extreme severity involving national security or serious threats to human life. [VNExpress 1]

The proposed reform comes in the wake of Truong My Lan's sentencing in April 2024 to death for embezzling VND 677 trillion (USD 27 billion) from Saigon Commercial Joint Stock Bank (SCB), the largest corruption case in Vietnam's history. Lan, chairwoman and founder of Van Thinh Phat Group, was accused of creating a network of shell companies and issuing fake bonds to move billions overseas and launder VND 445.75 trillion (USD 17.2 billion).

In a separate phase of the case, prosecutors recently proposed reducing Lan's life sentence on a charge of "fraudulent appropriation of assets" after she repaid around VND 8 trillion (USD 309 million)—approximately a quarter of the VND 30.08 trillion (USD 1.16 billion) defrauded from more than 35,800 investors. Prosecutors also noted that an additional VND 15 trillion (USD 579 million) is being recovered from other entities involved. However, they opposed reducing Lan's 12-year sentence for money laundering

and her eight-year sentence for illegal cross-border transfers of USD 4.5 billion.

Lan's husband, Hong Kong businessman Eric Chu, was sentenced to two years for aiding in money laundering. Although he did not appeal the ruling, prosecutors have recommended leniency due to his contributions of assets for restitution. [VietnamPlus] [VNExpress 2]

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Justice reported that civil judgment enforcement agencies recovered nearly VND 9.8 trillion (USD 380 million) from corruption and economic crime cases in just six months. Authorities concluded more than 255,000 cases valued at VND 58 trillion (USD 2.2 billion), a 21 percent increase from the previous year.

The Van Thinh Phat case continues to dominate enforcement efforts, with more than 34,000 bondholders having submitted information for restitution. To manage the scale of the case, enforcement bodies have collaborated with Tan Viet Securities and proposed forming a special task force under the Prime Minister's directive. Other major cases, including the Chi Lang Stadium scandal linked to Pham Cong Danh, are also being addressed under expanded enforcement mechanisms. [asianews.network]

Vietnam: Prime Minister pushes new plan to boost private sector

(hn/lm) Vietnamese leaders are stepping up efforts to grow the private sector's role in the economy, with Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh ordering the National Steering Committee for Private Economic Development to complete a draft strategy for Politburo approval. At the committee's second meeting on April 2, Chinh emphasized that private sector development is essential for national progress and called for practical policies that align with Vietnam's market economy and international obligations. [Viet Nam News]

The initiative follows an announcement by Party General Secretary To Lam, who recently set an ambitious target of expanding the private sector's share of GDP to 70 percent by 2030. This figure would bring Vietnam in line with regional peers such as Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia, whose private sectors account for 80 to 90 percent of GDP.

Vietnam has struggled to meet earlier targets, such as a 2017 goal of 55 percent by 2025. By the end of 2023, the private sector's share of GDP had only reached

50.42 percent—barely above its 2016 level. Observers argue that this stagnation reflects deep-rooted structural challenges, including preferential treatment for state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in credit access, tax policy, and foreign investment incentives.

Vietnam's legacy of supporting SOEs through cheap credit and government-backed guarantees has crowded out private firms, which face difficulties accessing finance. The country's underdeveloped capital markets further compound the problem, with limited foreign investment due to its classification as a "frontier market" and reputational damage to the bond market following the 2022 real estate crisis.

Analysts suggest that for the private sector to grow meaningfully, Vietnam may need to shrink the state sector through deeper equitization and privatization—an approach that remains politically sensitive. Still, recent shifts in political rhetoric and decision-making efficiency, combined with ongoing anti-corruption efforts, signal new momentum for reform. [the-shiv]

Vietnam: Politburo proposes disciplinary action against former Deputy Prime Minister Truong Hoa Binh

(hn) The Politburo has asked the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam to consider disciplining Truong Hoa Binh, former Politburo member and former Standing Deputy Prime Minister, for serious violations of party and state regulations during his tenure.

According to the April 4 statement, the Politburo determined that Binh, while serving as a Politburo member, Deputy Secretary of the Party Committee of the Government, and Standing Deputy Prime Minister, breached the Party's rules and state laws in carrying out his responsibilities, particularly in anti-corruption efforts. He also violated the code of conduct for party members and leadership standards, causing severe consequences, negative public opinion, and damaging the Party and State's reputation.

The Politburo formally recommended that the Party Central Committee consider disciplinary measures against him.

In a separate case, the Politburo issued a warning to Nguyen Van Hieu, a member of the 13th Party Central Committee and former Party Secretary of Can Tho City. It concluded that Hieu had violated Party rules and state laws in governance, anti-corruption, and the

management of public resources, causing serious consequences and reputational harm. He was removed from his positions and the Politburo has proposed that the Central Committee relieve him of his membership in the 13th Party Central Committee.

The Politburo also instructed relevant state bodies to impose administrative penalties in tandem with Party disciplinary measures. [Vietnamnet, in Vietnamese]

Vietnam: Government holds growth target despite signs of slowdown and U.S. tariffs

(lm) Vietnam's economy grew 6.93 percent in the first quarter of 2025, slowing from 7.55 percent in the final quarter of 2024, as newly imposed U.S. tariffs cast a shadow over the country's heavily export-dependent growth model. Nonetheless, the government has opted to maintain its ambitious full-year GDP growth target of 6.0 to 6.5 percent—an affirmation that, while projecting confidence, may also underscore the vulnerability of Vietnam's current economic structure. [Reuters]

The slowdown comes just ahead of a sweeping 46 percent tariff imposed by the United States on a broad range of Vietnamese exports, including garments, electronics, furniture, and footwear. These sectors have been pivotal in sustaining high growth over the past decade. In the first quarter alone, Vietnam recorded a trade surplus of USD 27.3 billion with the U.S., a 22.1 percent year-on-year increase, further highlighting the country's dependence on a single market.

While the government insists that strong domestic demand, ongoing foreign direct investment, and policy measures will offset the impact, the math behind the target is stark: Vietnam would need quarterly growth between 8.2 and 8.4 percent for the remainder of the year to meet its goal. Economists at BMI warn that a 10 percent decline in U.S.-bound exports could reduce GDP growth by 0.84 percentage points, with a sharper contraction cutting as much as 3 points. Investment consultants note that the uncertainty has already led firms to delay expansion plans. [Reuters]

The first quarter's industrial production rose 7.8 percent, compared to 11.5 percent in Q4 2024, while exports rose 10.6 percent year-on-year. A February survey of U.S. manufacturers operating in Vietnam pointed to concerns about layoffs and disruptions in

supply chains, further hinting at systemic fragility beneath the surface numbers.

In an effort to cushion the fallout, the government has issued Decree 82 to defer more than VND 102 trillion (USD 3.9 billion) in tax and land rent payments for 2025. The measure provides a temporary six-month extension for value-added tax and land rent, and five-month deferrals for corporate and personal income taxes. While the Ministry of Finance insists the deferrals will not reduce total budget revenues—since all payments must be made within the year—the scale of relief suggests underlying concern about the economy's ability to absorb further external shocks. [Viet Nam News]

Despite these warning signs, Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh reiterated the government's full-year growth target and emphasized the role of policy tools, trade diversification, and investment incentives in maintaining stability. The Ministry of Planning and Investment also pointed to efforts to strengthen regional trade with ASEAN and the EU, while accelerating support for high-tech and value-added industries.

Inflation remained moderate at 3.13 percent year-on-year in March, and the government has activated a rapid-response task force to monitor evolving trade conditions. [TradingView] [Vietnam.vn] [South China Morning Post]

Vietnam: Vietnam Expo 2025 showcases digital transformation and export diversification

(cmc) Vietnam Expo 2025 wrapped up on April 5 in Hanoi, showcasing the country's push to enhance trade competitiveness through digital innovation and diversified global partnerships. The four-day event, themed "Step together in a digitised world," gathered over 400 businesses from 18 countries and territories, with more than 500 booths spanning key sectors such as electronics, machinery, e-commerce, agriculture, and supporting industries.

Organized by the Ministry of Industry and Trade and VINEXAD JSC, the 34th edition of the annual fair introduced an online B2B matching platform to support year-round trade connectivity alongside traditional networking. A central booth promoted Vietnam's industrial and investment agenda, while delegations from 17 provinces and international pavilions from countries including China, Cuba, Korea,

and Belarus showcased national products. [VietnamPlus] [Vietnam.vn]

Vietnam: Da Nang advances semiconductor, AI ambitions with major investments

(cmc) Da Nang, a central coastal city and one of Vietnam's key innovation hubs, is accelerating its push to become a national center for semiconductor and artificial intelligence (AI) development. The city recently launched major initiatives, including a new research and development (R&D) center by tech giant FPT Corporation and the construction of a large-scale data center.

FPT's R&D center will focus on chip design, AI solutions, and data analytics, supporting Vietnam's goal of building a self-sufficient semiconductor supply chain. Thousands of engineers are expected to be trained through the center, strengthening local expertise and reducing reliance on foreign technology.

At the same time, the Da Nang International Data Center began construction with an initial investment of VND 800 billion (USD 32 million), with a second phase of VND 1.2 trillion (USD 48 million) planned. Located in the city's Hi-Tech Park, the facility will support cloud computing and cybersecurity and is expected to be fully operational by 2027.

Da Nang's broader strategy includes partnerships with firms like Intel, Synopsys, and Gasa Holdings through the Da Nang Semiconductor & AI Research and Training Center (DSAC). Over 400 students have already enrolled in chip and AI training programs. Armenia's Grovf Inc. and Malaysia's SkyeChip have also begun chip development projects in the city.

Currently, 14 semiconductor firms operate in Da Nang, including US and Korean companies, alongside Vietnamese players such as FPT Semiconductor and Viettel Hi-Tech. LG and Samsung have also launched AI and innovation training programs in the city. [Nikkei Asia] [VietnamPlus]

International Relations, Geopolitics and Security in Asia

China further extends anti-dumping probe into EU brandy

(dh) The Chinese Ministry of Commerce announced, on April 2, that it will further extend its anti-dumping investigation into EU brandy by three months. The investigation, which began in January 2024, was originally scheduled to last one year but was extended in December until April 5 (see AiR No. 53, December/2024, 5).

The ministry justified the further extension citing the complexity of the investigation into anti-dumping practices. The investigation has been criticized by the EU, with French President Emmanuel Macron being a vocal critic, as the probe was initiated during a time of high trade tensions between the EU and China. China's commerce ministry notes that dumping practices by EU brandy pose a threat to China's domestic industry (See AiR No. 53, December/2024, 5).

The investigation is now scheduled to conclude by July 5. This extension follows French Foreign Minister Jean-Noel Barrot's visit to China last month (see AiR No. 12, March/2025, 4).

Beijing imposed temporary tariffs on EU brandy imports last October that has resulted in a significant decrease – 72 percent – in brandy imports to China. This extension to the investigation was welcomed by Bureau National Interprofessionnel du Cognac, a French cognac industry group, that sees this as an opportunity to negotiate with China. [Reuters]

NATO Chief calls for deeper practical cooperation with Japan

(adi) NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte called for enhanced practical cooperation between Japan and

the North Atlantic Treaty Organization ahead of his planned visit to Tokyo on April 8–9. In an interview with The Japan Times, Rutte emphasized the need to go beyond joint statements and develop concrete partnerships in defense and security.

“We need to have more flesh on the bones,” Rutte said, outlining plans to bolster information-sharing, industrial collaboration, and innovation through closer engagement with Indo-Pacific partners, including Japan, Australia, South Korea, and New Zealand—the so-called Indo-Pacific Four (IP4).

The upcoming visit will mark Rutte’s first trip to the Indo-Pacific since assuming the NATO post in October 2024. He noted that lessons drawn from the war in Ukraine could inform future coordination between NATO and its Indo-Pacific partners, particularly in strengthening resilience against shared threats and improving interoperability.

The NATO chief’s remarks reflect the alliance’s growing focus on the Indo-Pacific amid rising geopolitical tensions, particularly surrounding China’s assertiveness and North Korea’s military provocations. Japan, which established its official mission to NATO in Brussels earlier this year, has expanded its cooperation with the alliance through joint exercises and regular high-level dialogue.

Rutte said NATO seeks to institutionalize mechanisms that facilitate not only political coordination but also operational collaboration with regional partners. The move aligns with Japan’s efforts to deepen security ties beyond its traditional alliances. [The Japan Times]

Japan, South Korea, U.S. reaffirm stance against North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs

(dql/fn) During an April 3 meeting on the sidelines of last week’s NATO foreign ministers’ meeting in Brussels, Japanese top diplomat Takeshi Iwaya and his U.S. and South Korean counterparts, Marco Rubio and Cho Tae Yul shared serious concerns over North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs and its increasing military ties with Russia. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan]

The ministers reaffirmed their commitment to closely coordinate on North Korea-related challenges, including its alleged use of cybercrime to fund military development.

The ministers also discussed regional security, voicing opposition to "unilateral attempts to change the status quo by force"—a reference to China's maritime assertiveness. They emphasized upholding shared principles such as the rule of law and agreed to strengthen deterrence and response capabilities through concrete collaboration to promote regional and global peace and stability.

This was their second in-person meeting since U.S. President Donald Trump's return to office, underscoring continued trilateral cooperation despite his "America First" policy. Their previous meeting took place in February in Germany when the Munich Security Conference was held. [Kyodo News] [Yonhap News Agency]

Mongolia, EU hold seventh round of human rights dialogue

(fs) Mongolia and the European Union (EU) held their seventh round of human rights dialogue in Ulaanbaatar on April 2.

The meeting was chaired by Acting Director of the Department of Treaties and Law at Mongolia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs J. Soyolmaa and Deputy Head of the Mongolia Division at the EU's External Action Service Nicoletta Pusterla. Representatives from various Mongolian ministries and institutions also participated.

Both sides reviewed recent developments and exchanged information on policies and priorities related to human rights. They reaffirmed their commitment to fully implementing the EU-Mongolia Partnership and Cooperation Agreement.

Discussions covered cooperation within the United Nations framework, press freedom, gender equality, child rights, climate change, and air pollution. The implementation of international conventions under the EU's Generalized System of Preferences (GSP+), which provides tariff-free access to the EU market for developing countries, was also addressed. [Gov.mn]

The EU expressed concern over the broad and imprecise use of the Law on State Secret and urged Mongolia to uphold due process and provide clarity on cases flagged by the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention. It also welcomed plans to reform the Law on Media Freedom but stressed the need to ensure full protection of media independence and plurality.

In the area of child rights, the EU raised alarm over the government's recent decision to delegate regulation of child jockeys in horse races to local authorities, urging stronger protections for children in hazardous labor. It also called for decisive action against violence targeting children, including child rape.

Finally, the EU stressed the human rights implications of climate change and urged inclusive dialogue with civil society to address pollution and environmental degradation. [European Union External Action]

Mongolia secures duty-free access for 367 goods to Eurasian Economic Union, eyes expanded exports

(fs) Mongolia will export 367 types of goods duty-free to member states of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) potentially saving exporters USD 16.6 million annually in customs duties, thanks to the free trade agreement that is expected to enter into force in the near future (see AiR No. 52, December/2024, 4).

The agreement covers 29 types of meat, 60 leather products, 204 wool and cashmere items, and 73 other agricultural goods.

According to Mongolian First Deputy Prime Minister Gantumur Luvsannyam, the government aims to expand meat exports, particularly sheep and goat meat, and establish cashmere and knitwear brands targeting EAEU markets. Each sector could generate up to USD 500 million.

A study by the National University of Mongolia warned, however, that the trade deal could widen the trade deficit. In 2023, Mongolia exported USD 110.1 million to the EAEU but imported USD 2.9 billion. Imports, mainly in the industrial sector, could rise by 4.7 percent.

Experts also stressed the need for industrial competitiveness and meeting rules of origin for Mongolia to fully benefit from the agreement's tariff preferences. [Qazinform]

Mongolia to reform pension system with World Bank support

(fs) The Mongolian Parliament has endorsed a long-term pension reform policy aimed at transitioning

from a distribution-based scheme to a partially funded, multi-tier pension system. This initiative is part of the country's long- and medium-term policy strategies to address growing demographic pressures.

In support of this effort, the Mongolian Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Protection is partnering with the World Bank. In November World Bank Senior Economist Oleksiy Sluchinsky visited Mongolia to present preliminary findings on pension reform policy options and actuarial projections.

Joint studies conducted by ministry specialists and World Bank experts highlight demographic challenges, including an aging population and a rising dependency ratio. Projections indicate that the ratio of pensioners to contributors will increase from 5 per 10 contributors in 2024 to 7 by 2030. [Mongolian Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Protection]

Nuclear Energy Agency Director General visits Mongolia to discuss nuclear energy development

(fs) Director General of the Nuclear Energy Agency (NEA) William D. Magwood IV conducted an official visit to Mongolia on February 20-21 to engage with senior government officials and participate in high-level discussions on the country's nuclear energy prospects.

Magwood met with Mongolian Energy Minister Battogtokh Choijilsuren to explore the potential deployment of small modular reactors (SMRs) in Mongolia. Talks addressed key sectoral challenges, including financing constraints, supply chain disruptions, and the need for workforce development.

Further meetings were held with senior representatives from the Mongolian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Industry and Minerals, and the Nuclear Energy Commission. Discussions focused on legal and regulatory preparedness, education and training, and public engagement strategies essential for nuclear energy adoption. [Akipress]

The Nuclear Energy Agency is an intergovernmental organization established under the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) that focuses on nuclear safety research, regulation, and collaboration among member states.

For a discussion of opportunities and challenges of a renewable hydrogen strategy as an element of the

energy pillar of the New Recovery Policy in Mongolia – a signatory to the Paris Agreement on Climate, joining the international effort to reach net zero emissions by the year 2050 – see [OECD].

Mongolia joins Central Asian countries at Samarkand Climate Forum to address regional environmental challenges

(fs) Mongolia's Minister of Environment and Climate Change Odontuya Saldan participated in the Samarkand Climate Forum held on April 4–5 in Samarkand, Uzbekistan.

The event brought together environment ministers from six Central Asian nations to discuss pressing issues including climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental pollution.

Ministers shared national strategies and best practices, highlighting projects such as drought-resistant afforestation, urban greening, fruit farming, and environmental education.

Mongolia presented its experience in engaging the private sector in the One Billion Trees National Movement and emphasized sustainable financing mechanisms like the Nature Conservation Trust Fund. Other initiatives included pond construction and measures to protect endangered species.

The forum underscored regional vulnerabilities, including glacier melt, water shortages, land degradation, and ecosystem collapse, with the desiccation of the Aral Sea cited as a stark example. Participants agreed on the need for increased regional cooperation through joint research, projects, and capacity-building programs. [Montsame]

UN Human Rights Council passes resolution on North Korea for tenth consecutive year

(fn) The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) continues to exert pressure on North Korea after it adopted on April 3 a resolution for the tenth consecutive year, warning of human rights abuses and the country's military aid to Russia amid the war against Ukraine. The resolution, submitted by Poland on behalf of the European Union and Australia, received unanimous approval in Geneva and urges the

regime to avoid employing excessive force at its borders, which intensifies civilian suffering and threatens global security.

Additionally, the resolution highlights the plight of detainees in North Korea, including three South Korean missionaries. South Korea is playing an active role in the drafting of the resolution and stresses the issue of forced labor in North Korea, raising concerns that this could constitute crimes against humanity, such as enslavement.

The government of South Korea has expressed strong support for the resolution and pledged to cooperate with the international community to enhance human rights conditions in North Korea.

This resolution is seen as important in light of the adverse effects stemming from the U.S. withdrawal from the UNHRC and the freezing of funds for organizations working on North Korean human rights. [NK News] [UN]

North Korean IT worker scam grows in Europe following U.S. law enforcement crackdown

(fn) The IT worker scam orchestrated by North Korea, which was previously concentrated on U.S. businesses (see AiR No. 3, January/2025, 3), has now spread into Europe after intensified law enforcement efforts in the U.S. A report from Google's Threat Intelligence Group reveals that North Korean operatives have been targeting European nations, especially within the defense and government sectors, using false identities to secure jobs in IT positions. These individuals often fabricate references and utilize various deceptive tactics to obtain employment through websites like Upwork, Freelancer, and Telegram. [Google]

The scam has evolved, with North Korean IT workers now seeking to blackmail companies by threatening to release stolen sensitive information, such as source code, if they are terminated. This marks a shift from previous tactics, where employees aimed to keep their positions by providing false references. Operating from countries that are sympathetic to North Korea, such as China and Russia, these workers create the illusion of being situated in the U.S. or Europe by using "laptop farms,"—multiple laptops located in different locations to simulate a local presence.

Investigations have revealed a global network of facilitators who produce falsified documents and

resumes to assist North Koreans in securing employment across various fields, including web development and blockchain technology. In some cases, stolen passports and fabricated information claims about residing in other countries have been used to mislead recruiters.

This scheme has proven to be extremely lucrative, with North Korean IT workers potentially earning more than USD 300,000 per year, while teams can generate up to USD 3 million annually. This scheme has even penetrated several major Fortune 500 companies, highlighting its extensive reach. U.S. authorities have initiated crackdowns on the facilitators, making arrests under the "DPRK RevGen: Domestic Enabler" initiative, connecting the operation to North Korea's Munitions Industry Department.

The growing complexity of the scam and its expansion into Europe indicates that North Korea is establishing a global infrastructure to continue this illicit operation, despite increased awareness and law enforcement actions. [The Record Media]

Resolutions supporting Taiwan pass European Parliament

(dql) The European Parliament has passed two resolutions supporting closer EU-Taiwan ties and expressing concern over escalating tensions in the Taiwan Strait.

The Common Foreign and Security Policy resolution criticized China's misinterpretation of UN Resolution 2758 and condemned its cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, and coercive attempts to alter the status quo. The Common Security and Defence Policy resolution called for regular security exchanges with Taiwan, cooperation against disinformation, and information sharing on China's hybrid warfare tactics, including undersea cable sabotage.

Both resolutions warned that cross-strait tensions threaten European security and economic interests, urging China to cease military provocations in the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea. [Taiwan News]

Saudi Arabia imposes temporary visa ban on multiple countries to prevent unauthorized Hajj

(lm) Saudi Arabia has imposed a temporary visa ban on travelers from 14 countries, including Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, and Indonesia, aiming to curb unauthorized participation in the annual Hajj pilgrimage. The ban targets individuals who enter the kingdom using multiple-entry business or family visas and then stay illegally to perform Hajj, contributing to overcrowding and safety concerns.

The affected countries are: Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, Indonesia , Egypt, Iraq, Nigeria, Jordan, Algeria, Sudan, Ethiopia, Tunisia, and Yemen. According to Saudi authorities, the measure is designed to improve crowd control and uphold visa regulations during the pilgrimage season.

Travelers holding valid Umrah visas will still be permitted entry until April 13 , but those violating visa conditions may face penalties, including a five-year entry ban. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs stressed that the move is temporary and intended to maintain order and security. Normal visa services are expected to resume after mid-June. [The Business Standard]

BIMSTEC and IORA sign MoU to tackle regional security and development challenges

(lm) The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) aimed at strengthening cooperation on security and development in the region. The agreement was concluded during the 6th BIMSTEC Summit held recently in Bangkok, Thailand.

BIMSTEC, established in 1997, brings together seven countries from the Bay of Bengal region—Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand—while IORA is an inter-governmental organization composed of 23 member states surrounding the Indian Ocean, also founded in 1997.

The agreement formalizes cooperation in priority areas including ocean and fisheries management, environmental protection, connectivity, and tourism. It is expected to enhance people-to-people ties and facilitate coordinated responses to transnational security threats and development goals across South and Southeast Asia. [Dhaka Tribune]

BIMSTEC-UNODC MoU aims to tackle non-traditional security threats

(lm) The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) has signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) to enhance cooperation in addressing non-traditional security challenges, including transnational organized crime, terrorism, and illicit drug trafficking.

The MoU formalizes a framework for future collaboration between BIMSTEC and UNODC in areas of mutual interest, such as law enforcement cooperation, criminal justice capacity building, and counter-narcotics efforts in the Bay of Bengal region. [Dhaka Tribune]

Myanmar confirms 180,000 Rohingya refugees eligible for return from Bangladesh

(lm) Bangladesh's interim government announced that Myanmar has verified 180,000 Rohingya refugees as eligible for repatriation, marking a potential step forward in the long-stalled effort to return over 1.3 million displaced Rohingya currently living in refugee camps in Cox's Bazar. The announcement followed talks in Bangkok on the sidelines of the 6th BIMSTEC Summit, where Khalilur Rahman, advisor to interim leader Muhammad Yunus, met Myanmar's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Than Swe.

The 180,000 names were drawn from a list of 800,000 Rohingya submitted by Bangladesh between 2018 and 2020. Myanmar indicated that another 70,000 names remain under final review and pledged to expedite verification for the remaining 550,000. Myanmar's government has not officially commented on the meeting.

Despite this development, Rohingya community members remain skeptical. Many view the announcement as insufficient and stressful that repatriation must include full citizenship and protection of rights. Previous repatriation attempts in 2018 and 2019 failed, with refugees refusing to return without guarantees of safety and dignity. Rohingya in Myanmar's Rakhine State continue to face severe restrictions and denial of citizenship under a system that human rights groups have labeled apartheid.

The repatriation talks occur amid international scrutiny of Myanmar's military government, with the International Criminal Court seeking arrest warrants for military leaders over the 2017 crackdown, which forced over 750,000 Rohingya to flee. [Anadolu Ajansı] [Reuters]

Bangladesh reiterates strong commitment to combating human trafficking at BIMSTEC meeting

(lm) Bangladesh's Home Affairs Adviser Lt Gen (Retd) Md Jahangir Alam Chowdhury reaffirmed the country's commitment to fighting human trafficking during the third meeting of the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) sub-group on human trafficking, held in Dhaka on April 6. He emphasized that Bangladesh has developed a robust legal and institutional framework to ensure accountability, strengthen border security, and raise public awareness about trafficking risks.

Chowdhury highlighted several initiatives undertaken by Bangladesh, including a national action plan, a national web-based referral mechanism for victims, and a dedicated special tribunal to expedite trafficking-related trials. He also noted the expansion of mutual legal assistance agreements and the integration of anti-trafficking awareness into national policy.

The adviser warned that traffickers are increasingly using technology and exploiting economic vulnerabilities to evade detection. He called for stronger intelligence-sharing and regional cooperation, underscoring the importance of BIMSTEC in countering these transnational crimes.

The meeting included representatives from all seven BIMSTEC member states—Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Nepal, and Bhutan—and was seen as an important platform for exchanging best practices and strengthening collective responses to human trafficking. Chowdhury also expressed confidence that under Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus's leadership, BIMSTEC would play a transformative role in enhancing regional cooperation on human security. [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh’s army chief visits Russia and Croatia to boost defense cooperation

(lm) Bangladesh's Chief of Army Staff General Waker-Uz-Zaman departed Dhaka for Russia on an official visit, where he will later continue on to Croatia on April 10. The visit includes meetings with senior military and civil officials in both countries to explore enhanced cooperation in defense and related sectors. Gen. Waker is also scheduled to visit military installations and arms-manufacturing facilities. He is expected to return to Bangladesh on April 12. [The Daily Star]

India-EU hope to redefine ties in the wake of US tariffs

(lm/hjn/rt) India is increasingly strengthening its diplomatic and economic relationships with Europe, amid rising global challenges, including trade tensions and the reshaping of international commerce. As part of these efforts, India has been advancing negotiations for a free trade agreement (FTA) with the European Union (EU), aiming to conclude the deal by the end of 2025. These talks come on the heels of U.S. President Donald Trump's imposition of significant tariffs, which has accelerated the need for Europe to secure new trade partners and expand its market access.

Key aspects of the India-EU talks focus on reducing car import tariffs and addressing sensitive sectors such as agriculture. The EU has called for a comprehensive reduction of car import duties, with discussions moving towards a phased reduction to 10 percent. This would be a victory for European carmakers such as Volkswagen, Mercedes-Benz, and BMW, expanding their access to India's vast market. At the same time, India's domestic car manufacturers, including Tata Motors and Mahindra & Mahindra, have voiced concerns over potential losses in local manufacturing competitiveness. India's automotive industry is particularly sensitive to tariff reductions, especially for electric vehicles (EVs), where the government aims to protect domestic investments. [Business Standard] [Reuters] [TRT Global]

In addition to trade talks, the two sides are increasingly engaging in cooperation on migration. As Europe grapples with an aging population and labor shortages, India's young and skilled workforce is seen as a crucial solution. India's skilled labor, particularly in tech, healthcare, and hospitality, is already in high demand across Europe. India has signed several Migrant Mobility Agreements with countries like Germany, Italy, and France, facilitating legal migration for Indian students, professionals, and workers while ensuring the repatriation of those without proper documentation. These agreements aim to address

labor shortages in sectors such as agriculture, healthcare, and hospitality.

At the same time, the EU is eager to capitalize on India's growing technological and industrial capacity. The two sides are exploring potential partnerships in green hydrogen production, renewable energy, and the technology sector. India's decarbonization agenda, alongside its commitment to reaching net-zero emissions by 2070, presents an opportunity for collaboration on sustainable energy solutions. The EU's interest in India's semiconductor industry further underscores the growing importance of bilateral relations in securing supply chains and mitigating dependence on China. [POLITICO]

Beyond trade and migration, both countries are seeking to address broader global issues, including climate change and multilateralism. India and the EU have emphasized the importance of collaborative efforts to combat climate change, particularly in the lead-up to the COP30 summit. The ongoing trade negotiations are framed within the context of strengthening global partnerships and pursuing shared goals such as promoting economic growth, sustainable development, and the creation of resilient supply chains. [The Hindu 1]

In parallel, India's engagement with individual European nations is also intensifying. Indian President Droupadi Murmu's state visit to Portugal marks the first visit by an Indian president to the country in 27 years, coinciding with the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations between India and Portugal. During her visit, the two countries have focused on expanding cooperation in sectors such as renewable energy, pharmaceuticals, education, and defense. Following her engagements in Portugal, President Murmu is set to visit Slovakia, marking the 30th anniversary of the Indian Embassy's establishment in Bratislava. Slovakia has become a key partner for India, with growing bilateral ties in automobiles, engineering, IT, and defense. [The Times of India] [The Indian Express] [The Hindu 2]

Maldivian government silent US military use of airspace for potential attack on Iran

(db) The government of Maldives has failed to provide an official comment regarding reports that the United States may use the country's airspace for military strikes against Iran. International media have reported that the U.S. is preparing to attack Iran from a military

base in the Chagos Islands, located south of Addu City, with the Maldives' airspace potentially being used for this operation.

Under international law, a nation's airspace can only be used for military purposes with the permission of the government. However, the government of the Maldives has not issued a statement or addressed concerns about the potential military action. The Maldives National Defence Force (MNDF) has indicated that the Ministry of Defence would comment on matters of national security, but efforts to reach Defence Minister Ghassan Maumoon for clarification have been unsuccessful.

Concerns have been raised among the public, particularly regarding the recent passage of U.S. military vessels through Maldivian airspace, and the use of Gan International Airport and Hanimaadhoo International Airport. Many members of the public have expressed unease about the silence of the government, especially given that Iran is a Muslim-majority country, prompting criticism from some quarters for the Maldives' failure to take a stance on the issue.

The situation has garnered additional attention, with Iran threatening retaliation if the U.S. uses Diego Garcia, a key military base in the Chagos Islands, to launch attacks. Iran has reportedly instructed military commanders to target the base if the situation escalates. Satellite images have also shown that U.S. military planes have been stationed at the base, raising further concerns about the region's stability and the Maldives' role in these developments. [Raajje]

Pakistan urges UN to curb illicit arms fueling cross-border militancy from Afghanistan

(mra) Pakistan has renewed its calls for international action to curb the flow of illicit arms into the hands of terrorist groups operating from Afghanistan. This comes amid a surge in cross-border militant attacks, with Pakistan urging the United Nations to take steps to recover weapons left behind by foreign forces and stop the trafficking of arms fueling instability in the region. These weapons, including M4 and M16 rifles, grenade launchers, and night vision equipment, continue to be used by groups like Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), which launch attacks on Pakistani territory from Afghanistan.

The issue was discussed in a recent telephonic conversation between Pakistan's Deputy Prime Minister Ishaq Dar and US Secretary of State Marco Rubio, with both sides acknowledging the concerns surrounding the proliferation of US-made military equipment in Afghanistan. Islamabad has expressed its fears that militant groups are gaining access to these weapons, which were abandoned during the US withdrawal in 2021. The Small Arms Survey, a Geneva-based monitor, has highlighted the ongoing trafficking of NATO- and Soviet-era weapons in Afghanistan and Pakistan's border regions, noting that these arms are still widely available in informal black markets, exacerbating the security situation. [Arab News 1] [Arab News 2]

Pakistan's representative at the UN, Syed Atif Raza, voiced these concerns during a Security Council session, urging the international community to work together to dismantle the black markets facilitating this trafficking. He warned that these weapons are not only used against Pakistan's security forces but are also hindering the country's socio-economic progress. Pakistan has frequently accused its "principal adversary"—a reference to India—of supporting militant groups and further destabilizing the region, although Kabul denies these allegations. [Arab News 3] [DAWN]

Islamabad has expressed "profound concern" over the presence of these weapons, especially following increased attacks on security forces in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan provinces. In 2024 alone, Pakistan recorded 383 military fatalities and over 900 militant deaths. The situation has been further complicated by militants leveraging new technologies such as cryptocurrency and the dark web to finance their operations, according to Pakistani officials.

Pakistan leads international push for Gaza accountability, denounces Israeli actions and UN inaction

(lm/sn) Pakistan has intensified its diplomatic campaign for accountability over Israel's actions in Gaza, spearheading a resolution at the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) while simultaneously condemning the UN Security Council's inaction on the humanitarian crisis.

On April 3, Pakistan's Ambassador to the UN in New York, Asim Iftikhar Ahmad, delivered a forceful address during a Security Council briefing, describing the

body's inaction as a "dangerous precedent" that erodes the global order. Ahmad criticized Israel's resumption of military operations in Gaza after breaking a ceasefire in March, pointing to over 1,100 new Palestinian deaths and the displacement of at least 280,000 civilians in the past month alone. He called attention to what he labeled Israel's "systematic destruction of a people," highlighting strikes on schools, hospitals, and aid convoys, and the use of starvation as a weapon—practices he described as war crimes.

Ambassador Ahmad also warned that Israel's plans to annex parts of Gaza and establish a "security corridor" in the occupied West Bank violate international law and reflect an intent to permanently colonize Palestinian territory. He called on the Security Council to go beyond "rhetorical condemnations" and take concrete action, including enforcing the January ceasefire agreement, lifting the blockade on Gaza, and launching a credible peace process. [Arab News 1]

This criticism came as Pakistan, on behalf of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), successfully introduced a resolution at the UNHRC in Geneva demanding justice and accountability for alleged Israeli crimes in Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem. The resolution draws from the July 2024 advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice (ICJ), which declared Israel's occupation illegal, and incorporates findings from the UN Commission of Inquiry on systematic sexual violence against Palestinians, particularly women and girls.

Pakistan's Ambassador to the UN in Geneva, Bilal Ahmed, emphasized that impunity perpetuates abuses and said the resolution marked the Council's commitment to ending systemic violations. It calls for the establishment of an independent investigative and prosecutorial mechanism and urges global action to prevent and punish incitement to genocide, in line with the ICJ's provisional measures issued in January. [Arab News 2]

Pakistan, which does not recognize Israel, has consistently supported Palestinian statehood based on pre-1967 borders and has sent more than two dozen humanitarian aid consignments to Gaza since the conflict began in October 2023.

Reflecting the same sentiment, Pakistan's army leadership expressed "complete solidarity" with the Palestinian people during a corps commanders' meeting held on April 4. Chaired by Chief of Army Staff General Asim Munir, the military condemned Israel's actions in Gaza as "serious human rights violations and

war crimes." The commanders reaffirmed Pakistan's political, diplomatic, and moral support for Palestine while also reviewing national security concerns, including militancy in Balochistan.

General Munir stressed the military's resolve to combat terrorism and illicit economic activities linked to violence and directed field commanders to maintain high operational readiness amid an evolving regional landscape. [Arab News 3]

Pakistan re-elected to UN narcotics commission with highest regional vote share

(lm) Pakistan has been elected to the United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND) for a four-year term beginning in 2026, securing the highest number of votes among member states from its regional group, according to Pakistan's UN mission.

The CND, operating under the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), is the principal international policymaking body for drug control. It oversees the classification of substances and sets global guidelines on combating narcotics trafficking and drug abuse. [Arab News]

Pakistan Navy conducts counter-piracy patrols in Arabian Sea under CTF-151 leadership

(lm) Pakistan Navy Ship (PNS) Aslat has conducted counter-piracy patrols off the east coast of Somalia in the Arabian Sea, supporting the operations of the Combined Task Force-151 (CTF-151), a multinational maritime security group currently led by the Pakistan Navy.

CTF-151 is part of the 46-nation Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) and was established in 2009 to combat piracy in the Gulf of Aden and the waters near Somalia. Its mission includes protecting global maritime trade routes and ensuring the safety of Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs).

Pakistan assumed command of CTF-151 for the 11th time in January 2025. The Pakistan Navy emphasized that the deployment of Aslat reflects the country's commitment to securing international shipping lanes and deterring piracy, armed robbery, and illicit

maritime activities. CTF-151 works in coordination with the European Union's Operation Atalanta and NATO's Operation Ocean Shield. [Arab News]

Pakistani senior official discusses migration and border security at UK's Border Security Summit 2025

(sn) Pakistan's Minister of State for Interior Affairs, Talal Chaudhry, attended the Border Security Summit 2025 in London, where he engaged in high-level discussions with UK officials, including Home Secretary Yvette Cooper, Deputy Foreign Minister Hamish Faulkner, and Members of Parliament Angela Eagle. Chaudhry also met with interior ministers from Germany, Spain, Austria, and Poland to discuss border security and international cooperation.

During his talks with British officials, Chaudhry emphasized the importance of curbing illegal immigration and promoting legal migration pathways. He commended the UK's efforts in tackling immigration challenges and reiterated Pakistan's commitment to strengthening bilateral cooperation on these issues. He stressed the need for a joint strategy to address border security, counterterrorism, and human trafficking, highlighting the significance of collective action to ensure safe and regulated migration.

UK Deputy Foreign Minister Hamish Faulkner acknowledged the positive outcomes of previous meetings between Pakistan's Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi and UK officials, underscoring the improvement in bilateral security collaboration. Chaudhry reiterated Pakistan's commitment to global cooperation in combating illegal immigration, terrorism, and organized crime, emphasizing the necessity for a comprehensive and long-term approach to these challenges. [The Express Tribune]

IMF team arrives in Pakistan for second phase of governance and anti-corruption review

(sn) An International Monetary Fund (IMF) team has arrived in Pakistan to begin the second phase of its Governance and Corruption Diagnostic Assessment (GCDA), a key condition under the country's USD 7 billion loan program. The GCDA aims to identify corruption risks and governance weaknesses across

Pakistan's core institutions, including fiscal management, judicial integrity, and financial oversight.

The IMF conducted a preliminary assessment in February, where it initiated evaluations of six core state functions and met with key officials, including the Chief Justice of Pakistan. In this second phase, the team is expected to hold meetings with representatives from the finance division, State Bank of Pakistan, Federal Board of Revenue, Election Commission, Securities and Exchange Commission, Auditor General, and the law ministry.

The IMF's final report will include reform recommendations to strengthen institutional performance, promote transparency, and reduce corruption vulnerabilities. The findings are not expected to influence the upcoming national budget but will contribute to broader economic governance reforms aimed at restoring investor confidence and supporting Pakistan's long-term economic recovery.

The review is part of the structural reform agenda tied to the IMF's Extended Fund Facility, under which Pakistan recently reached a staff-level agreement expected to unlock a USD 1 billion tranche. The country aims to grow its economy by 3.6 percent this fiscal year, amid mounting pressure to stabilize inflation and create employment opportunities for its large youth population. [Arab News]

European experts to train Pakistan's aviation inspectors amid security concerns

(lm) A team from the European Civil Aviation Conference (ECAC) is set to arrive in Islamabad on April 7 to provide specialized training and certification to Pakistani aviation security inspectors, according to the Pakistan Civil Aviation Authority (PCAA). The initiative follows the European Union's recent decision to lift a ban on Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) and approve Airblue for flights to Europe after a nearly four-year suspension.

The four-day training will be held at Islamabad International Airport and will focus on Explosives Trace Detection (ETD) and Explosive Detection Dogs (EDD). Twelve regulatory inspectors from the PCAA are scheduled to participate. Officials say the training is intended to enhance inspection capabilities and ensure Pakistan meets international security standards amid a recent surge in militant violence, particularly in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Pakistan has ranked as the second-most affected country by terrorist violence in the Global Terrorism Index 2025, with a 45 percent increase in terrorism-related deaths last year. Aviation security is a key focus of international assessments, and PCAA officials emphasized that improving inspectors' qualifications is essential for maintaining access to European airspace. [Arab News]

Pakistan, Belarus sign trade and energy deals, push for corridor linking to Europe and Central Asia

(sn) Pakistan and Belarus have signed multiple Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) covering energy, industrial collaboration, communications, and postal services, as both countries seek to deepen trade and investment ties. The agreements were finalized during a two-day visit by Pakistan's Communications Minister Abdul Aleem Khan to Minsk, aimed at transforming earlier discussions into actionable outcomes.

During meetings with Belarusian Energy Minister Denis Moroz and other senior officials, Khan underscored the importance of establishing trade corridors to facilitate access to Central Asian and European markets. The proposed infrastructure would run through Pakistan, China, Afghanistan, and Iran, linking Belarus to Eastern Europe via South and Central Asia. Both sides also emphasized improving communication mechanisms to support future cooperation.

The agreements will be further formalized during an expected visit by Pakistan's prime minister to Belarus. The two countries previously agreed to enhance collaboration in tourism, media, and industry, and marked 30 years of diplomatic ties in 2024.

The developments are part of Pakistan's broader effort to attract foreign investment and diversify its economic partnerships. Since 2023, Pakistan has pursued agreements worth billions of PKR with China, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Azerbaijan, and others, under the framework of the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC). This council was created to fast-track investments in sectors such as energy, mining, agriculture, livestock, and tourism. [Arab News 1] [Arab News 2]

In related investment news, Pakistan's Deputy Prime Minister Ishaq Dar called for all trade and investment proposals to be finalized with "friendly countries." The instructions came while Dar chaired a meeting on

Pakistan's investment project proposals, including briefs on petroleum, trade, infrastructure, and information technology.

In 2023, Pakistan formed the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC) to attract foreign investment from China, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf and Central Asian states. Investment proposals have ranged from livestock, mining and minerals, energy, agriculture, tourism, and other key sectors. [Arab News 3]

Pakistan showcase estimated USD 6 trillion mineral wealth at investment forum

(lm) Pakistan is hosting the Pakistan Minerals Investment Forum (PMIF25) from April 8-9 in Islamabad, aiming to attract foreign investment into its mineral sector, estimated to be worth USD 6 trillion. The forum, organized by the Oil and Gas Development Company Limited (OGDCL) in collaboration with the government and the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC), highlights Pakistan's vast untapped mineral resources, including copper, gold, coal, and gemstones, spread across over 600,000 square kilometers.

The forum aims to present Pakistan as a mining investment frontier, focusing on its potential to reduce reliance on imports and boost exports. International investors, including delegations from the US, Saudi Arabia, China, and other nations, are attending, with discussions centered on unlocking the country's mineral potential and integrating it into global mineral value chains. The event places particular emphasis on critical minerals, an area of growing importance for international energy and technology markets. [Profit, Pakistan Today]

Despite contributing less than 8 percent to Pakistan's GDP, the mining sector plays a crucial role in the country's economic outlook. The forum is aligned with the government's broader economic reform agenda, which aims to foster sustainable growth through foreign investment. A key feature of the event is the unveiling of the National Minerals Harmonization Framework 2025, designed to streamline mining policies and create a more investor-friendly environment. Minister Ali Pervaiz Malik emphasized that efforts to corporatize the sector and align it with global standards are essential for fostering long-term growth in Pakistan's mining industry.

A prominent aspect of the forum is the participation of a US delegation, led by Eric Meyer from the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs. The delegation will engage in discussions on investment opportunities in critical minerals and explore how the US and Pakistan can collaborate to harness these resources. This cooperation is viewed as a strategic step for both countries, as Pakistan's rich mineral reserves align with the US's increasing interest in securing a stable supply of critical minerals.

The PMIF25 comes amid broader discussions between the US and Pakistan regarding trade and economic relations. On April 7, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio spoke with Pakistan's Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar about reciprocal tariffs, trade relations, and potential collaboration in critical minerals. Following the imposition of a 29 percent tariff on Pakistan by the US, both countries see the mining sector as a key area for expanding commercial ties and fostering mutual economic growth. [Arab News 1] [Arab News 2] [Reuters]

Sri Lanka and IMF discuss preliminary review of IMF fourth tranche

(lm) Sri Lanka and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) recently held discussions regarding Sri Lanka's progress under the IMF-supported programme and the steps needed to meet the country's future economic goals. The meeting, held at the Presidential Secretariat, focused on the preliminary review of the fourth tranche under Sri Lanka's Extended Fund Facility (EFF) arrangement with the IMF.

The discussions, led by President Anura Kumara Dissanayake and IMF representatives, also touched upon emerging economic challenges, particularly the potential impact of new U.S. trade tariffs on Sri Lanka's economy. The IMF delegation was headed by Sanjaya Panth, Deputy Director for the Asia and Pacific Department, alongside Senior Mission Chiefs Peter Breuer and Evan Papageorgiou.

On the Sri Lankan side, the meeting included key figures such as Minister of Labour and Deputy Minister of Economic Development Anil Jayantha Fernando, Deputy Minister of Finance & Planning Harshana Suriyapperuma, Central Bank Governor Dr. Nandalal Weerasinghe, Senior Economic Advisor Duminda Hulangamuwa, and Secretary to the Ministry of Finance Mahinda Siriwardena. [Daily Mirror]

India and UAE to develop Sri Lanka energy hub, countering China's influence

(lm) India and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have agreed to jointly develop an energy hub in Trincomalee, Sri Lanka, signaling a strategic move by New Delhi to expand its regional footprint amid growing competition with China. The agreement was signed during Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's April 5 visit to Colombo—the first by a foreign head of state since Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Dissanayake took office in September 2024.

The proposed hub will include a multi-product pipeline and may utilize an existing World War II-era oil tank farm, partly held by the Sri Lankan subsidiary of Indian Oil Corporation. Indian Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri said the next step would be selecting business entities to assess financing and feasibility. He also emphasized the UAE's role as a strategic energy partner.

The initiative comes as China's Sinopec prepares to build a USD 3.2 billion oil refinery in Sri Lanka's southern Hambantota port, highlighting intensified geopolitical competition in the region.

In addition to the Trincomalee agreement, Modi also inaugurated a USD 100 million solar project—a joint venture between Sri Lanka's Ceylon Electricity Board and India's National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC). Further agreements were signed on power grid connectivity, digitalization, security, and healthcare.

India also announced the conclusion of its debt restructuring process with Sri Lanka, which defaulted in 2022. Sri Lanka reportedly owes about USD 1.36 billion to India's EXIM Bank and State Bank of India. [Reuters]

Cambodian prime minister assures new Ream Naval Base open for visits of foreign ships

(dql) Prime Minister Hun Manet announced that the newly inaugurated Ream Naval Base in Preah Sihanouk province is open to foreign military ships for docking and joint drills, while reaffirming that no foreign military bases will be established in Cambodia. The statement aims to dispel concerns about national sovereignty, particularly allegations that the base grants China exclusive control.

Built with Chinese assistance, the base was inaugurated by Hun Manet alongside Lieutenant General Cao Qingfeng of China's Central Military Commission on April 5. The Prime Minister highlighted the base as a symbol of strengthened Cambodia-China cooperation and as a means to enhance Cambodia's defense capacity, maritime security, and ability to conduct joint exercises with friendly nations.

Hun Manet emphasized that the Ream Naval Base remains under Cambodian sovereignty and that foreign access will be allowed only within technical and legal limits. He rejected claims of foreign military control and stressed Cambodia's constitutional commitment to prohibit foreign military bases and the stationing of Cambodian forces abroad. He reaffirmed that the constitution will not be amended to allow foreign bases.

The prime minister also announced that two new warships would soon join the Cambodian Navy to enhance peacekeeping, search and rescue, and humanitarian operations. He reaffirmed Cambodia's openness to defense cooperation with all friendly nations, not just China, based on mutual respect and sovereignty. [Khmer Times]

Cambodia partners with SEAMEO to assess and improve primary school learning skills

(mfr) The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) of Cambodia has partnered with the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) to assess and improve primary school students' math, reading, and writing skills. The collaboration was discussed during a courtesy meeting between Minister Hang Chuon Naron and SEAMEO Director Dr. Habibah Abdul Rahim.

The meeting also included representatives from development partners such as the World Bank, UNICEF, and UNESCO. Dr. Habibah praised Cambodia for its involvement in the Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM), a regional initiative aimed at improving educational outcomes across Southeast Asia.

As part of this collaboration, SEAMEO and MoEYS organized a workshop to explore ways to integrate SEA-PLM results into policy, with a focus on data analysis, report writing, and action plans. The 2024 SEA-PLM assessment saw Cambodia participating alongside seven other countries, with 195 schools from

across the country involved, including a mix of urban and rural schools, both public and private. [Khmer Times]

ASEAN, US Treasury hold closed-door talks on tariff concerns

(tl) ASEAN finance and central bank deputies held a closed-door meeting with the US Department of the Treasury (UST) on April 7 to address concerns over newly imposed US tariffs. The session, part of the US Treasury, ASEAN Finance and Central Bank Deputies Meeting (AFCDM), was attended by UST Deputy Assistant Secretary Robert Kaproth.

While tariffs weren't officially on the agenda, they became a central issue discussed following US President Donald Trump's April 3 announcement of new trade measures targeting nations with large trade surpluses.

ASEAN member states are hit hard by these tariffs, with Cambodia facing an initial and reciprocal tariff of 49 percent, followed by Laos (48 percent), Vietnam (46 percent), and Myanmar (44 percent). Thailand faces a tariff of 36 percent, Indonesia 32 percent, Brunei and Malaysia both at 24 percent, the Philippines 17 percent, and Singapore at a baseline tariff of 10 per cent.

Malaysia, which chaired the meeting, confirmed that it will not impose retaliatory tariffs despite facing 24 percent duty on some exports to the US starting April 9. Not all Malaysian products will be affected by the hike. [Malaymail 1] [Malaymail 2]

ASEAN finance leaders begin key meetings in Malaysia

(tl) Preparatory discussions for the 12th ASEAN Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors' Meeting (AFMGM) kicked off in Kuala Lumpur, with Malaysia chairing the event. Senior officials are finalizing documents focused on boosting regional financial integration.

This year's agenda is expected to be intense, especially following the recent US tariffs under President Trump that have sparked global trade concerns. High-level engagements will include ASEAN-US Business Council and ASEAN-European Union dialogues, alongside discussions with the ASEAN Business Advisory Council.

Over 300 delegates are attending, with 14 meetings planned throughout the four-day event. Highlights include the ASEAN Investment Conference, launch of the ASEAN Environmental, Social and Government (ESG) Disclosure Guide for small and medium enterprises, and an exhibition featuring finance and youth initiatives. Malaysia's Finance Minister II Amir Hamzah Azizan is set to officiate key segments of the summit. [Malaymail]

Malaysia elected to UN Commission on Population and Development for 2026-2030 term

(ga) Malaysia has been elected to the United Nations Commission on Population and Development (CPD) for the term 2026-2030 during the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) meeting in New York on April 4. Malaysia's four-year term will start at the 60th CPD Session in 2026 and end at the conclusion of the 63rd Session in 2030.

This election reflects international recognition of Malaysia's efforts to implement the Programme of Action from the International Conference on Population and Development. It also highlights the country's commitment to promoting sustainable population policies that enhance public health and well-being, while upholding human rights and inclusiveness.

In line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Malaysia reaffirms its dedication to collaborating with international partners and the UN to address population-related issues. The Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development (KPWKM) plays a central role in advancing policies related to gender equality, family planning, and social development.

The CPD, a subsidiary of ECOSOC, consists of 47 members, elected every four years to advise on population and development issues. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia]

Myanmar Senior-General Min Aung Hlaing participation in BIMSTEC Summit faces backlash

(hw) Myanmar's junta leader, Senior-General Min Aung Hlaing, attended the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-

Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation summit held in Bangkok, Thailand, from April 2 to 4. The member states agreed to provide assistance to the earthquake-affected countries of Thailand and Myanmar. Min Aung Hlaing also held separate meetings with the leaders of Bhutan, Thailand, and India.

The National Unity Government (NUG), Myanmar's shadow government, condemned his participation, describing his attendance an affront to justice and an endorsement of an illegal regime. Justice for Myanmar and other human rights groups voiced disappointment, arguing that by hosting Min Aung Hlaing a regime that has been widely opposed by the Burmese people for over four years has been legitimized. [Pattaya Mail]

A Myanmar immigrant, meanwhile, hung a couple of banners at the Somdet Phrachao Taksin Maha Rat Bridge in Bangkok, bearing the words "We Do Not Welcome" and "Murderer Min Aung Hlaing." The immigrant was later arrested. [Mizzima, in Burmese]

A Thai student from Thammasat University also staged a solo protest at the Shangri-La Hotel in Bangkok, where Min Aung Hlaing was staying. A clash also occurred between two Thai groups in Bangkok: one group was protesting against Min Aung Hlaing in front of the United Nations office, while another group attacked the leader of the former group. [BBC News, in Burmese]

Myanmar junta agrees to repatriate 180,000 Rohingyas

(hw) Myanmar's military leader, Senior-General Min Aung Hlaing, confirmed that Myanmar is ready to accept 180,000 Rohingyas back into the country. Min Aung Hlaing made this statement during a meeting with Bangladeshi interim leader Muhammad Yunus on April 4, when both leaders were in Bangkok attending the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation summit. During the meeting, Yunus expressed his sorrow over the devastating earthquake that struck Myanmar on March 28, claiming many lives.

The 180,000 Rohingyas are part of the 800,000 Rohingyas that the Bangladeshi government proposed for repatriation between 2018 and 2020. Min Aung Hlaing stated that his government would accelerate the processing of Rohingya refugees for their return to Myanmar. The "clearance operations" carried out by

the Myanmar military in 2017 forced thousands of Rohingyas to flee to Bangladesh. [Radio Free Asia, in Burmese] [Anadolu Ajansi]

World Bank grants USD 800 million loan to boost clean energy transition in Philippines

(jto) The World Bank has approved a USD 800 million loan to support the Philippines' transition to clean energy and improve climate resilience. The funding will back government reforms to increase renewable energy adoption, enhance competition and security in electricity markets, and strengthen water management systems.

The "First Energy Transition and Climate Resilience Development Policy Loan" aims to raise the share of renewable energy in the Philippines' installed capacity to 42 percent by 2027, up from 30 percent in 2023. It will support the procurement of 1,000 megawatts of offshore wind power, promote energy efficiency, and encourage the use of electric vehicles in the public sector.

In addition to energy reforms, the loan will aid water resource management and sanitation coordination between national and local governments. World Bank officials highlighted the loan's importance in reducing energy import dependence, lowering power costs, and bolstering climate resilience amid natural disasters. [Philstar]

Philippines' military preps for Taiwan conflict draw backlash from China

(jto) The Philippines has come under sharp criticism from Beijing following statements by Armed Forces Chief General Romeo Brawner Jr., who instructed Northern Luzon troops to prepare for possible scenarios arising from a Taiwan invasion, emphasizing the country's proximity to the Taiwan Strait and the need to evacuate over 250,000 Filipino workers.

Brawner's remarks, delivered during the Northern Luzon Command's anniversary on April 1, included a call to expand planning "beyond Mavulis Island" and cited "inevitable involvement" should conflict erupt across the Strait. His comments echoed U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth's "peace through strength" doctrine and came amid People's Liberation Army

(PLA) drills encircling Taiwan. [Inquirer.net] [USNI News]

While contingency planning for such a crisis is not new—the Philippine government already conducts semiannual reviews for evacuation scenarios—the military chief's public mention of a potential invasion was unusually direct. His statements triggered both praise and alarm in the Philippines and abroad, especially as they followed high-level U.S.-Philippine defense coordination and the approval of a potential USD 5.58 billion sale of F-16 fighter jets to Manila.

China swiftly condemned Brawner's remarks, with officials calling the Taiwan issue an internal matter and warning Manila not to "play with fire." Chinese commentators accused the Philippines of hyping the threat for political gain and of trying to draw in more U.S. support by portraying the situation as a regional security flashpoint. [Global Times]

Meanwhile, Philippine officials and security experts argue that Taiwan's geographic proximity—less than 400 kilometers from northern Luzon—makes Philippine involvement in a cross-strait conflict virtually unavoidable, particularly through civilian evacuations or spillover effects. [Rappler]

US-Philippines joint drills begin as Washington approves USD 5.58 billion F-16 sale

(jto/jm) The Philippines and the United States launched their Cope Thunder joint air drills on April 7 at Clark Air Base in northern Luzon, as Washington approved a potential USD 5.58 billion sale of 20 F-16 fighter jets to Manila. The developments come amid intensifying tensions in the region, particularly over China's assertiveness in the South China Sea and recent simulated military blockades around Taiwan.

The Cope Thunder exercise involves around 700 Filipino and 250 U.S. air personnel, with participation from observers from Japan, Australia, Malaysia, and Indonesia. The drills focus on enhancing asymmetric warfare capabilities, operational coordination, and strategic deterrence. Philippine Air Force (PAF) Commander Lt. Gen. Arthur Cordura described the exercise as a step toward deepening combat readiness, while U.S. Major General Christopher Sheppard emphasized that the U.S.-Philippines alliance is "accelerating." [Taipei Times] [Japan Times]

The air drills also marked the return of the Philippines' FA-50 light combat aircraft, grounded since a fatal crash in March. These will be joined by American F-16 jets, which may soon be bolstered by the U.S.-approved sale of 16 F-16C and four F-16D multirole variants, pending a 30-day congressional review. The acquisition forms part of the Philippines' USD 33.6 billion Horizon 3 military modernization plan and would significantly upgrade Manila's air defense capability, which currently depends on lighter FA-50s.

The U.S. Defense Security Cooperation Agency said the deal would strengthen maritime domain awareness and interoperability in high-end operations. The announcement followed a visit by U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, who reaffirmed Washington's "ironclad" defense commitment to Manila and vowed to counter Beijing's aggression. [CNN] [Reuters] [Al Jazeera] [Radio Free Asia]

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Beijing criticized the arms deal, warning that it could fuel an arms race and destabilize the region. Philippine officials responded by insisting the purchase is purely defensive. National Security Council spokesperson Jonathan Malaya said the acquisition "does not in any way harm the interest of any third party," and Executive Secretary Lucas Bersamin emphasized it is "not aimed at any particular country." [South China Morning Post] [Philippine News Agency]

The exercises and arms deal unfolded alongside fresh maritime tensions. The Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) deployed an aircraft to monitor the Chinese research vessel Zhong Shan Da Xue, suspected of conducting unauthorized marine research near Batanes. The vessel was spotted within the Philippines' exclusive economic zone. On the same weekend, a Chinese

coast guard ship nearly collided with a Philippine vessel near Scarborough Shoal, prompting condemnation from Filipino senators and renewed calls for expanded joint drills like Balikatan, set to begin later this month. [Inquirer.net]

EU boosts space cooperation with Philippines for sustainable development

(jto) The Philippines and the European Union (EU) have strengthened their space cooperation through a high-level visit to the Philippine Space Agency (PhilSA), reaffirming shared goals to harness satellite technology for sustainable and inclusive development.

The visit brought together EU Ambassador Massimo Santoro, the EU Delegation to the Philippines, representatives from 17 EU member states, and the Council of Asia-Pacific Working Party (COASI). The delegation emphasized the EU's commitment to space collaboration through its Global Gateway strategy, which promotes international partnerships in sectors such as digital, transport, and energy.

At the center of the partnership is the National Copernicus Capacity Support Action Programme for the Philippines (CopPhil), launched in April 2023. CopPhil delivers EU satellite Earth Observation data to help the Philippines tackle climate resilience, disaster preparedness, and environmental monitoring. The program, implemented jointly by the European Space Agency (ESA), EU Delegation, PhilSA, and the Department of Science and Technology (DOST), has been hailed as a model for international collaboration.

A key milestone was the October 2024 launch of the Copernicus Data Centre—the first in Southeast Asia—which significantly boosts access to satellite data for disaster risk and environmental management. CopPhil also supports customized Earth Observation services, such as land use and crop mapping, coastal marine monitoring, and ground motion tracking.

To ensure long-term impact, the program includes training, technical workshops, and scholarship programs aimed at building Filipino expertise in Earth Observation and remote sensing. [Manila Standard]

Vietnam imposes provisional anti-dumping duties on coated steel from China and South Korea

(hn) Vietnam's Ministry of Industry and Trade has imposed provisional anti-dumping duties on certain coated steel products imported from China and South Korea, following a surge in imports that the government says threatens the domestic industry. Under Decision No. 914/QĐ-BCT issued on April 1, duties of up to 37.13 percent apply to Chinese products and up to 15.67 percent to South Korean ones.

The steepest rate targets China's Baosteel Zhanjiang Iron & Steel Co., Ltd., while Hyundai Steel Company faces a 13.7 percent duty. Exemptions have been granted to several companies, including POSCO and KG Dongbu Steel of South Korea, and Boxing Hengrui and Yieh Phui of China.

The Ministry cited customs data showing that coated steel imports surged by 91 percent year-on-year to 454,000 tons by March 2024. Imports continued to rise after the investigation began, reaching 382,000 tons in the final nine months of 2024—a 20 percent increase from the previous year.

The provisional duties will remain in effect for 120 days, during which time the Ministry will continue on-site inspections before making a final decision. [Asia News Network]

Yunus and Modi meet for first time since Hasina's ouster, signaling tentative thaw amid deep mistrust

(lm) Bangladesh's interim head of government Muhammad Yunus and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi held their first face-to-face talks since the August 2024 student-led uprising that topped former prime minister Sheikh Hasina, a longstanding ally of New Delhi. The meeting, held on April 4 on the sidelines of the BIMSTEC Summit in Bangkok, marked a symbolic attempt to stabilize ties following months of escalating tensions.

Yunus, who leads Bangladesh's caretaker administration ahead of planned elections in 2026, described the 40-minute bilateral exchange as "constructive and productive." According to Dhaka, he pressed Modi to curb Sheikh Hasina's alleged "incendiary remarks" from exile in India and reiterated Bangladesh's formal request for her extradition to face charges related to protester deaths and corruption.

Modi, for his part, was quoted by Indian officials as urging Yunus to "avoid rhetoric that vitiates the

atmosphere" and reiterated India's support for a "democratic, peaceful, and inclusive" Bangladesh. However, India did not offer any public commitment on Hasina's extradition. According to Indian Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri, Modi emphasized concerns about attacks on minorities—especially Hindus—in Bangladesh, while expressing hope for continued border stability.

Bangladesh rejected the claims of minority-targeted violence as exaggerated, asserting they were not communal in nature. Meanwhile, Yunus's office noted that Dhaka remains committed to a "pragmatic" reset in bilateral ties, while still expecting India not to shield figures it considers fugitives.

India has yet to formally respond to the extradition request for Hasina, and Indian sources criticized Dhaka's public readout of the Bangkok meeting as "mischievous and politically motivated." They insisted that sensitive topics—such as extradition—should be addressed through diplomatic channels rather than public statements. Modi reportedly emphasized that elections must be held to preserve democratic legitimacy in Bangladesh and expressed concern over any delays.

Yunus's earlier visit to Beijing and Dhaka's diplomatic outreach to Pakistan have added to Indian unease. The caretaker government's pivot away from India-aligned policies—combined with public anger in Bangladesh over New Delhi's perceived sheltering of Hasina—has strained what was once a close alliance.

Observers say the Bangkok meeting may help initiate a diplomatic reset, but the trust gap remains wide. Stabilizing relations, they argue, will require a balancing of accountability demands from Dhaka and strategic restraint from New Delhi. [Al Jazeera] [Deutsche Welle] [Hindustan Times] [Reuters]

Bangladesh's BNP urges India to reconsider Waqf law to preserve communal harmony

(lm) The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) has urged India to reconsider its recently passed Waqf Amendment Bill, expressing concern that the legislation may infringe upon the religious rights of Muslims and undermine regional communal harmony. At a press conference in Dhaka on April 6, BNP Standing Committee member Salahuddin Ahmed said the bill, if enacted into law, would represent a "direct

interference" in the Islamic Waqf system and the rights of India's Muslim minority.

BNP officials highlighted that India's Muslim population —estimated at around 200 million or 14 percent of the total—has expressed strong opposition to the bill, viewing it as unconstitutional and politically motivated. Salahuddin warned that the law could jeopardize the future of key Islamic institutions—including mosques, madrasas, cemeteries, and orphanages—built on the nearly 1 million acres of Waqf land in India.

The BNP, positioning itself as a party concerned with regional stability, said it believes India's role as a large democratic state carries the responsibility of ensuring equal rights and protections for all religious communities. It expressed hope that Indian authorities would reconsider the legislation in the interest of preserving communal harmony. [The Daily Star]

Philippine envoy meets Bangladesh's interim leader to discuss strengthening bilateral relations

(lm) On April 7, Philippine Ambassador to Bangladesh, Nina P. Cainglet, met with Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus at the State Guest House Jamuna in Dhaka. The discussion centered on expanding trade and exploring potential Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) to enhance cooperation between the two nations.

Key areas of collaboration such as agriculture and education were identified, with both sides expressing optimism about the future of Philippine-Bangladesh relations. Ambassador Cainglet also conveyed the full support of the Philippine government, led by President Marcos Jr., for Bangladesh's interim government. [Dhaka Tribune]

Sports hubs to be built in all eight divisions of Bangladesh with UAE support

(lm) Bangladesh's Ministry of Youth and Sports has announced plans to construct dedicated sports hubs in all eight administrative divisions with financial assistance from the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Youth and Sports Adviser Asif Mahmud Shojib Bhuyain made the announcement on April 6 during a ceremony at the National Stadium in Dhaka, held to mark National and International Sports Day.

Bhuyain said initial discussions had taken place with China, but the project ultimately moved forward with UAE support. He also noted the ministry's plans to reclaim land in the Gulshan area of Dhaka—previously occupied by unauthorized individuals—for the construction of a federation office and additional sports facilities. [Dhaka Tribune]

State visit by Thai royals to Bhutan to deepen cultural and economic ties

(hgk) Bhutan is preparing to host Their Majesties King Maha Vajiralongkorn and Queen Suthida of Thailand from April 25 to 28 in what is being hailed as a historic state visit marking a new chapter in bilateral relations. The visit will celebrate longstanding royal and spiritual ties, shared Theravada Buddhist traditions, and decades of diplomatic cooperation between the two kingdoms.

A series of public events, including a football match, Thai food festival, Muay Thai demonstrations, and joint Buddhist prayers, will commemorate the visit. The two nations will also spotlight tourism and education partnerships, with Bhutan seeking to attract more Thai visitors under the "Two Kingdoms, One Destination" initiative.

The visit comes shortly after the signing of a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) on April 3, which grants Bhutan duty-free access to Thai markets. Trade between the two nations reached USD 31 million in 2024, and officials hope the FTA will boost investment and support Bhutan's development projects, including the Gelephu Mindful City.

Business leaders in Thimphu view the state visit as a chance to promote collaboration in high-value, low-impact tourism, eco-tourism, and Buddhist cultural circuits, building on the strong monarchic and cultural affinities between the two nations. [Kuensel]

Singapore minister visits Brunei to strengthen bilateral ties during Eid al-Fitr celebrations

(ga) Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah of Brunei received Singapore's Minister in the Prime Minister's Office, Second Minister for Education, and Second Minister for Foreign Affairs Maliki Osman at Nurul Iman Palace. The minister was in Brunei from April 1-4 to celebrate Eid

al-Fitr and strengthen bilateral relations. [Borneo Bulletin 1]

During his visit, Minister Maliki also met with Brunei's Minister of Religious Affairs Badaruddin Othman at the latter's residence. Both sides reaffirmed their countries' long-standing ties, which are built on mutual sincerity and cooperation. Maliki highlighted areas of collaboration, including economic ties, education, and trade, noting Singapore's imports of Bruneian commodities and the increasing number of scholarships for Bruneian students. [Borneo Bulletin 2]

Maliki is accompanied by Singapore's Minister of State for Transport and Law Murali Pillai, Mayor of South East District Fahmi Aliman, and Member of Parliament Rachel Ong. The delegation attended Eid al-Fitr open houses hosted by Bruneian ministers and government officials and attended the Singapore High Commission's Eid al-Fitr event before concluding their visit. [Borneo Bulletin 3]

US imposes 24 percent tariff on Brunei exports in reciprocal trade move

(ga) The United States has imposed a 24 percent reciprocal tariff on Brunei's exports as part of a broader tariff policy announced by President Donald Trump. According to the White House, Brunei applies a 47 percent tariff, including trade barriers and currency manipulation factors, on US exports, prompting the US to implement the reciprocal tariff.

The new tariffs will take effect in two phases: the 10 percent baseline tariff begins on April 5, while reciprocal tariffs will be enforced from April 9. Brunei's Ministry of Finance and Economy (MOFE) stated that it is engaging with US counterparts to clarify the policy and assess its impact on Brunei's exports.

In 2024, Brunei's trade with the US totaled BND 537.1 million (USD 402.1 million), with BND 238.7 million (USD 178.7 million) in exports, mainly chemicals, mineral fuels, and machinery, while imports from the US amounted to BND 298.4 million (USD 223.4 million), including machinery, manufactured articles, and chemicals. MOFE will continue discussions with affected exporters to address potential trade implications. [Borneo Bulletin]

Japan's language institute to open in Cambodia to teach Japanese and IT skills

(mfr) The AIWA Language Institute of Japan plans to establish a school in Phnom Penh to offer Japanese language training and IT skills to Cambodian youth. Cambodia's Minister of Education, Youth, and Sport Hang Chuon Naron expressed support for the initiative during a meeting with President of the Japan-Cambodia Association (JCA) Takahashi Fumiaki. The institute aims to improve education and create job opportunities for students, particularly in Japanese companies in both Cambodia and Japan.

Naron discussed the process for opening schools in Cambodia and encouraged collaboration with local universities. The AIWA Institute will provide training that aligns with high-demand professional skills, helping Cambodian youth secure well-paying jobs. Naron also thanked the JCA for their continued support and emphasized the importance of further cooperation in human resource development. [Khmer Times]

Cambodia, South Korea deepen public health cooperation

(mfr/dql) The Cambodian Ministry of Health and the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) have signed a USD 7 million grant agreement to strengthen the public health system in Ratanakiri province. The project will run from 2025 to 2030 and is expected to improve the quality and accessibility of health services in provincial hospitals and health centers, ultimately boosting the overall capacity of the region's public health system. [Khmer Times 1]

In a separate development, Cambodia's Minister of Information Neth Pheaktra met with representatives from South Korea's SBS (Seoul Broadcasting System) and Thanatvarman Digital 21 Company Ltd on April 4 to discuss potential collaboration on producing entertainment programs for Cambodian audiences.

The meeting explored the possibility of working together with the National Television of Cambodia (TVK). Additionally, the discussion provided an opportunity for the South Korean government to support the progress of Cambodia's media and digitalization law amendment project. [Khmer Times 2]

Cambodia, India strengthen defense and educational cooperation

(mfr) Cambodia and India are strengthening their cooperation in both defense and education sectors. In a meeting between Cambodian Defence Minister General Tea Seiha and Indian Ambassador to Cambodia Vanlalvawna Bawitlung on April 1, both sides expressed a shared intent to bolster military ties. General Seiha highlighted India's continuous support in strengthening Cambodia's defense capabilities, especially through training the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF).

India's "Act East" policy views Cambodia as a crucial partner in the region, and to further enhance military collaboration, India plans to appoint a defense attaché and establish a defense office within its embassy in Phnom Penh. General Seiha supported this initiative, which underscores the countries' strategic commitment to expanding their defense relations.

In addition to discussions on military ties, the meeting also touched on the successful Cambodia-India Bilateral Army Exercise (CINBAX-I) held last year. This exercise showcased both countries' growing military cooperation, with participants engaging in counter-terrorism planning and joint training in areas such as intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance. [Khmer Times 1]

In parallel, Cambodia and India are focusing on expanding cooperation in the field of education. Cambodian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Education, Youth, and Sports Hang Chuon Naron met with Ambassador Bawitlung on April 2 to discuss potential collaborations in education, youth, and sports. The meeting emphasized the long-standing historical and cultural ties between the two nations, which have laid a strong foundation for continued educational partnerships.

Naron stressed the importance of equipping Cambodian youth with skills to drive the country's socio-economic progress, and both parties agreed to enhance cooperation through educational exchanges, teacher training programs, and sharing knowledge in digital education.

India's support for Cambodia's educational development has been evident through scholarships, exchange programs, and initiatives aimed at improving teacher quality and preparing Cambodian youth for the evolving job market. Ambassador Bawitlung reiterated India's commitment to fostering these educational ties, reflecting the mutual desire to

advance human resource development in both countries.

The meeting highlighted the positive state of government-to-government relations, with both nations expressing interest in further expanding cooperation across various sectors, including education, national defence, trade, and cultural exchange. [Khmer Times 2] [Khmer Times 3]

Cambodia, Laos vow to further deepen ties

(dql) Cambodia and Laos reaffirmed their strong bilateral relations and commitment to further cooperation during separate meetings in Vientiane on April 5. Prime Minister Hun Manet of Cambodia met with Lao President Thongloun Sisoulith and Prime Minister Sonexay Siphandone to discuss strengthening ties for the mutual benefit of both nations.

Hun Manet, leading a high-level delegation, visited Vientiane to pay respects to the late Khamtay Siphandone, former Chairman of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party Central Committee and former President of Lao PDR. On behalf of Cambodia, he extended condolences to Prime Minister Sonexay Siphandone and his family, praising Khamtay Siphandone as a national hero and a key figure in enhancing Cambodian-Lao relations.

In response, the Lao leadership expressed gratitude for Cambodia's sympathy and for Hun Manet's presence, viewing it as a symbol of the enduring friendship and strategic partnership between the two countries.

Khamtay Siphandone passed away on April 2 at the age of 102 (see article in this edition). [Khmer Times]

Cambodia and Timor-Leste strengthen bilateral cooperation

(mfr) Cambodia and Timor-Leste held bilateral talks to strengthen cooperation in key sectors, including economics, trade, tourism, education, and people-to-people exchanges. Cambodian Foreign Minister Prak Sokhonn met with Timor-Leste's Foreign Minister Bendito Dos Santos Freitas in Phnom Penh on April 3 during Freitas' two-day visit. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Cambodia]

Both sides reaffirmed their commitment to enhancing diplomatic ties and mutual collaboration. Following the meeting, Sokhonn hosted a dinner in honor of Freitas and his delegation.

Cambodia and Timor-Leste established diplomatic relations in 2002 after Timor-Leste gained independence, with ongoing cooperation in multilateral forums such as the United Nations. [Khmer Times]

Cambodia seeks talks with U.S. over newly imposed tariffs

(sal/dql) After President Donald Trump implemented a 49 percent tariff on Cambodian goods entering the U.S., Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet proposed lowering tariffs on U.S. imports to Cambodia. New information has surfaced regarding these proposed tariff reductions.

The specifics are outlined in a letter sent by Cambodian Minister of Commerce Cham Nimul to U.S. Trade Representative Jamieson Greer.

In the letter it is stated that Cambodia expressed its intention to strengthen bilateral trade by immediately reducing tariffs on 19 product categories from the bound rate of 35 percent to an applied rate of 5 percent for US imports. Alongside this initiative, Cambodia requested the US government to establish a negotiation framework and extend the implementation deadline of the tariffs. This would allow more time for consultations with relevant stakeholders and a comprehensive review of alternatives that support both US economic interests and Cambodia's sustainable development.

Cambodia reaffirmed its commitment to a constructive and mutually beneficial dialogue with the United States. [Khmer Times 1]

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Hun Manet has defended the Cambodian government's handling of the U.S. reciprocal tariff, rejecting opposition claims of inaction. Speaking at the inauguration of the Morodok Techo Overpass in Phnom Penh, Hun Manet explained that while the government had not responded publicly on the day of the U.S. announcement, it had been working behind the scenes to address the issue.

Opposition figures Sam Rainsy and Mu Sochua criticized Hun Manet for not taking immediate, visible action. In response, the Prime Minister revealed that

he had sent a letter to the U.S. President 41 hours after the announcement, requesting negotiations, and had delegated further responsibilities to the Ministers of Economy and Commerce after 37 hours of internal deliberation.

Hun Manet noted that the U.S. tariffs affected 180 countries, not just Cambodia, and that his government was pursuing a responsible, phased response—starting by reducing tariffs on 85 U.S. products from 35 percent to 5 percent—in preparation for formal negotiations.

The prime minister accused the opposition of misleading the public and failing to support the country during difficult times, suggesting that their actions prioritized political attacks over national unity. [Khmer Times 2]

China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi visits Russia

(dh) China's Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, conducted a three-day visit to Russia, lasting from March 31 to April 2 upon an invite from Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. Both sides reaffirmed the need to strengthen ties between the two nations. Lavrov noted Wang's visit as an important preparation for the Russia-China summit scheduled in May, which will include a meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping. [China Ministry of Foreign Affairs] [Russia Ministry of Foreign Affairs]

Wang remarked that China and Russia are "friends forever, never enemies", emphasizing the need for improving strategic cooperation between the two nations. Wang also signaled China's welcoming of an improvement in Russia-U.S. relations, adding that it was important that big powers foster stability given the current global geopolitical climate. [Reuters 1]

Ukrainian peace talks were a key topic of discussion, as Wang reiterated China's readiness to play a "constructive role" in ending the war. Wang also further maintained China's neutral approach to the Ukraine-Russia conflict, stating that peace talks must ensure an acceptable deal for all parties. [Reuters 1] [The Moscow Times]

Wang's visit follows days after Russia and Ukraine agreed a limited ceasefire deal in principle, although much uncertainty remains on how this will take place in reality. Additionally, on March 30 U.S. President Donald Trump expressed critical remarks of both Putin

and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, with particular criticism of Putin's questioning of Zelenskyy's legitimacy. [AP]

Whilst China has reiterated its neutral approach to peace talks, emphasizing the need for dialogue and cooperation, it has been criticized by others, such as NATO, as being an enabler of Russia's war, particularly since it declared a "no limits" strategic partnership with Russia days before the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. [Al Jazeera]

During his meeting with Lavrov, Wang also discussed Iran's nuclear program, Central Asian affairs, and the situation on the Korean Peninsula. These discussions build upon last month's meeting between, China, Russia and Iran to discuss the Iranian nuclear issue (See AiR No. 11, March/2025, 3). In that meeting, all sides agreed that nuclear talks between Iran and the U.S. should occur without the sanctions and on the basis of mutual respect. Both sides reiterated their agreement on major issues and their need to strengthen Russia-China cooperation. [Reuters 2]

Wang's meeting with Putin at the Kremlin expressed satisfaction with the current state of bilateral relations and a desire to further enhance cooperation between Russia and China. Putin noted the importance of working through organizations, such as the UN and BRICS, to develop cooperation. Putin also promised a substantial program to be prepared for Xi Jinping's visit in May in a bid to strengthen strategic ties. This visit will mark over 40 visits by Xi to Russia in the last decade, highlighting both side's desire to further cooperation on important issues, such as Taiwan, and Ukraine. [Anadolu Ajansı] [Reuters 1]

Chinese military conducts live-fire drills near Taiwan

(dh) China's People's Liberation Army's (PLA) Eastern Theatre Command (ETC) conducted live-fire military drills, under the code-name "Strait-Thunder-2025A", in the middle and southern areas of the Taiwan Strait on April 2. This drill comes only a day after the Chinese military held joint military exercises, including the navy, air force, and army, around Taiwan (see AiR No. 13, April/2025, 1). [China Military]

The military stated that these drills were focused on improving the military's ability to undertake precision strikes and conduct a joint blockade. China's increased action in the South China Sea near Taiwan highlights its increased aggression in its warnings against "Taiwan independence separatist forces."

The ministry of Foreign Affairs defended China's military drills in the South China Sea as necessary for defending national sovereignty and unity, whilst also reiterating that Taiwan is an inalienable part of China and the need to uphold the "One China" principle. [China Ministry of Foreign Affairs] [Reuters]

These live-fire drills – an escalation of previous drills on 1 April – have been condemned by Taiwan, and its main ally, the United States who criticized China for its intimidatory tactics and for increasing tensions in the already fragile region. Concern over these drills has also been expressed by Japan and the European Union. [CNN] [Reuters]

In addition, the foreign ministers of the G7 countries, including representatives from the US, UK, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, and the European Union, recently voiced concerns over China's large-scale military exercises near Taiwan. They described these activities as provocative and potentially harmful to regional stability, warning that they could escalate tensions across the Taiwan Strait and threaten broader global security. The G7 called for peaceful dialogue and a resolution to cross-Strait issues without resorting to force or coercion. [Focus Taiwan]

On April 5, it was also reported that Taiwan's National Security Adviser Joseph Wu was in Washington for 'secret' talks with U.S. officials. These talks, part of a quiet diplomatic channel that's existed for years between the U.S. and Taiwan, mark the first use of the forum since Donald Trump returned to office in January. When questioned over the meeting, China's Foreign Ministry reiterated that Taiwan is an inalienable part of China and called upon the U.S. to uphold the One-China principle. [Anadolu Ajansı] [China Ministry of Foreign Affairs]

China and U.S. hold first military talks since start of Trump presidency

(dh) U.S. and Chinese military officials held a series of meetings in Shanghai on April 3. The talks were part of a semi-annual meeting between the two sides, known as Military Maritime Consultative Agreement (MMCA) working group, which focuses on maritime security.

The U.S. military stated the focus of these talks was to reduce the number of unsafe and unprofessional incidents perpetrated by China's People's Liberation Army's navy and air force. [Reuters]

China's defense ministry raised concerns about increased U.S. military presence near its borders, arguing that reconnaissance missions and military drills in nearby waters and airspace could lead to miscalculations and security risks.

These working-level talks are the first such talks between the two sides since the beginning of U.S. President Donald Trump's second term. The talks also coincided with two days of large-scale Chinese military exercises around Taiwan, which were condemned by the U.S (see article in this edition). [U.S. Department of State]

While tensions between Washington and Beijing remain high over issues such as trade, cybersecurity, Taiwan, and territorial disputes in the South China Sea, both sides continue to engage in diplomatic and military discussions to manage risks. The talks were described by China as "candid and constructive," with both countries exploring ways to improve communication and maritime security measures. [ABC News]

Safeguarding national security as priority for new Hong Kong police chief

(dh) Despite recent U.S. sanctions on Beijing and Hong Kong officials over "transnational repression" of pro-democracy advocates in Hong Kong, newly appointed Hong Kong police chief, Joe Chow Yat-ming, has promised to increase security measures to ensure national security.

On April 1, six officials were sanctioned by the U.S. over rights abuses due to their implementation of national security laws (See AiR No. 13, April/2025, 1). On April 2, Beijing confirmed the appointment of Chow as Hong Kong's new police commissioner. Chow has since downplayed these sanctions and promised to bolster security measures.

Chow noted that, while Hong Kong seems stable since the crackdown on protests in 2019 and the national security law implemented in 2020, there is a need to further safeguard national security against remaining "soft resistance." He noted a need for the police to focus on those who stir up trouble through the use of social media as well as the culture and art sectors. [Reuters]

Chow also reiterated China's Foreign Ministry's condemnation of the U.S. sanctions on Beijing and Hong Kong officials, which included Chow's

predecessor, Raymond Siu. Chow referred to the sanctions as "barbaric." China's spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs also accused the U.S. of interfering in the internal affairs of China by sanctioning these individuals. Whilst some Western governments and rights organizations have repeatedly condemned the enforcement of the national security laws as a means of repression, Chow states that he will remain steadfast in ensuring national security. [Reuters] [China Ministry of Foreign Affairs] [SCMP]

Three Filipinos detained in China on suspicion of espionage

(dh) China detained three Filipinos on suspicion of spying on April 3. Chinese state media identified the individuals as David Servañez, Albert Endencia, and Nathalie Plizardo, publishing images of them being questioned by police. Reports claim the three were recruited by a Philippine intelligence agent named Richie Herrera, whose location is currently unknown.

According to Chinese authorities, Servañez, who had been living in China, was allegedly approached during a visit to the Philippines and asked to collect sensitive information, particularly related to military activities. He reportedly visited military sites, took photographs, and later brought Endencia and Plizardo into the operation. Chinese state media also alleged that the trio received financial support in exchange for intelligence and were tasked with identifying other potential recruits among Filipino nationals in China. [China Daily] [SCMP]

The Chinese foreign ministry stated that China's judicial and relevant authorities will deal with the case in accordance with the law, promising to protect the rights of all parties involved. It accused the Philippines of making up Chinese spy cases and affirmed China's right to protect its citizens residing there. [China Ministry of Foreign Affairs]

The detentions come amid increasing tensions between China and the Philippines, particularly over security concerns and territorial disputes in the South China Sea. The arrests also follow recent Philippine operations targeting alleged Chinese spies. Last month, authorities in Manila detained several Chinese nationals, along with a Cambodian and a Filipino, for allegedly using drones to monitor naval activities at Subic Bay. Earlier this year, individuals were also arrested over accusations of spying on Philippine military operations in Palawan and Luzon.

As diplomatic friction grows, the Chinese embassy in Manila has issued a travel advisory warning Chinese citizens of increased security risks in the Philippines, citing concerns over their treatment by local authorities. [SCMP] [Associated Press]

China responds to more tariff hikes by U.S. President Trump

(dh) China has condemned and vowed to retaliate to U.S. President Donald Trump's tariff increase on Chinese exports to the U.S. On April 2, Trump announced tariff increases on all of the U.S.'s trading partners. Trump increased tariffs on Chinese products by 34 percent, on top of the 20 percent tariffs imposed earlier this year (See AiR No. 9, March/2025, 1), resulting in a total of a 54 percent levy on China's exports to the U.S.

Trump defended the tariffs as reciprocal, arguing that China has been taking tremendous advantage of the U.S. China's Ministry of Commerce has labelled these new tariffs an "act of unilateral bullying" and urged the Trump administration to immediately lift them, promising to take the necessary "countermeasures to safeguard its rights and interests." It further stated the need to reach a solution through dialogue, reiterating previous statements that trade wars have no winners. China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs further condemned the U.S. tariffs, citing a violation of WTO rules, and added that protectionism leads nowhere. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs] [Reuters 1] [CNN]

Trump also ordered the ending of a trade loophole, known as "de minimis", which allowed for cheap packages- those under the value of USD 800 from China and Hong Kong to end the U.S. without any duties charged. Close to 1.4 billion packages entered the U.S. through this duty-free route last year, with 60 percent of those coming from China as retailers, such as Temu and Shein, utilized shipping direct to consumers.

The U.S. accuses that this duty-free trade route has allowed traffickers to send Chinese chemicals, used by Mexican cartels to produce fentanyl, without detection. Trump initially ordered the ending of this trade loophole on February 1, but this was paused on February 7 due to logistical issues prompted by the need to inspect and tax millions of low-cost shipments which resulted in a backlog of packages at ports. Imported goods from China, under the value of USD 800, are now subject to a tariff of 30 percent of their

value or USD 25 per package- set to increase to USD 50 after June 1. [Reuters 2]

Trump's tariffs have also affected China's supply chain. Trump's first term, in which he escalated trade tensions with China, resulted in some Chinese businesses altering their operations, opting to do their manufacturing in nearby Southeast Asian countries, such as Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, to avoid tariffs imposed on Chinese exports to the U.S. However, this new rollout of tariffs included heavy tariffs on these three nations, ranging from 46 percent-49 percent, with analysts saying these tariffs are almost certainly due to their complicity in allowing China to avoid previous tariffs. [BBC]

The method in which China retaliates is still unclear as well as the effect these tariffs will have. Trump's sweeping tariffs have been widely condemned by the international community and other political figures in the U.S. [SCMP] [Reuters 1]

China's retaliatory tariffs

On April 4, China announced it will impose a reciprocal tariff of 34 percent on U.S. exports to China. These tariffs are set to come into effect on April 10. U.S. Trump was quick to respond, vowing to impose an additional 50 percent duty on China if it does not withdraw its proposed tariffs by Tuesday, 8 April. [Anadolu Ajansı] [CNN Business]

Meanwhile, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a statement condemning the U.S.'s abuse of tariffs as a violation of WTO rules as well as for being harmful to global trade. The statement noticeably dropped China's previous call for negotiations and dialogue and rather defended China's right to take the necessary measures to safeguard its sovereignty and development interests. The statement also condemned U.S. protectionism and unilateralism, reiterating China's commitment to multilateralism and economic globalization. [China Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1] [CNBC]

Trump's threat, if he were to follow through with it, would result in a total 104 percent levy on China. China's Ministry of Commerce denounced Trump's threats as "blackmail" and declared that China would not back down if the U.S. insists on continuing a trade war. Analysts have noted that the U.S. does not gain much from hiking tariffs further on China given the already high tariff rate imposed by the U.S. Additionally, analysts note China's position of relative strength as a country with the ability to continually match U.S. tariffs, stop their purchase of U.S. farm

products, and increase export controls on rare-earth minerals and chemicals. [Reuters 3]

China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs also did not respond directly to claims that China imposed new tariffs in a bid to stall the deal to sell TikTok, and rather called for a fair and non-discriminatory environment for Chinese businesses to operate in the U.S. [China Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2]

China's retaliatory tariffs were among the toughest responses to Trump's sweeping tariffs imposed last week. Analysts signal fears that Beijing's more aggressive stance could trigger further escalation in a trade war as both countries impose tit-for-tat tariffs, especially with China's commerce ministry vowing to "fight to the end". This has worried economists given an already steep economic downturn, with markets reporting significant losses and stocks plunging, since Trump announced his sweeping tariffs, and China announced their retaliatory measures. Investors have expressed concern that continual tariff hikes and trade barriers could result in a global recession. [CNBC] [Reuters 4] [BBC]

Chinese natural gas buyers opt to resell US cargoes amid tariff war

Chinese buyers of liquefied natural gas (LNG) are increasingly reselling U.S. LNG cargoes due to the impact of tariffs, which have made importing U.S. LNG more expensive. In February, China imposed a 15% tariff on U.S. LNG imports (see AiR No. 6, February/2025, 2), and from April 10, additional tariffs on all U.S. goods will take effect in response to U.S. tariffs on Chinese products. As a result, Chinese companies are finding it more profitable to sell U.S. LNG to other markets, particularly Europe, where prices are more favorable.

The sharp increase of in tariffs, caused by tit-for-tat tariffs between the U.S. and China, is expected to accelerate this process, especially as new long-term supply contracts, such as Sinopec's deal with U.S. exporter Venture Global, begin in April. So far this year, Chinese buyers have already resold a large portion of their U.S. LNG to Europe, and this trend is likely to continue. The combination of weak domestic demand in China and higher prices for LNG in Asia has made reselling to Europe a more attractive option. [Reuters 5]

China to restrict investment into U.S. amid trade tensions

(dh) A Bloomberg report shows that on April 2, China has instructed its top economic planning agency, the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), to temporarily hold off on approving investments by Chinese companies in the United States. According to sources familiar with the matter, several branches of the NDRC have been told in recent weeks to delay processing applications for firms looking to expand into the US.

While China has previously placed restrictions on overseas investments for reasons such as national security and capital control, this latest move comes at a time of heightened trade tensions between Beijing and Washington. The US, under President Donald Trump, has continued to impose tariffs on Chinese goods, contributing to ongoing economic friction between the two countries. This decision to restrict investment came just before Trump announced a significant tariff hike on Chinese products.

Despite the pause on new approvals, existing investments by Chinese companies in the US, as well as China's financial holdings such as US Treasury bonds, are not expected to be impacted. It remains unclear what prompted this decision or how long the temporary suspension might last.

Neither the NDRC nor the Ministry of Commerce, which also oversees foreign investment, has issued an official response. Following reports of the restrictions, US equity futures declined, and European stock markets also saw a downturn, reflecting investor concerns over the broader implications of China's decision. [Business Times] [Bloomberg]

Fraternization ban on Washington diplomats and Chinese citizens

(dh) The U.S. government has announced a ban on all U.S. government personnel, such as diplomats, their family members, and security-cleared contractors from engaging in romantic or sexual relations with Chinese citizens.

This sweeping directive applies to staff at the US embassy in Beijing and consulates in Guangzhou, Shanghai, Shenyang, Wuhan, and Hong Kong. Personnel already in existing relationships with Chinese nationals may apply for an exemption; if denied, they must end the relationship or face expulsion from China.

The ban significantly expands on a more limited measure introduced last summer. That earlier version prohibited relationships specifically with Chinese support staff working at US diplomatic facilities. That earlier version prohibited relationships specifically with Chinese support staff working at US diplomatic facilities.

Upon questioning over the matter, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs refused to comment, stating that someone in the U.S. would be better suited to respond. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs]

The policy echoes Cold War-era practices aimed at minimizing intelligence vulnerabilities, with the US citing concerns over foreign influence and espionage risks. Sources suggest the move reflects heightened caution as bilateral tensions escalate, particularly in the domains of cybersecurity, military strategy, and economic competition.

Recent US intelligence assessments have labelled China as the foremost military and cyber threat, accusing Beijing of possessing the capability to attack US infrastructure and satellites. Meanwhile, Chinese officials have countered with claims that the US is the main origin of cyberattacks against Chinese institutions, citing recent incidents during the Asian Winter Games.

The diplomatic crackdown unfolds alongside broader anti-China measures pushed by the US government. These include a proposed Republican bill to block Chinese nationals from receiving student visas, citing espionage fears, and a series of new tariffs imposed by former President Donald Trump, including a 34 percent levy on Chinese imports announced this week. [SCMP] [Associated Press]

U.S. pressures Argentina to end currency swap deal with China

(dh) The United States is urging Argentina's President, Javier Milei, to end a currency swap agreement with China, a key aspect of Argentina's financial dealings with Beijing. This request comes as part of Washington's push for support in Argentina's negotiations with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Mauricio Claver Carone, a former top adviser to U.S. President Donald Trump, emphasized that the U.S. will not back Argentina's request for a USD 20 billion loan from the IMF unless Milei distances himself from China by canceling the currency swap agreement.

The swap deal, which allows Argentina to access Chinese yuan and convert it into dollars to support its foreign reserves and manage debt repayments, has been vital for Argentina's economy, given its financial challenges. However, Claver Carone criticized the arrangement, calling it "extortionate," and argued that it gives China undue leverage over Argentina's finances.

Milei's government is working with the IMF to secure much-needed funds to stabilize Argentina's economy, but U.S. support is critical in these negotiations, as the U.S. holds significant sway over IMF decisions. Milei has shifted from his earlier hardline stance against China, acknowledging the importance of maintaining good relations due to Argentina's economic needs.

Experts suggest that abandoning the currency swap is not a practical option, as Argentina would struggle to replace the liquidity provided by China. Additionally, ending the agreement could strain relations with Beijing.

The U.S. appears to be leveraging its influence over the IMF to pressure Milei on this issue. As Milei plans a visit to China in May, the situation remains delicate, with potential political and economic consequences depending on how he navigates these competing demands. [SCMP]

China unveils new funding plan for Kenyan railway

(dh) China has introduced a new funding model aimed at reviving Kenya's stalled Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) extension, which would stretch 475km from Naivasha to the Malaba border with Uganda. The project, valued at USD 5.3 billion, stalled after China Exim Bank halted funding in 2019, citing concerns over commercial viability. Under the revised arrangement, a consortium of Chinese companies will contribute 40 percent of the project cost and operate the railway for a set period to recover their investment through toll fees. China Exim Bank is expected to provide 30 percent of the funding via loans, while Kenya will finance the remaining 30 percent through domestic resources such as the railway development levy.

This public-private partnership approach reflects a broader shift in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) financing, which now emphasizes reduced direct lending and greater involvement of Chinese firms through equity investments. The Nairobi Expressway, financed and operated by China Road and Bridge

Corporation under a similar model, is seen as a precedent.

With Kenya's fiscal constraints limiting its ability to take on large sovereign loans, the blended finance structure offers a more feasible path forward. The extension is also strategic, as it connects to Uganda's own rail line to Kampala and is envisioned to eventually link with Rwanda, South Sudan, and the resource-rich Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), a major target of Chinese mining interests.

However, experts remain cautious. Analysts warn that while Kenya has publicly framed the funding deal as confirmed, little has materialized so far. Ongoing instability in eastern DRC could also dampen Chinese enthusiasm for deeper investment. Others note the public-private partnerships model (PPP) as a necessary evolution, allowing African countries to pursue infrastructure development while managing debt levels. [SCMP]

Kenya redacts statement on China debt talks

Kenya has walked back a claim that China was open to discussing debt restructuring, after a social media post from its finance ministry briefly mentioned the topic following high-level talks in Beijing. The post, which highlighted a meeting between Kenya's Finance Minister John Mbadi and Chinese counterpart Lan Foan, was quickly edited to remove references to restructuring and concessional financing. Kenyan officials later confirmed no such discussions took place.

China, Kenya's largest bilateral lender, has played a key role in financing major infrastructure projects like the Standard Gauge Railway. While both countries reaffirmed their commitment to deepening trade and investment ties, the episode highlights growing scrutiny over China's lending practices and its evolving role in African debt negotiations.

The incident comes as Kenya faces mounting debt pressures and seeks new financing sources. Though China has signaled support for economic cooperation, it remains cautious about engaging in formal debt relief talks, reflecting a broader shift in how Beijing manages financial relationships under its Belt and Road Initiative. [Reuters]

China urges against 'politicising' of Darwin port

(dh) Both major political parties in Australia have proposed ending the 99-year lease of the Port of Darwin, currently held by the Chinese company Landbridge Group, ahead of the upcoming federal election on May 3. Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and opposition leader Peter Dutton have both expressed intentions to terminate the lease and seek a private buyer for the port.

In response, China's foreign ministry urged Australia to ensure a fair and predictable business environment for foreign investments, including those from Chinese companies. It advised against using national security concerns to interfere with normal business operations and warned against politicizing the issue. [China Ministry of Foreign Affairs]

The lease, which was signed in 2015, has become a key issue in the election campaign. While Australia's relationship with China has improved since the Labor government came to power in 2022, the diplomatic thaw follows a period of significant tensions, particularly related to the origins of COVID-19 and trade disruptions. Despite the improving ties, recent geopolitical challenges, such as military drills near Australia's coast, have continued to strain relations. [Bloomberg]

Indian investors express strong interest in Bhutan's Gelephu Mindfulness City project

(lm) Indian investors have shown growing interest in Bhutan's Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC) Special Administrative Region following the Advantage Assam 2.0 summit held in Guwahati, India. The GMC, a flagship Bhutanese initiative launched in 2023, aims to create a sustainable, culturally rooted economic hub in southern Bhutan, distinct from traditional Special Economic Zones by prioritizing spiritual values, environmental integrity, and balanced development.

The GMC team confirmed ongoing discussions with several Indian firms, with official announcements to follow upon finalization. Indian media reports indicate that the Adani Group—a major conglomerate involved in infrastructure, energy, and logistics—is in talks with the Bhutanese government for potential investments in solar and hydroelectric power within the GMC.

The GMC has also begun engaging with Assam's government to facilitate broader industrial collaboration, including efforts to attract leading Japanese automakers such as Toyota, Mitsubishi, and

Nissan to establish manufacturing hubs in Assam, with GMC serving as a strategic regional trade gateway.

A joint working group, comprising officials from the governments of Bhutan, India, and Assam, will be formed to coordinate future cooperation. Officials highlighted the complementary role of Assam's emerging investment landscape, where major companies such as Reliance (telecommunications, retail, and energy), Adani Total Gas (natural gas distribution), Tata Power (electricity generation and distribution), Vedanta (metals and mining), Oil India (state-owned oil and gas exploration), and Jindal (steel and infrastructure) have signed memoranda of understanding to boost industrial growth. [Kuensel]

India overhauls teaching in Himalayan Buddhist monasteries to counter China

(wyn) India is set to roll out its first school curriculum for Buddhist monasteries, aimed at fostering patriotism and unifying educational programs in the Himalayan religious centers near the China border. The initiative comes as India seeks to counter Chinese influence in the region, particularly after Tibetans began settling in India in the 1950s.

The new curriculum, designed to provide Tibetan and Indian students with a more standardized education, will cover Buddhist traditions, as well as modern subjects such as mathematics, science, English, and the national language, Hindi. The move aims to instill an Indian identity alongside traditional Buddhist teachings. Approximately 600 monasteries across northern states like Sikkim, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Jammu and Kashmir will gradually adopt the program, with 20 monasteries near the China border beginning implementation this year.

The curriculum is part of India's broader strategy to unify its education system and create a cohesive national identity. Officials stress the need for Tibetan students, many of whom live in Indian monasteries, to learn about India's history and its role in the Tibet freedom struggle to better integrate into the country's workforce.

However, some monks oppose the curriculum, arguing that it disrupts the long-standing educational traditions tailored to meet the needs of future religious leaders. This educational reform, which is backed by the Indian government, is seen as a way to insulate monasteries from foreign influences and ensure Tibetan and Indian students receive the necessary qualifications to pursue

academic and professional careers outside the monasteries. [Reuters]

India's Modi urges Myanmar junta to hold credible elections, pledges continued humanitarian aid

(lm) Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi met Myanmar junta chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing on April 4 in Bangkok on the sidelines of the BIMSTEC Summit, marking their first meeting since the military coup in Myanmar in February 2021. Modi used the occasion to call for the early restoration of democracy through "inclusive and credible elections" and emphasized that a political solution to Myanmar's civil war could only be achieved through dialogue, not military means.

The meeting also centered on Myanmar's recovery from the devastating March 28 earthquake that killed more than 3,000 people. Modi conveyed condolences and reaffirmed India's support, highlighting rapid humanitarian assistance under "Operation Brahma," which included military field hospitals in Mandalay and deployment of National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) teams. Myanmar's leadership expressed gratitude for India's swift response.

Both leaders also discussed regional connectivity, security cooperation, and transnational crime. Modi acknowledged Myanmar's role in aiding the rescue of Indian nationals from cyber-scam centers along the Thailand–Myanmar border and stressed collaboration on tackling insurgency and trafficking across the shared border.

The meeting is seen as a significant diplomatic step, with Myanmar's leadership attending a formal dinner with BIMSTEC leaders. India refrained from quantifying its aid, maintaining that humanitarian support should not be measured monetarily—a contrast to China's public disclosure of aid amounts. [The Indian Express] [The Hindu]

India and Thailand upgrade ties to strategic partnership during Modi visit

(rt) India and Thailand have formally elevated their bilateral relationship to a strategic partnership during Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's two-day visit to Bangkok from April 4 to 5, coinciding with the 6th Bay

of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) leaders' summit. Modi's visit marked the first official trip by an Indian leader to Thailand in over a decade.

Following a meeting with Thai Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra, both leaders announced the upgrade in ties and pledged to deepen cooperation across defense, connectivity, digital technology, and regional trade. Prime Minister Modi emphasized that Thailand plays a central role in India's Act East Policy and Indo-Pacific vision, while Shinawatra noted the importance of South Asia-Southeast Asia connectivity.

A centerpiece of the discussions was the commitment to accelerate the construction of a 1,300-kilometer highway project linking northeastern India to northern Thailand via Myanmar. Thailand also pitched its landbridge project linking the Pacific and Indian Oceans as a new trade and logistics corridor. Both sides further agreed to establish a strategic dialogue between their security agencies and to work together to combat human trafficking, illegal migration, and cybercrime. Modi thanked Thailand for its support in repatriating Indian victims of cybercrime networks.

The two leaders also witnessed the signing of six agreements, including the formal establishment of the India-Thailand Strategic Partnership. Additional memoranda of understanding (MoUs) included collaborations in digital technology, micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs), maritime heritage, and cultural economy. Specific MoUs were signed between India's Ministry of Development of the Northeastern Region and Thailand's Foreign Ministry, and between the North Eastern Handicrafts and Handlooms Development Corporation and Thailand's Creative Economy Agency. [Bangkok Post] [The Indian Express] [Hindustan Times]

Crown Prince of Dubai on first official visit to India

(rt) Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohammed Al Maktoum, Crown Prince of Dubai, Deputy Prime Minister, and Minister of Defense of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), began his first official visit to India on April 8–9. The two-day visit aims to strengthen the India-UAE Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and deepen cooperation in traditional and emerging sectors.

During his stay, Sheikh Hamdan is holding high-level meetings with Indian leaders, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar,

and Defense Minister Rajnath Singh. A working lunch hosted by Prime Minister Modi will provide a platform for advancing bilateral dialogue across key areas, including defense, trade, innovation, and sustainability.

On the second day of his visit, the Crown Prince will travel to Mumbai to participate in a business roundtable involving leading Indian and Emirati business figures. The discussion will focus on expanding economic collaboration in infrastructure, energy, fintech, and other future-oriented sectors. The Crown Prince is accompanied by several UAE ministers, senior officials, and a high-level business delegation, reflecting the strategic importance of the visit.

The UAE is India's third-largest trade partner after the United States and China, and India is the UAE's second-largest trading partner. India accounts for 9 percent of the UAE's total foreign trade and 14 percent of its non-oil exports. The UAE also serves as home to around 4.3 million Indians, the largest Indian diaspora community abroad, with most residing in Dubai. [The Times of India] [Hindustan Times] [News on AIR]

India expands copper mining footprint in Zambia to secure mineral supply chains

(hjn) India has secured a 9,000-square-kilometer exploration block in Zambia's Northwestern Province, aiming to address its growing demand for copper and cobalt, essential for technologies like electric vehicles and renewable energy.

This acquisition is part of India's broader strategy to diversify mineral sources, as domestic production has remained stagnant at approximately 500,000 tonnes annually, while demand grows at 12 percent per year. The exploration area is expected to contain high-grade copper ore, averaging 2.5 percent Cu, significantly higher than India's current domestic mines.

Beyond Zambia, India is engaging with other African nations, including the Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, and Mozambique, to secure access to cobalt, nickel, and other minerals vital for advanced manufacturing and renewable energy sectors.

This initiative positions India as a key player in the global race for critical minerals, ensuring a stable supply to meet its ambitious green transition and manufacturing goals. [Discovery Alert] [Oil Price.com]

India and Chile launch economic partnership talks, deepen strategic cooperation across sectors

(rt) India and Chile have agreed to begin negotiations for a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) and signed seven Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) during Chilean President Gabriel Boric Font's first state visit to India from April 1 to 5, 2025. The visit marked the 76th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two nations and included high-level talks with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, President Droupadi Murmu, and External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar.

The new CEPA negotiations aim to build on the existing Preferential Trade Agreement, with both leaders committing to unlock the full potential of bilateral trade and investment, including diversification of economic ties and greater market access. As part of the visit, Chile also announced a multiple-entry visa for Indian businesspersons, while India reaffirmed its e-visa facility for Chilean nationals to promote trade, tourism, and academic exchanges.

Chile emphasized India's role as a priority partner in the global economy, while Modi described Chile as India's gateway to Antarctica, highlighting shared interests in science, research, and environmental cooperation. A Letter of Intent was signed to enhance bilateral cooperation in Antarctic affairs.

Critical minerals were a major area of discussion. Both sides agreed to accelerate collaboration in the mining, processing, and supply of essential resources—such as lithium and copper—needed for emerging technologies, clean energy, and advanced manufacturing. Chile's rich mineral reserves and India's growing technological base were seen as complementary.

Defence cooperation was formalized under a new MoU described as an "umbrella framework" for joint training, defense industry collaboration, and personnel exchanges. India reiterated its willingness to train Chilean military personnel and welcomed enhanced collaboration in peacekeeping, mountain warfare, and institutional training. Chile was also invited to participate in Indian infrastructure projects, particularly in the railway sector.

Energy cooperation featured prominently, with a trilateral MoU between India, Chile, and the United Arab Emirates signed to develop Trincomalee, Sri Lanka, as an energy hub. Chile also pledged support for India's International Solar Alliance (ISA) and the

Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI). Both sides committed to joint investments in renewable energy, green hydrogen, and carbon-neutral technologies.

Other MoUs covered areas such as pharmaceuticals, digital infrastructure, traditional medicine, education, women's empowerment, ICT, science and technology, and audiovisual co-productions. India also announced plans to establish an ICCR Chair of Indian Studies at a Chilean university.

President Boric concluded his visit with trips to Agra, Mumbai, and Bengaluru. He extended an invitation for Prime Minister Modi to visit Chile at a mutually convenient time. [The Times of India] [Hindustan Times] [Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India]

India raises staple goods and construction material supply quotas to the Maldives

(lm) India has increased its annual quota for essential commodities and construction materials to the Maldives under a long-standing bilateral arrangement dating back to 1981. This marks the highest quota increase in the agreement's history, according to the Indian High Commission in Malé.

Amid growing demand from the Maldivian construction sector, India has raised the quota for river sand and stone aggregates by 30 percent to 1.3 million metric tons. Food supply quotas for essential items—including rice, wheat, flour, sugar, onions, eggs, and potatoes—have also been increased by 5 percent. The quota for pulses was raised by 56 percent.

Despite India's global export restrictions on key staples such as rice, sugar, and onions, it continues to supply these to the Maldives under its "Neighborhood First" policy. [the edition]

Indonesia and Malaysia discuss coordinated response to tackle Trump's import tariffs

(th) On April 4, Coordinating Minister for Economic Affairs, Airlangga Hartarto visited Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim to discuss the new import tariffs announced by the United States government under the Trump administration.

Hartarto told Ibrahim that it was important for Malaysia to prioritize enhancing collaboration among all ASEAN member states to tackle global challenges, such as the reciprocal tariff policy introduced by the U.S.

Hartarto urged the 10 ASEAN member states to synchronize their steps, considering that none of them is exempt from the US policy, which President Trump has described as a reciprocal move. He encouraged the member states to "collectively engage and build communication with the US government."

During his visit to Malaysia, Hartarto also met with Deputy Prime Minister I of Malaysia, Ahmad Zahid Hamidi and the Malaysian Minister of Investment, Trade, and Industry, Tengku Zafrul Azis.

Hartarto and Azis expressed their commitment to advocating for the economic interests of the countries, while maintain strong trade relationships with the US, including through trade and investment framework agreements forged with Washington. [Antara]

US President Trump imposes 32 percent reciprocal tariffs on Indonesia

(th) U.S. President Donald Trump announced a 32 percent "reciprocal" tariff on imports from Indonesia, citing what he described as unfair trade practices by Jakarta. According to Trump, Indonesia had been levying significantly higher tariffs on American goods, justifying the newly imposed tariffs, which are set to take effect from April 9.

At a White House press conference on April 2, Trump presented a chart claiming that Indonesia had imposed a 64 percent tariff on U.S. goods. The calculation factored in currency manipulation, trade barriers, and what Trump referred to as "other forms of cheating". He characterized the tariff imposition as a "Liberation Day" for the United States, asserting that it would promote domestic job creation.

The White House outlined several reasons for the tariffs, primarily targeting countries with which the United States has large trade deficits. In an official statement on April 2, the administration framed the measure as an effort to create a level playing field for American businesses and workers, addressing what it described as tariff disparities and non-tariff barriers. The statement also referenced inconsistencies in tariff rates under the Most-Favored-Nation principle.

On the same day, Trump signed an executive order instituting the tariffs, citing concerns over Indonesia's trade policies. The document highlighted a disparity in ethanol tariffs, noting that Indonesia had imposed a 30 percent tariff on ethanol imports compared to the 2.5 percent imposed by the U.S.

The tariffs are expected to significantly impact Indonesia's automotive and electronic exports. According to Bhima Yudhistira, executive director of the Center of Economics and Law Studies, the additional import duties could start affecting Indonesia's economy as early as the fourth quarter of 2025, potentially slowing broader economic growth.

Bhima further noted that the tariffs would increase the cost of Indonesian vehicles in the U.S. market, reducing consumer demand and ultimately lowering export volumes. He warned that production capacity adjustments and layoffs could follow as "automotive manufacturers in Indonesia cannot easily redirect their products to the domestic market due to differences in specifications." For example, vehicles sold in Indonesia are right-hand drive, unlike those in the U.S.

Beyond the automotive sector, labor-intensive industries such as garments and textiles may also be affected. Bhima explained that U.S. brands could reduce orders from Indonesian factories in response to increased costs.

According to Abdul Sobur, head of the Furniture and Craft Association, Indonesian furniture exports would also be badly impacted. [Antara 1] [Jakarta Globe 1] [Jakarta Globe 2] [Jakarta Globe 3] [The Jakarta Post]

Indonesia's responses to the tariffs

In light of the economic challenges posed by the new tariff regime, Deputy Chairman of the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) Eddy Soeparno stressed the importance of the government taking proactive steps to cushion the economic impact. He urged officials to intensify trade diplomacy efforts to protect domestic industries, as it might be instrumental in seeking exemptions for key Indonesian export goods.

Soeparno also underscored the need to broaden Indonesia's export markets, suggesting that the country should make strategic use of its permanent membership in BRICS to access alternative trade opportunities. He pointed out that diversifying trade relationships would be crucial to maintaining a balanced trade position and growing global protectionism.

Moreover, he emphasized the need to boost the competitiveness of Indonesian products. He called on the government to support innovation and efficiency in domestic industries by providing incentives to help domestic businesses stay competitive internationally despite external trade pressures.

In addition to his earlier comments on strengthening trade diplomacy, Soeparno underscored the opportunity that the US tariff imposition presents for Indonesia to reinforce its national industries. He expressed confidence that the government would not relax its domestic component level (TKDN) policy, which aims to reduce reliance on imported goods and promote domestic manufacturing.

He emphasized that the continuation of the TKDN policy is crucial to protecting and building Indonesia's industrial base. While acknowledging that this policy might be perceived as a barrier by some trade partners, he stressed the importance of diplomatic efforts to explain Indonesia's position comprehensively.

Furthermore, Soeparno backed the strategies put forward by President Prabowo Subianto in response to U.S. trade protectionism. Soeparno also reaffirmed his support for President Prabowo's commitment to accelerating Indonesia's industrialization particularly through the down-streaming of mineral products and natural resources.

In response to the broader market uncertainties induced by the tariff escalation, Bank Indonesia reaffirmed its commitment to maintain the stability of the rupiah. On April 5, 2025, the central bank indicated that it would optimize interventions in the foreign exchange market – including spot, domestic non-deliverable forwards, and bone markets – to ensure adequate liquidity and stabilize the currency.

On April 4, Indonesia's main business lobby has backed the government to negotiate better terms with Washington after the imposition of the tariffs. The Indonesian government has responded diplomatically to the U.S. tariffs, as the Foreign Ministry confirmed plans to send a high-ranking delegation to Washington to negotiate more favourable terms for Indonesian exports. [Antara 2] [Antara 3] [The Jakarta Post]

Japan voices concern over impact of South Korean President's removal on bilateral ties

(adi) The Japanese government expressed concern that the dismissal of South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol could undermine recent progress in bilateral relations. Yoon's impeachment was upheld by South Korea's Constitutional Court following his controversial declaration of martial law in December 2024 (see article in this edition).

Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba's administration is closely monitoring developments in Seoul ahead of the upcoming presidential election, expected within 60 days. A Japanese government official noted that while Tokyo does not interfere in domestic political affairs of other countries, the leadership change may affect ongoing diplomatic efforts.

During his tenure, Yoon prioritized improved ties with Japan, resolving long-standing disputes related to wartime labor and enhancing trilateral security cooperation with the United States. His removal has cast uncertainty over the continuity of this engagement, particularly as Japan and South Korea had recently reaffirmed their commitment to strategic and economic collaboration.

The political transition in South Korea comes at a time of regional volatility, including escalating tensions over U.S. trade policy under President Donald Trump. Japanese officials have voiced concerns that these compounded uncertainties may affect stability and cooperation in Northeast Asia. [The Japan Times]

China finds no abnormalities in Fukushima water samples but maintains seafood import ban

(dql) China announced Monday that its analysis of seawater and marine life samples collected near Japan's Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant in late February found no abnormalities in radioactive levels. The samples were tested for tritium, cesium-134, cesium-137, and strontium-90, with results deemed normal. However, China maintained that this result does not guarantee the lifting of its ban on Japanese seafood imports, which was imposed in August 2023 following the discharge of treated radioactive water from the plant.

China and Japan agreed in September 2024 to gradually resume seafood trade, contingent on China's participation in monitoring activities under the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Despite the recent test results, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Lin Jian stated that further examinations

would be needed before lifting the ban, emphasizing that one test result does not ensure future safety.

Lin reiterated China's opposition to Japan's discharge of the treated water, stressing the country's commitment to food safety for its citizens. Japan confirmed during a high-level economic dialogue in March 2024 that it would accept international monitoring, including China's independent sampling.

The IAEA has confirmed that the treated water discharge from Fukushima aligns with global safety standards and poses negligible risk to people and the environment. The wastewater, which has accumulated due to reactor cooling after the 2011 earthquake and tsunami, is treated to remove most radioactive substances, except tritium, which is considered relatively harmless to humans. [Kyodo News]

U.S. to deploy MQ-4C Triton drones in Okinawa, sparking local opposition

(dql) U.S. forces will deploy large MQ-4C Triton reconnaissance drones at Kadena Air Base in Okinawa for an indefinite period to enhance surveillance, according to Japan's Defense Ministry. The deployment is expected to begin within weeks, as announced by Defense Minister Gen Nakatani. The Triton drones, with a wingspan of around 40 meters, are designed for long-duration flights at high altitudes, covering larger areas than the smaller MQ-9 Reaper drones stationed at the base since 2023.

The U.S. military briefly deployed two Tritons at Kadena in 2023 for about five months. Okinawa, located near the East China Sea and Taiwan, has seen increased Chinese military activity, making it a strategic location for surveillance.

The Okinawa prefectural government has opposed the deployment, citing concerns about the increased burden on local communities hosting U.S. military bases. Governor Denny Tamaki urged the Japanese government to reconsider the plan and reduce the base's impact. However, Nakatani downplayed concerns about noise, referencing the lack of complaints during the previous Triton deployment and noting that the aircraft’s long-range capabilities minimize takeoff and landing frequency. [Kyodo News]

US President Trump's new tariff policy poses major setback for Lao exports

(tas) Laos is among the hardest-hit countries under former U.S. President Donald Trump's newly announced "Liberation Day" tariff policy, which introduces a steep 58 percent total tariff on Lao imports starting April 9.

The new policy includes a 10 percent universal tariff on all U.S. imports from April 5, followed by an additional 48 percent reciprocal tariff specifically targeting Laos. Trump's administration calculated these rates based on each country's trade deficit with the U.S., arguing the measures are a "kind" correction to trade imbalances.

Economists warn that the policy could severely disrupt Laos' export-dependent sectors such as textiles, footwear, wood furniture, electronics, and especially its high-quality coffee industry. With the U.S. being a key growth market, the tariffs may lead to significant drops in demand, posing a serious threat to the country's economic progress and trade ambitions. [The Laotian Times]

Malaysia and Indonesia strengthen economic ties, address US reciprocal tariffs

(ga/tl) Prime Minister of Malaysia Anwar Ibrahim and Indonesia's Coordinating Minister for Economic Affairs Airlangga Hartarto held discussions in Kuala Lumpur on bilateral trade and investment opportunities. The meeting also addressed the US reciprocal tariff policy, emphasizing the need for ASEAN coordination in response.

As the 2025 ASEAN Chair, Malaysia is prioritizing regional economic cooperation to navigate global economic uncertainties. Anwar highlighted the importance of strengthening economic collaboration with Indonesia, encouraging business engagement in multiple sectors. Airlangga reaffirmed Indonesia's commitment to aligning ASEAN's economic policies and enhancing trade frameworks like the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) to secure mutual benefits.

The meeting included discussions with Malaysia's Minister of Investment, Trade, and Industry (MITI) Tengku Zafrul Aziz on strategies to fortify ASEAN's economic resilience. Both sides acknowledged the

impact of US trade policies and stressed the importance of maintaining constructive relations while safeguarding regional economic interests. [New Straits Times] [Antara] [Bernama]

Malaysia responds to US tariff hike with strategic engagement

(tl) Following the US government's decision to impose a 24 percent reciprocal tariff on Malaysian imports which will be effective on April 9, Penang Chief Minister Chow Kon Yeow has submitted feedback and potential impact from industry players to Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and MITI Minister Tengku Zafrul Aziz. Chow will also lead a roundtable this week with stakeholders to assess the local impact, especially in Penang, a key hub for the Electrical & Electronics (E&E) sector.

Despite some analysts suggesting Malaysia may gain a competitive edge compared to other ASEAN countries facing higher tariffs, Chow urged caution and stressed the need for thorough evaluation of tariffs before action. [Free Malaysia Today 1]

The Ministry of Investment, Trade and Industry (MITI) acknowledged the serious economic implications of the US tariff, which it said exceeded initial expectations. However, the government has no plans for retaliatory measures. Instead, it will pursue diplomatic engagement with the US, focusing on upholding free and fair-trade principles under World Trade Organization's rules.[Free Malaysia Today 2]

The MITI expressed confidence in the country's economic resilience, citing strong domestic demand as the main driver of growth. To mitigate the impact, Malaysia will expand its export markets via Free Trade Agreements, strengthen domestic demand, and partner with ASEAN in accelerating industrial policies such as the New Industrial Master Plan and National Energy Transition Roadmap for the resilience of the Malaysia supply chain. To address potential challenges, the newly established National Geoeconomic Command Centre (NGCC), chaired by Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and supported by MITI, will assess the impact and craft a multi-pronged response strategy. [Free Malaysia Today 3]

Labour groups like the Labour Solidarity and Learning Resources Association (LLRC) have voiced concerns about potential job losses due to foreign manufacturers relocating, warning that tens of thousands of workers may be affected. They urged the government to reduce reliance on foreign investment

and support and invest in local industries.[Free Malaysia Today 4]

Meanwhile, ASEAN economic ministers will meet on April 10 to coordinate a regional response and uphold the bloc's commitment to free and fair trade amidst growing global protectionism.[Free Malaysia Today 2]

Malaysia yet to decide on U.S. poultry trade proposal

(tl) Malaysia has not yet responded to a proposal by the U.S. to adopt a regionalization approach that would allow poultry imports to resume from areas unaffected by avian flu outbreaks. The ban on U.S. poultry products, which was imposed in June 2022 due to concerns over highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI), remains in place. Although U.S. authorities have provided further details on their control measures, Malaysian officials have yet to conclude internal deliberations to begin negotiations.

Separately, the U.S. raised concerns over Malaysia's strict definition of alcoholic beverages under its Food Regulations 1985. The regulations reportedly block the entry of certain U.S. malt- and spirit-based drinks that don't fit into Malaysia's existing defined product categories, despite the permission of similar wine-based products. [Free Malaysia Today]

Maldives foreign minister visits Malta to expand bilateral ties and economic cooperation

(lm) Maldives' Foreign Minister Dr. Abdulla Khaleel met with Maltese Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Tourism Dr. Ian Borg during an official visit aimed at strengthening bilateral relations between the two island nations. The talks in Valletta focused on expanding cooperation in trade, investment, tourism, and education, with both sides emphasizing shared priorities such as sustainable development and renewable energy.

The ministers highlighted the potential for greater collaboration among small island states facing common challenges and reaffirmed their commitment to environmental stewardship and economic resilience. Discussions also covered knowledge exchange and enhancing people-to-people ties

through joint initiatives in fisheries and higher education.

Minister Khaleel is scheduled to continue consultations with other senior Maltese officials. He is accompanied by Foreign Ministry Secretary Dr. Hala Hameed and Senior Under Secretary Hassan Hussain Shihaab. [the edition 1] [the edition 2]

Maldivian President Muizzu visits United Kingdom to launch partnership with Liverpool FC

(sl) Maldivian President Dr. Mohamed Muizzu attended the Liverpool FC vs. Everton match on April 2 to launch a partnership between the Maldives Marketing and Public Relations Corporation (MMPRC/Visit Maldives) and Liverpool FC (LFC). The collaboration, aimed at boosting Maldives tourism, will feature branding at Anfield Stadium and extensive advertising across Europe. [The President's Office – Republic of Maldives]

The partnership, expected to attract 100,000 additional tourists in 2025, includes a Liverpool Academy in the Maldives and promotional campaigns with LFC legends. The initiative is projected to generate over USD 100 million in tourism revenue and 397 million media impressions annually. [Maldives Marketing and Public Relations Corporation (MMPRC)]

On the same trip, President Muizzu visited the AXA Training Centre in Liverpool, exploring opportunities to develop football in the Maldives. [the edition]

Mongolia, Turkmenistan to expand bilateral cooperation

(fs) State Secretary of Mongolia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs L. Munkhtushig received Turkmenistan's Deputy Minister of Culture N. Shirimov on April 7 to discuss strengthening bilateral relations.

Munkhtushig emphasized Mongolia's commitment to enhancing its friendly ties with Turkmenistan and expanding mutually beneficial trade and economic cooperation.

Shirimov expressed satisfaction with the steady development of diplomatic ties since their establishment in 1992.

Both sides agreed to promote high-level visits, establish an intergovernmental commission, and enhance cooperation in trade, agriculture, transport, culture, and education. [Gov.mn]

Oli-Modi meeting in Bangkok clears diplomatic path for India visit, sets tone for stronger ties

(lm) Nepalese Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi held a high-level one-on-one meeting in Bangkok on April 5, breaking months of diplomatic silence and paving the way for Oli's long-delayed visit to India. The meeting took place on the sidelines of the sixth Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) Summit.

The two leaders spoke privately for around 30 minutes before briefing their respective delegations. Officials described the atmosphere as warm and constructive, with Oli reportedly pleased with the outcome. He later described the talks as “cordial, meaningful, and productive,” covering bilateral cooperation in trade, energy, connectivity, and the Mahakali River irrigation project.

Oli's official visit to India, stalled since he took office in July 2024, is now expected to take place ahead of Nepal's Sagarmatha Sambad climate dialogue scheduled for May 16–18. While Modi will be unable to attend the dialogue due to a scheduled European tour, India has pledged to send a senior representative.

Speaking to journalists upon his return to Kathmandu, Oli dismissed speculation that political tensions had hindered his travel plans, insisting there was “no barrier” to visiting India. He also addressed reports of a previous failed meeting with Modi in New York, saying there had been “nothing negative” in that exchange.

According to Indian officials, the two sides reaffirmed their commitment to deepening the “unique and close relationship” between India and Nepal. Indian media reported that Modi had assured Oli of India's support for Nepal's democracy—seen in Kathmandu as an attempt to ease concerns about perceived Indian involvement in the recent pro-monarchy protests, which left two people dead and over 100 injured. [The Kathmandu Post 1] [The Kathmandu Post 2] [The Kathmandu Post 3] [United News of India]

In addition to the diplomatic breakthrough, Nepal and India signed Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs)

for 10 high-impact community development projects across Nepal. These projects, valued at NPR 625 million (USD 4.56 million), will focus on improving access to education, healthcare, and cultural resources. Funded through India's grant assistance, the initiatives will be implemented in coordination with Nepal's Ministry of Federal Affairs and General Administration and various local agencies. Since 2003, India has supported 573 such projects in Nepal, with 495 already completed, showcasing the countries' ongoing multi-sectoral cooperation. [The Kathmandu Post 4]

Nepal and Sri Lanka prime ministers meet at BIMSTEC summit

(lm) Nepal's Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli met with his Sri Lankan counterpart Harini Amarasuriya in Bangkok on the sidelines of the sixth Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) summit. According to Oli's secretariat, the two leaders discussed ways to enhance bilateral relations and mutual understanding between their countries. [The Kathmandu Post]

North Korea, China forge technology deal on rare earths minerals for semiconductors and electronics

(fn) Mangyongdae Trading Company of North Korea has finalized a critical deal with a Chinese electronics firm, concentrating on the exchange of rare earth minerals for key electronic components. As part of this agreement, North Korea will supply China with rare earth elements such as neodymium and dysprosium, essential for advanced technology sectors, including semiconductors and electric vehicles. In exchange, North Korea will obtain semiconductors, lithium-ion batteries, display panels, and chipsets to address shortages in the production of mobile phones and wireless network devices.

This agreement is crucial for advancing North Korea's technology and electronics sectors, providing a chance to enhance its productivity and technological capabilities. The deal also involves the collaborative development of a mine in North Pyongan province, as well as enhancements in logistics and payment systems between the two countries, including a digitally encrypted payment mechanism, likely intended to evade international sanctions. [Daily NK]

This collaboration signifies a progression toward stronger strategic relations between North Korea and China in the realms of technology and resource exchange.

Russia expands agricultural exports to North Korea in 2024

(fn) In 2024, Russia made notable strides in boosting its agricultural exports to North Korea, resuming shipments of items like sunflower oil, pork, frozen fish, and soybeans after a long pause. Sunflower oil quickly rose to become one of the top three agricultural exports to the country, alongside wheat flour and sugar. Overall, Russia shipped around 22,000 tons of agricultural products, with wheat flour accounting for 69 percent of these exports.

A directive from the Russian government in March 2024 began negotiations for a cooperation agreement between Russia's Agriculture Ministry and North Korea's Agriculture Commission, aimed at strengthening agribusiness collaboration. This agreement is expected to facilitate the export of fertilizers, seeds, machinery, and various agricultural resources, offering comprehensive solutions to meet North Korea's agricultural demands. The collaboration is viewed as a chance for Russia to secure a stable position in the North Korean market, facing minimal competition, and will also help in developing logistics routes through Russia's Far East. [Interfax]

North Korean delegation hosted by Russia in reciprocation of bilateral visitations

(kp) North Korea’s Supreme People’s Assembly Chairman Pak In-chol met with a visiting delegation from Russia’s Communist Party on April 3 as a show of strengthening bilateral ties between Pyongyang and Moscow. The delegation, led by Kazbek Taysaev, secretary of the Communist Party’s central committee and head of the Russia-North Korea friendship parliamentary group, was welcomed at Mansudae Assembly Hall. Also present were Ri Chol, chair of the North Korea-Russia parliamentary group, and Russian Ambassador Alexandr Matsegora.

Since the signing of the mutual defense treaty in June 2023, cooperation has expanded to include military, economic, and public health sectors. The visit comes amid ongoing preparations for North Korean leader

Kim Jong-un to visit Russia, according to Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Andrey Rudenko. While no date has been announced, speculation suggests the trip could take place in May to coincide with the 80th anniversary of Russia's Victory Day. [Yonhap News Agency 1]

Previously on April 1, a Russian delegation, led by Taysaev, was welcomed into Pyongyang. A South Korean unification ministry official noted that the Communist Party's visit—though from Russia's main opposition party—carries symbolic weight, underscoring the longstanding relationship between the two nations. Taysaev's consistent role as a key figure in bilateral exchanges further highlights the continuity in high-level engagement. [Yonhap News Agency 2]

5,000 North Korean troops killed on the frontlines of Russia's war against Ukraine

(mm/kp) New reports from the British Ministry of Defense estimated that North Korean soldiers have suffered over 5,000 casualties while fighting in the Kursk region frontline of Russia's war against Ukraine. Roughly a third of these casualties have been killed in action. This accounts for nearly half of the 11,000 troops North Korea has sent to Russia in 2024, following the signing a mutual security pact with Moscow. This figure indicates an increase in North Korean casualties since late February, which were previously estimated to be 4,000 according to the South Korean military. [Korea Herald][Yonhap News Agency]

In recent weeks, North Korean and Russian forces have made territorial gains in Kursk, with North Korean soldiers playing a central role in the fighting. Defense experts attribute the high casualty rate of the North Koreans to their assignment as frontal assault troops, as most of those deployed were intended and trained to be special operations forces to penetrate their enemy's rear. Furthermore, including language barriers under Russian command and a return to 20th century combat tactics, such as heavy artillery and trench warfare. North Korean soldiers lack battlefield experience and have primarily been deployed for high-risk front-line assault operations against Ukrainian forces, often without military support like artillery or drones. [Voice of America]

South Korean lawmaker Yoo Yong-won, who recently visited Ukraine, described North Korean troops as being used as "cannon fodder" in aggressive frontline

breakthroughs. As Russia has shown no resolute sign of working toward a ceasefire, analysts predict North Koreans will continue to be used for high-risk operations.

South Korea's military has recently estimated an additional 3,000 North Korean soldiers have been deployed to Russia between January and February of this year. [Korea JoongAng Daily]

Pakistan: New science partnerships with China target cotton innovation and space research

(lm) Pakistan and China have expanded cooperation in both agriculture and space science, signing key agreements to boost cotton production and inviting joint research for a future space mission.

To address declining cotton yields, Pakistan's Ayub Agricultural Research Institute (AARI) and China's Institute of Cotton Research (ICR) have signed a memorandum of understanding to develop genetically improved cotton varieties. The collaboration aims to revitalize Pakistan's cotton industry, which plays a vital role in the economy—accounting for 0.8 percent of GDP and 51 percent of foreign exchange earnings. This comes amid a 34 percent drop in cotton production, particularly in Punjab province, attributed to climate-induced weather irregularities. [Arab News 1]

Meanwhile, Pakistan's space agency SUPARCO has called on scientists and students to submit experimental proposals for the country's first manned mission to China's Tiangong space station, scheduled for late 2026. The mission will mark Pakistan's first human spaceflight, part of a broader agreement signed with China in February. SUPARCO is particularly encouraging proposals in agriculture and medical sciences that are novel, lightweight, and feasible within one week of microgravity conditions. The deadline for proposals is April 30. [Arab News 2]

Pakistan issues over 6,500 visas to Indian Sikh pilgrims for Baisakhi festival

(lm) Pakistan has issued more than 6,500 visas to Indian Sikh pilgrims for the Baisakhi festival, which will be celebrated from April 10 to 19. The festival, a major cultural and religious event for Sikhs, marks the beginning of the Sikh New Year and symbolizes

spiritual rejuvenation. Pilgrims will visit sacred sites such as Gurdwara Panja Sahib in Hasan Abdal, Gurdwara Nankana Sahib, and Gurdwara Kartarpur Sahib in Pakistan. [Arab News]

Malaysia looks to strengthen economic ties with Pakistan

(sn) Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim has expressed hope for increased Pakistani investment, which has grown to nearly USD 397 million in recent years. During a phone conversation with his Pakistani counterpart, Shehbaz Sharif, the two leaders exchanged Eid Al-Fitr greetings and reaffirmed their commitment to further strengthen bilateral relations. Ibrahim welcomed more Pakistani investments in Malaysia, particularly in agriculture, petrochemicals, and biomass industries.

Ibrahim's comments come ahead of Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's planned official visit to Kuala Lumpur in May, following Ibrahim's trip to Islamabad last October. During that visit, several memoranda of understanding were signed, and Ibrahim was conferred Pakistan's highest civilian award, the Nishan-e-Pakistan. Both leaders discussed ways to expand cooperation in trade, education, and research, and agreed to expedite pending matters to achieve shared goals.

The Malaysian Prime Minister also addressed the ongoing conflict in Gaza, condemning Israel's violations of the ceasefire and emphasizing the need for coordinated efforts to support reconstruction and end violence against Palestinians. He expressed his anticipation for Sharif's visit, hoping that the partnership between Malaysia and Pakistan will continue to grow for the benefit of both nations. [Arab News]

Pakistan, Russia agree to enhance communication and institutional linkages

(sn) Pakistan and Russia have agreed to enhance their institutional linkages between their respective parliaments, including reviving Parliamentary Friendship Groups, exchange visits, and more consistent dialogue to resolve shared challenges. The agreements were announced by Pakistan's Senate Chairman, Yousuf Raza Gilani, on the sidelines of the 150th Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) Assembly.

Gilani stated that bilateral ties between both nations were showing positive momentum and that both sides should diversify economic ties in the future. Gilani also expressed the need for strengthened security dialogue to combat growing militancy, with the potential for military exchange training programs to be established.

Pakistan recently expressed interest in importing increased amounts of Russian crude oil, with the nations are also exploring a new steel mill partnership. The news is another sign of the growing bilateral ties between both parties. [The Express Tribune]

Pakistan intensifies Afghan deportation efforts amid security concerns and humanitarian criticism

(tj/sn) Pakistan has escalated its campaign to deport Afghan nationals, launching the second phase of its controversial repatriation drive on April 3, 2025, following the expiration of a March 31 deadline for Afghan Citizen Card (ACC) holders. The government had extended the deadline to April 2 due to Eid al-Fitr holidays, but conflicting statements from officials led to confusion, with some erroneously suggesting an extension to April 10. Deportations are now actively underway, with over 13,500 individuals repatriated since the deadline expired, bringing the total number of deported Afghans to over 800,000 since the drive began in 2023. [Arab News 1] DAWN] [The Express Tribune]

This new phase of deportations has raised serious humanitarian concerns and garnered widespread international criticism. Pakistan's government has argued that the removals are necessary for national security, alleging that Afghan nationals, including ACC holders, are linked to militant groups such as Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), who allegedly operate from Afghan territory. However, the Taliban administration in Kabul has consistently denied these accusations, further straining relations between the neighboring countries.

While Pakistan has emphasized that only illegal migrants are being targeted, rights organizations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have condemned the deportations, especially for vulnerable groups such as women and children. Critics argue that returning Afghan nationals to the Taliban-controlled country exposes them to grave risks, including severe restrictions on women's rights, including bans on education, employment, and freedom of movement. Furthermore, some deported individuals, including

registered refugees and those awaiting resettlement in third countries, have reported harassment and detentions despite holding valid documentation, prompting additional concerns about the fairness of the process.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has expressed alarm that some Afghan nationals holding ACCs may require international protection. The organization has called for a more dignified and voluntary repatriation process, urging both Pakistan and Afghanistan to ensure that returns are carried out in a manner that respects the rights and safety of those being repatriated. In response to the criticism, Afghan refugee ministry officials have called for proper mechanisms to facilitate voluntary returns and avoid forceful deportations. [Arab News 2] [Arab News 3]

Pakistan's drive, which has already seen the return of over 473,000 Afghans since September 2023, continues to face logistical challenges, including the operation of holding centers and biometric verifications at border points like Torkham and Chaman. Local authorities, particularly in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Balochistan provinces, have been actively engaged in the deportation process, while the federal government maintains that the repatriations are critical for addressing security concerns and managing the country's demographic composition.

Philippines alarmed over arrest of three citizens in China on espionage charges

(jto/lm) Tensions between the Philippines and China have escalated following the arrest of three Filipino nationals in Beijing on espionage charges, deepening mistrust between the two sides as they continue to clash over maritime security and alleged intelligence operations.

Chinese state-run media reports claim that the three individuals—identified as David Servanez, Albert Endencia, and Nathalie Plizardo—were recruited by Philippine intelligence to collect sensitive information on Chinese military deployments. Servanez, described as a long-term resident of China, was allegedly spotted near military facilities and reportedly confessed to being promised financial rewards by a Philippine intelligence handler identified as "Richie Herrera." Chinese authorities say they obtained "conclusive evidence" and that all three suspects confessed and showed remorse. Under Chinese law, espionage is a

serious offense punishable by life imprisonment or even the death penalty in extreme cases. [Inquirer.net]

The arrests have triggered diplomatic concern in Manila. While the Philippines' National Security Council (NSC) initially suggested the detentions were retaliatory—linking them to recent Philippine arrests of Chinese nationals on similar charges—this claim was later softened. Foreign Affairs Undersecretary Claire Castro clarified that there is no evidence to confirm retaliation, and the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) has formally raised the matter with Beijing, urging due process and protection of the Filipinos' rights. [Rappler]

The individuals were reportedly in China under a scholarship program established between Hainan province and Palawan, with the NSC insisting that they were ordinary citizens vetted by China prior to their arrival. "They have no military training or criminal records," the NSC stated, noting that the arrests could damage bilateral cooperation and trust.

China, meanwhile, has firmly rejected claims of political motivation. Its Ministry of Foreign Affairs accused the Philippines of "fabricating" spy cases and politicizing the issue. Beijing urged Manila to stop making what it called "baseless accusations" and affirmed that the arrests were lawful and evidence-based. [Global Times]

The developments come against a backdrop of mounting espionage-related tensions. Since early 2025, Philippine authorities have arrested at least a dozen Chinese nationals suspected of spying on military and infrastructure facilities, particularly in Palawan and Makati. China has criticized these moves as part of an orchestrated campaign to stigmatize its presence in the Philippines.

Philippines, Finland explore closer defense cooperation

(jto) The Philippines and Finland are exploring closer defense cooperation grounded in a shared commitment to a rules-based international order. During a meeting on April 2, Philippine Defense Secretary Gilberto Teodoro Jr. welcomed Finnish Ambassador Saija Nurminen in Manila and emphasized potential partnerships aligned with the Philippines' Comprehensive Archipelagic Defense Concept.

Teodoro praised Finland's geographic and historical resilience, noting its advanced capabilities in securing defense supply chains. Nurminen, in turn, expressed Finland's willingness to deepen cooperation with like-minded countries and highlighted interest from Finnish company Nokia in supporting the Philippines' Self-Reliant Defense Posture (SRDP) Program.

The Department of National Defense emphasized that future collaboration may focus on defense logistics and supply chain management, key elements in Manila's evolving maritime and territorial defense strategy. [Manila Standard]

Qatar drops charges against 17 Filipinos detained over pro-Duterte protest

(cm) Qatar has dropped legal proceedings against 17 overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) who were detained for participating in an unauthorized political gathering in support of former Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte. The group—12 men and 5 women—was initially arrested on March 27 during a rally at a resort in Doha, which called for Duterte's release from the International Criminal Court (ICC), where he faces charges of murder as a crime against humanity over his war on drugs.

The detained Filipinos were granted provisional release in the early morning of April 4. Three minors who were arrested with them had already been released earlier. While Qatari authorities had initially continued their investigation, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. announced on April 7 that the case had been formally dropped. The 17 will face no penalties and are permitted to return to work.

Under Qatari law, unauthorized protests can carry penalties of six months to three years in prison and fines of up to QAR 50,000 (USD 13,040). [ABS-CBN] [Rappler] [PhilStar]

Singapore medical firms expand rapidly in China amid economic and geopolitical shifts

(lm) Singapore-linked companies are rapidly expanding their presence in China's healthcare sector, capitalizing on new opportunities despite economic headwinds and rising geopolitical tensions between China and the West.

Raffles Medical Group recently signed a strategic agreement with Shanghai's renowned Renji Hospital to build a "dual circulation" service model, allowing Raffles patients access to Renji's vast pool of specialists while exposing Renji to Raffles' affluent clientele across Asia. Renji, affiliated with Shanghai Jiao Tong University's medical school, treats over 7 million patients annually. Raffles currently operates hospitals in Shanghai, Beijing, and Chongqing, along with clinics in five Chinese cities.

Another key player is Perennial Holdings, which opened its fully foreign-owned Perennial General Hospital in Tianjin just six months after China began allowing such entities in select cities. With a 500-bed capacity and USD 137 million (CNY 1 billion) investment, the hospital features a Shared Medical Platform model that allows doctors to practice using Perennial's high-end facilities without making large capital outlays. Following Tianjin's success, Perennial has received interest from other cities, including Guangzhou and Shanghai. [Channel NewsAsia]

South Korean defense and aerospace company to supply India with howitzers

(dql) South Korea's Hanwha Aerospace has finalized a USD 254 million deal with the Indian Army for the supply of new 155mm K9 Vajra self-propelled howitzers, continuing a partnership that began in 2017. Under the original agreement, Hanwha supplied 100 K9 Vajra units, a locally manufactured version of South Korea's K9 Thunder, designed for India's challenging mountainous terrain.

The Indian Army has since been negotiating a second batch of 100 units as part of its artillery modernization efforts. This new agreement, finalized at the end of 2024, involves Hanwha Aerospace collaborating with Indian firm Larsen & Toubro Limited (L&T) to manufacture 60 percent of the components locally.

While the exact number of units in the second batch is not specified, it is estimated to be around 100 K9 Vajra howitzers, featuring a 52-caliber barrel, to be produced at the Hazira Industrial Complex in Surat. Hanwha's K9 self-propelled howitzer has proven successful in Eastern Europe and is expanding its presence in the Asian defense market. [Zona Militar]

Meanwhile, fifteen foreign ambassadors and diplomats visited South Korea's defense production facilities, where they experienced the assembly of the K2 Black Panther tank and K9 Thunder self-propelled howitzer.

The tour, led by Second Vice Foreign Minister Kang In-sun, offered a behind-the-scenes look at South Korea's advanced defense systems, from the factory assembly lines to live demonstrations in the field.

The two-day event included visits to Hyundai Rotem and Hanwha Aerospace in Changwon, and Korea Aerospace Industries (KAI) in Sacheon. Ambassadors from Greece, New Zealand, Norway, Romania, Saudi Arabia, Slovakia, Thailand, and Uzbekistan, along with other diplomatic representatives, participated in the tour.

The diplomats observed the production of the K2 Black Panther tank, soon to be delivered to Poland and Peru, and the K9 Thunder howitzer, which can be manufactured in just 100 working days. At Hyundai Rotem, diplomats learned about the company's mass production capabilities and integrated maintenance, repair, and overhaul (MRO) system, which ensures an operational readiness rate close to 100 percent for South Korean military equipment.

The Foreign Ministry emphasized its goal of positioning South Korea among the top four global defense exporters by 2027, with continued efforts to enhance defense cooperation with partner nations. [The Korea Herald]

South Korea hit hard by U.S. tariffs

(kp/mm) South Korea has been hit with steep trade tariffs from the United States. On April 2, U.S. President Donald Trump announced a 25 percent reciprocal duty on South Korean imports, on top of a sweeping 10 percent baseline duty. The announcement initially caused confusion, as White House officials revised the reciprocal tariff rate to 26 percent, before reverting it back to 25 percent on April 3. The tariffs are higher than expected and have come as a surprise to South Korean officials. While the tariffs were predicted to be at a rate of 20 percent or lower, analysts are now calling this outcome dangerously close to the "worst case scenario" for South Korea's export-driven economy. [Korea JoongAng Daily 1] [Korea JoongAng Daily 2] [The Korea Herald 1]

Acting President Han Duck-soo wasted no time, calling an immediate emergency meeting with the country's top economic officials, including the industry and finance ministers, the Bank of Korea governor, the Financial Services Commission chairman, and the Financial Supervisory Service governor, alongside leaders from research institutes and major industry

groups. The Acting President directed Industry Minister Ahn Duk-geun to work with South Korean businesses and begin negotiations with Washington to contain the fallout.

The government is working to implement support measures for affected sectors, the auto industry in particular, after Trump announced an additional 25 percent tariff on all foreign automobile imports. On April 6, the government announced its plans to approve KRW 3 trillion in emergency financial support for the auto industry. The Korea Development Bank (KDB) and other policy lenders will also be offering up KRW 248 trillion this year to prop up businesses and reorganize industry sectors. The auto sector is South Korea's largest export to the U.S., accounting for 49.1 percent of South Korea's global car exports, and is expected to be the hardest hit by American tariffs. Analysts warn the new duties could also deal a serious blow to South Korea's electronic exports. This is especially worrisome for South Korean companies with offshore manufacturing operations in Vietnam, as major players like Samsung Electronics and LG Electronics now face a staggering 46 percent tariff on Vietnam-origin imports to the U.S. [The Korea Herald 2] [The Korea Herald 3][Reuters]

Just days before Trump's announcement, Hyundai Motor Groups pledged a USD 21 billion investment in U.S. manufacturing, including USD 6 billion for Hyundai Steel Co.'s first American steel mill, a strategic move that suggests South Korean conglomerates are pursuing tariff concessions from the Trump administration. Trump welcomed the investment, calling it "a clear demonstration that tariffs very strongly work." However, despite the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement and Hyundai's last-minute investment, Trump singled out South Korea as one of the "worst offenders" of unfair trade practices. While Seoul fared better than China, it faced harsher duties than Japan, which has a larger trade surplus with the U.S. but secured a lower tariff rate of 20 percent. According to a report from the IBK Economic Research Institute, these tariffs are estimated to drop South Korean car exports to the US to 18.6 percent. [The Korean Economic Daily][C-SPAN][Yonhap News Agency 1]

The White House confirmed that reciprocal tariffs will not stack with existing auto and steel duties. The 10 percent baseline tariff took effect April 5, with the reciprocal tariff following on April 9 at 12:01 a.m. To combat trade risks and other pressing national issues, South Korean Finance Minister Choi Sang-mok has furthered his request for the creation of a supplementary budget in hopes of cushioning the

blow. However, the immediate effects of the tariffs were made evident as the South Korean won made its farthest fall in over five years, quoted at KRW 1,467.8 per USD on April 7. This was also recorded as the sharpest single-day decline since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic on March 19, 2020. [Reuters] [Yonhap News Agency 3][Yonhap News Agency 4]

South Korea dismisses reports of US demand for military commitment against China in Indo-Pacific

(fn) The South Korean Ministry of Defense has denied claims from local media stating that the United States requested Seoul to clarify its role and commitment in the event of a potential military conflict involving China in the Indo-Pacific region. The reports, published by *Hankook Ilbo*, indicated that Washington was seeking South Korea's support for military operations, including maintenance and logistical support, to counter China's increasing military influence.

These reports emerged during US Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth's recent visit to the Philippines and Japan (see AiR No. 13, April/2025, 1), where he highlighted the significance of regional deterrence, naming key allies such as the Philippines, Japan, Australia, and South Korea in efforts to prevent Chinese aggression. Although he did not visit South Korea, Hegseth emphasized the importance of these alliances for maintaining peace and stability in the region.

In response to the media reports, the South Korean Ministry of Defense clarified that the US-South Korea alliance remains dedicated to peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula, reiterating that the alliance continues to center on deterring threats from North Korea. [The Korea Herald]

US, South Korean firms sign MoU on shipbuilding cooperation

(dql) Huntington Ingalls Industries (HII), America's largest military shipbuilder, has signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with South Korea's Hyundai Heavy Industries (HHI) to explore joint shipbuilding efforts. The deal, announced at the Sea Air Space 2025 exposition in Maryland, aims to boost U.S. naval shipbuilding capacity and address growing concerns over China's rapidly expanding fleet.

The deal comes amid a USD 1 trillion, 30-year plan, under which the U.S. aims to add 364 new combat, logistics, and support ships by 2055—an effort to maintain maritime superiority over China in the Indo-Pacific. This will require an average of 12 new ships per year. [Naval News]

HD HHI views this as a key opportunity to deepen U.S.–South Korea defense cooperation. The company currently has the capacity to build more than one destroyer annually, equivalent to the U.S. Navy's 9,800-ton Arleigh Burke-class, and says it could scale up to five vessels per year if bilateral collaboration is activated.

Both HII and HHI construct Aegis destroyers—key assets for missile defense and naval operations. The MOU marks the first formal collaboration between leading shipbuilders from the U.S. and South Korea and may accelerate delivery of warships through shared best practices and technical cooperation.

Analysts view the agreement as a strategic step to alleviate the U.S. Navy's production bottlenecks, caused by limited shipyard space and labor shortages. While U.S. law currently restricts foreign yards from building warships for the Navy, maintenance and repairs—already done by South Korean firms like Hanwha Ocean—are permitted and in high demand due to a significant backlog.

The deal may also support U.S. workforce development, with Hyundai potentially helping to train new American shipbuilders. Hyundai – which owns the world's largest shipyard and accounts for 10 percent of the world's shipbuilding market – claims it can build five or more Aegis destroyers annually, compared to the U.S. average of two, underscoring the potential for long-term gains if policy adjustments allow foreign shipbuilding.

South Korean officials praised the agreement as a "win-win" model that strengthens bilateral security ties and counters China's maritime expansion. Experts note that improved U.S. naval capacity directly benefits South Korea's national security by reinforcing deterrence against North Korea and supporting regional stability. [CNBC] [Military Times]

U.S. Patriot missile batteries to be temporarily deployed from South Korea to Middle East

(fn) The United States and South Korea have reached an agreement to temporarily deploy Patriot missile defense batteries from South Korea to the Middle East, marking the first instance of U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) equipment being sent to that region.

This deployment, expected to last a several months, comes as part of initiatives to counter threats, especially from the Yemen's Houthi rebels. This decision follows with a broader strategy by the U.S. to adjust military assets in response to regional security issues.

The Patriot missiles, which are part of South Korea's multilayered defense system against North Korean missile and nuclear threats, will be relocated temporarily as authorized by U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth. This rare move has sparked concerns in South Korea about potential shifts in the role of USFK and future financial responsibilities for South Korea concerning the maintenance of U.S. forces, particularly under U.S. President Donald Trump's "transactional" approach to international alliances.

Despite the temporary deployment of these assets, the USFK has emphasized its dedication to sustaining a "ready, capable, and lethal" force on the Korean Peninsula. The U.S. military has stated that this deployment will function under a rotational framework, ensuring that readiness in South Korea remains intact. [Yonhap News Agency]

South Korea and Canada military chiefs discuss strengthening cooperation

(fn) The top military officers from South Korea and Canada met in Seoul on April 3 to discuss how to enhance collaboration for peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific area. Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Adm. Kim Myung-soo and Canada's Chief of the Defence Staff Gen. Jennie Carignan engaged in discussions aimed at reinforcing their military partnership.

Carignan highlighted the significance of close cooperation between friendly nations, while Kim emphasized the growing importance of their collaboration in the face of rising military cooperation between Russia and North Korea, which threatens both the Korean Peninsula and the global community.

This visit is Carignan's first trip to the Indo-Pacific region as Canada's military chief, following stops in Hawaii, Japan, and the Philippines. [Yonhap News Agency]

South Korea and Ecuador strengthen naval ties with new cooperation agreement

(kp/mm) South Korea and Ecuador have taken a step toward deepening military and defense industry ties following high-level talks between their top naval commanders. Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Yang Yong-mo met with his Ecuadorian counterpart, Admiral Miguel Santiago Cordova Chehab, at South Korea's Navy headquarters in Gyeryong on April 8 to explore opportunities for expanded cooperation. [The Korea Herald]

During the meeting, both sides agreed to boost personnel exchanges and facilitate more frequent warship port visits. The two navies also signed a memorandum of understanding to establish regular bilateral talks, marking a formal commitment to closer naval collaboration. Chehab's visit comes alongside the ceremonial transfer of a South Korean Coast Guard patrol vessel to the Ecuadorian navy. The South Korean government announced the donation of the vessel in 2024 as part of broader efforts to support maritime security cooperation [Yonhap News Agency]

The South Korea-Ecuador alliance has grown stronger in recent years, particularly following the signing of the 2023 Strategic Economic Cooperation Agreement (SECA) and de facto free trade agreement. The expanding military cooperation comes as South Korea has emerged as a major player in arms production, ranking as the 10th largest arms exporter globally. South Korea has also solidified its role in international military cooperation, with recent reports of NATO Chief Mark Rutte urging NATO members to pursue defence cooperation with South Korea. [The Korea Herald] [Korea.net 1] [Korea.net 2]

New India-Sri Lanka signal deepening ties but draw mixed domestic reactions

(lm/rt/sl) Sri Lanka has intensified engagement with India in the wake of U.S. President Donald Trump's imposition of high tariffs on Sri Lankan exports, seeking to bolster regional cooperation and economic resilience. During Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Colombo, the two countries signed

seven Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) covering defense, energy, digital cooperation, health, and power grid connectivity.

Among the MoUs signed was a trilateral agreement with India and the United Arab Emirates to develop Trincomalee as an energy hub. [Daily Mirror 1] [see detailed article in this edition]

Another high-profile agreement was a new Defense MoU described as an “umbrella framework” that expands longstanding military ties. It includes provisions for joint exercises, training, personnel exchanges, and defense industry collaboration. Indian officials emphasized that Sri Lanka assured India it would not allow its territory or waters to be used in any way that could harm Indian security interests. [Daily Mirror 2] [Daily Mirror 3]

Alongside diplomatic engagements, Modi and Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Dissanayake jointly launched two major India-assisted railway projects. These included the inauguration of the refurbished 128-kilometer Maho-Omanthai railway line, backed by Indian assistance of USD 91.27 million, and the launch of construction for a new signaling system between Maho and Anuradhapura, funded by a USD 14.89 million Indian grant. These infrastructure upgrades are seen as milestones in enhancing north-south rail connectivity under the broader India-Sri Lanka development partnership.

Modi also visited Anuradhapura’s sacred Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi Temple and announced restoration assistance for historic religious sites, including Anuradhapura and Thirukoneswaram Temple. During his trip, he was conferred Sri Lanka’s highest civilian honor, the Mithra Vibhushana, in recognition of his contributions to bilateral relations. [Daily Mirror 4] [Daily Mirror 5]

Domestically, the agreements—particularly the defense pact—sparked both support and criticism. While former President Ranil Wickremesinghe welcomed deeper integration with India and advocated for finalizing the Economic and Technology Cooperation Agreement (ETCA), critics questioned the timing and transparency of the pacts. The opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) announced it would question the government in Parliament, with MP Harsha de Silva stressing the public's right to know the terms of these agreements. [Daily Mirror 6] [Daily Mirror 7]

Moreover, the defense MoU drew sharp criticism from Tamil and leftist groups. The Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (MDMK), a Tamil nationalist party

in India's Tamil Nadu, condemned the pact over the Sri Lankan military's alleged wartime abuses. Meanwhile, the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), a breakaway faction of the now-ruling Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), denounced the JVP-led government for signing the agreement on April 5—the anniversary of the 1971 JVP uprising—calling it a betrayal of socialist ideals and a move that deepens Sri Lanka's entanglement in Indian Ocean geopolitics.

In this context, the Fort Magistrate's Court issued an order barring FSP and Inter-University Students' Federation (IUSF) activists from entering Colombo Fort and Galle Face to stage a protest against the India-Sri Lanka defense and energy agreements. [Daily Mirror 8] [Daily Mirror 9] [Daily Mirror 10]

Meanwhile, in India, Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M.K. Stalin reignited the Katchatheevu Island dispute, urging the Indian government to reclaim the island from Sri Lanka. On April 5, the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly passed a unanimous resolution, supported by both the ruling Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and opposition parties, calling on the Union government to amend the 1974 bilateral agreement and reclaim the island. [Daily Mirror 11]

Despite goodwill gestures from Sri Lanka, including the release of 11 Indian fishermen ahead of Modi's visit, the Katchatheevu Island dispute remains contentious. Tamil Nadu's leadership continues to pressure the Indian government for stronger action regarding the treatment of Indian fishermen by Sri Lankan authorities [see AiR No. 44, October/2024, 5]. [Daily Mirror 12]

Sri Lankan family of late detainee in Japan to seek full disclosure of footage over her death

(lm) The family of Ratnayake Liyanage Wishma Sandamali, a Sri Lankan woman who died in detention at a Japanese immigration facility in 2021, plans to file a lawsuit demanding the release of all security camera footage leading to her death. Her family is challenging the Japanese immigration authorities' decision to deny additional footage, following a ruling on March 26. They intend to take the matter to Tokyo District Court, potentially in May.

Wishma, 33, died in March 2021 at a Nagoya immigration facility after being detained for overstaying her visa. She had complained of severe health issues, including vomiting and stomach pain, for

approximately a month before her death, which sparked national outrage over her treatment.

In a related damages suit, her family is seeking compensation from the Japanese government, accusing them of illegal detention and inadequate medical care. The government released five hours of security footage, but Wishma's family is requesting the remaining 290 hours of footage. Some of the released footage showed Wishma pleading for medical attention, while other clips depicted immigration staff casually interacting while she was in pain.

The authorities have refused to release further footage, citing concerns about public safety and the potential disruption of security operations. [Daily Mirror]

Two Japanese ships in Sri Lanka for goodwill visit

(lm) On April 1, two ships from the Japan Maritime Self-Defence Force (JMSDF), the Bungo and Erajima, arrived at the port of Colombo on a goodwill visit. The Sri Lanka Navy welcomed the ships in line with naval traditions. [Daily Mirror]

Taiwanese, Chinese vessel collision still under investigation

(dql) The Taiwanese navy is investigating a March 27 collision between its Chung Ho-class tank landing ship, LST-232, and a Chinese fishing vessel, Min Lien Yu 61756, about 45 nautical miles off the Port of Taichung.

In a statement on April 4, the Naval Fleet Command disclosed that it is still working with the Coast Guard Administration (CGA) to determine responsibility and that any follow-up actions will adhere to cross-strait negotiation mechanisms.

While the Taiwanese vessel sustained minor damage, navigational safety was not compromised. No injuries were reported. Two CGA patrol boats were deployed to collect evidence.

China's Taiwan Affairs Office has demanded compensation, accusing the Taiwanese ship of causing the incident and evading responsibility. The Office claimed the Chinese vessel had its AIS signal and warning lights activated, while the Taiwanese ship allegedly did not. [Taipei Times]

Taiwan not to retaliate against U.S. tariffs

(dql) Taiwan's President Lai Ching-te has announced that his government will not retaliate against U.S. President Donald Trump's new 32 percent tariff on Taiwanese goods, aiming to reassure the public amid concerns about economic repercussions. In a national video address, Lai acknowledged the potential economic impact but emphasized Taiwan's strong fundamentals, noting that while 23.4 percent of exports went to the U.S. in 2024, the majority were destined for other markets, with ICT and electronic components comprising 65.4 percent of U.S.-bound goods. [Office of the President, Taiwan]

Lai stated that Taiwanese investments in the U.S. will continue if aligned with national interests. To address the tariffs, Vice Premier Cheng Li-chiun will lead a negotiation team to launch talks with the U.S., aiming for a "zero tariff" agreement. Taiwan also plans to increase imports of American goods—such as agricultural products, industrial materials, and defense equipment—to help reduce the trade deficit.

The government will support Taiwanese firms investing in U.S. sectors like electronics, petrochemicals, and natural gas, while also seeking to eliminate non-tariff barriers and address U.S. concerns about export controls and labeling issues. Domestically, Lai pledged aid for affected industries, especially SMEs, and said Taiwan will accelerate industrial transformation by leveraging strengths in semiconductors and AI. [Reuters]

The address followed Lai's meetings with representatives from traditional industries and SMEs. the discussions focused on supporting the ICT industry, stabilizing the economy, ensuring global competitiveness, and protecting Taiwan's national interests. Notably, the meeting reportedly included key figures from Taiwan's semiconductor and electronics sectors, such as Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company's (TSMC's) Deputy COO Cliff Hou and Foxconn's chairman Young Liu, although TSMC has not commented on its participation due to its earnings announcement quiet period. [The Economic Times]

Meanwhile, Premier Cho Jung-tai has agreed to brief lawmakers on the NTD 88 billion (USD 2.65 billion) Cabinet proposal aimed at supporting Taiwanese businesses following U.S. tariff announcements. The proposed plan, which allocates NTD 70 billion (USD 2.1 billion) for measures such as lowering loan interest rates, reducing administrative costs, and expanding tax

exemptions for affected industries—with an additional NTD 18 billion (USD 555 million) earmarked for the agricultural sector—has raised concerns over its initial lack of detail.

Opposition voices, including Taiwan People's Party (TPP) chair Huang Kuo-chang and Kuomintang (KMT) caucus whip Fu Kun-chi, have urged for a comprehensive impact evaluation of the tariffs and greater budgetary commitment. Following a lengthy cross-party meeting convened by Cho in the Executive Yuan, the legislature, led by Speaker Han Kuo-yu from the KMT, plans to negotiate a date for the briefing, with hopes it will occur within the week. The detailed report is seen as crucial for clarifying how the proposal will address the challenges posed by the U.S. tariffs on most Taiwanese exports. [Focus Taiwan 1]

The ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) requires support from the opposition KMT and TPP—who hold a majority in the 113-seat Legislature—to advance the proposal.

In a latest development, Taipei Mayor Chiang Wan-an has scheduled a meeting this week with the mayors of New Taipei, Keelung, and Taoyuan to coordinate responses to tariffs. The four mayors have agreed to jointly mitigate the tariff's impact on their region's key industries. Chiang also launched an online platform to collect input from small and medium-sized enterprises and held intensive internal meetings over the Tomb Sweeping holiday.

These actions are part of broader efforts by opposition-led local governments to respond to U.S. trade policy shifts. Opposition Kuomintang (KMT) Chair Eric Chu criticized President Lai Ching-te for what he called a naive approach to the issue. [Focus Taiwan 2]

U.S. lawmakers reintroduce Taiwan Allies Fund Act

(dql) U.S. lawmakers have reintroduced the Taiwan Allies Fund Act, a bipartisan bill aimed at supporting Taiwan's international space and countering Chinese Communist Party (CCP) coercion, according to the House Select Committee on the CCP.

The bill authorizes USD 120 million in foreign assistance over three years (2026–2028) for Taiwan's official and unofficial partners targeted by CCP pressure. A Senate version is being led by Senators Chris Van Hollen, John Curtis, and Andy Kim.

Eligible recipients include countries that maintain or strengthen ties with Taiwan and face coercion from China as a result. Funding is capped at USD 5 million per country per fiscal year.

The funds may support civil society, media, and NGOs in resisting Chinese influence and propaganda. The bill also calls for coordination between the U.S. State Department and the American Institute in Taiwan to ensure cost-effective implementation. [Focus Taiwan]

In a separate development, the Indiana House of Representatives passed a resolution on April 3 reaffirming its sister-state relationship with Taiwan and supporting Taiwan's meaningful participation in international organizations. The resolution highlights shared values such as democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, and recognizes Taiwan's contributions to global efforts including humanitarian aid and medical assistance.

It opposes any misuse of UN Resolution 2758 to block Taiwan's international engagement and emphasizes Taiwan's economic significance—being the U.S.' eighth-largest trading partner and supporting over 360,000 American jobs. The resolution also encourages deeper economic ties between Indiana and Taiwan under the Taiwan Relations Act, affirming the use of "Taiwan" in commercial contexts.

Indiana was the first U.S. state to form a sister-state relationship with Taiwan in 1979. The partnership has since expanded through cooperation in trade, education, culture, and tourism. [Taipei Times]

Passed by the UN General Assembly in October 1971, UN Resolution 2758 recognizes the People's Republic of China (PRC) as "the only legitimate representative of China to the United Nations," effectively expelling the Republic of China (ROC) from the UN and gave China's seat, including its permanent seat on the UN Security Council, to the PRC.

Parliamentary delegation from Luxembourg visits Taiwan

(dql) A delegation of Luxembourg parliamentarians is visiting this week Taiwan, marking the first such visit since 2019. Led by Stéphanie Weydert, the group includes fellow members of the Chamber of Deputies – Luxembourg's legislature - Ben Polidori, Liz Braz, and Ricardo Marques. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Taiwan, in Chinese]

During their stay until April 11, the delegation will meet with Vice Premier Cheng Li-chiun, Deputy Legislative Speaker Johnny Chiang, Deputy Foreign Minister Chen Ming-chi, and representatives from NGOs. Discussions will focus on strengthening bilateral ties and addressing topics such as cross-Strait relations, education, culture, and gender equality.

This is the first visit by Luxembourg lawmakers since the COVID-19 pandemic. [Taiwan News]

Taiwan, UK to cooperate in hydrogen project

(dql) UK cleantech company Bramble Energy has launched a GBP 1.5 million (USD 1.9 million) initiative, the POWER project, in partnership with Taiwan's Tripod Technology Corporation and Tripod Nanotechnology Corporation. Co-funded by Innovate UK and Taiwan's Department of Industrial Technology under the UK-Taiwan CRD 2024 program, the project aims to advance Bramble's patented Printed Circuit Board AEM Electrolyser (PCBEL™) technology to reduce the cost and enhance the scalability of hydrogen production.

The technology meets the EU Clean Hydrogen Partnership's 2030 targets for performance and critical raw material use. It also leverages the high-volume, low-cost printed circuit board (PCB) supply chain, achieving an industry-leading AEM stack cost of USD 200/kW.

The POWER project will refine the cell and stack design, incorporate advanced catalysts, and develop improved membrane electrode assemblies (MEA) to enhance durability, flexibility, and affordability. The aim is to lower the cost of AEM electrolyser stacks further, supporting their commercial viability. [FCW]

Honduras seeks to re-enter Taiwanese market

(dql) Honduran Foreign Minister Enrique Reina has announced that his government is seeking to re-engage with Taiwan, following a significant decline in shrimp exports.

Reina's statement comes against the backdrop of Honduras's alignment with China. In March 2023, Honduras severed diplomatic ties with Taiwan and established relations with China, hoping a Free Trade Agreement would benefit its economy. However,

rather than an economic boost, China flooded the Honduran market with goods, creating a severe trade imbalance.

Reina acknowledged the difficulties in accessing the Chinese market and confirmed that the government is now working with Taiwan to explore new opportunities.

Before the shift in diplomacy, Taiwan and Honduras had over 80 years of relations, marked by military, educational, and economic cooperation. Taiwan was a key market for Honduran shrimp, importing nearly 40 percent of the country's exports in 2022. After the break with Taiwan, the Honduran shrimp industry saw a 67 percent decline in exports over two years, leading to over 14,000 job losses. [Taiwan News]

Bhutan and Thailand sign first bilateral trade agreement

(lm) Thailand and Bhutan formally signed a free trade agreement (FTA) on April 3, marking Bhutan's first such pact with a country outside South Asia and Thailand's 17th FTA overall. The deal, signed in the presence of Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra and Bhutanese Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay, aims to eliminate tariffs and boost trade between the two countries.

Thai Commerce Minister Pichai Naripthaphan said the agreement would enhance commercial opportunities and consumer benefits on both sides. In 2024, bilateral trade totaled over THB 460 million (USD 13.3 million), with Thailand exporting goods worth THB 457 million (USD 13.2 million) to Bhutan and importing goods worth THB 3.47 million (USD 100,000).

Thailand mainly exports automobiles, processed foods, and electronic appliances to Bhutan, while Bhutan's exports include agricultural products, timber, aircraft parts, and beverages. The FTA also allows Bhutan to diversify its trade beyond the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA), which includes India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, among others. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand to register three new GI products in Japan

(lm) Thailand plans to register three additional geographical indication (GI) products in Japan this year: Hom Thong Bua Daeng banana, Nam Dok Mai Si Thong Phitsanulok mango, and Phetchabun sweet tamarind

Lamphun, according to the Department of Intellectual Property (DIP).

These new entries build on Thailand's earlier GI successes in Japan, which include Doi Tung coffee, Doi Chaang coffee, and Huaymon pineapple. GI registration supports Thailand's broader soft power strategy by enhancing the value of local products tied to unique geographical origins, traditional knowledge, and biodiversity.

Thailand currently has 227 domestic GI registrations, contributing over THB 77 billion (USD 2.2 billion) annually, and nine GI products registered internationally across more than 33 countries. The DIP plans to promote GI products further through platforms such as Shopee, Lazada, and Born Thailand, and at events like Thaifex-Anuga Asia 2025 and Thailand Coffee Fest 2025.

The department also introduced the GI Smarttrace system, a digital traceability platform, and aims to register 22 new GI products this year from 18 provinces, potentially adding THB 5.8 billion (USD 167 million) in value. GI items are increasingly featured in high-end restaurants and may also be used to boost tourism in producing regions. [Bangkok Post]

Japan donates diesel trains to Thailand

(lm) The State Railway of Thailand (SRT) will begin deploying 20 second-hand diesel trains donated by East Japan Railway Company (JR EAST) for suburban passenger services. These KiHa 40 and KiHa 48 series trains will first undergo system testing in June, followed by refurbishment. Six trains are expected to be operational by the end of 2025.

This marks the first time JR EAST has donated trains to Thailand, although previous donations have come from JR West and JR Hokkaido since 1997. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand and Nepal sign eight agreements seeking closer ties

(msz) On April 2, Nepalese Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli visited Thailand, marking the 66th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two nations and the first official bilateral visit by a Nepali prime minister to Thailand in 65 years.

During the visit, eight agreements were signed in areas such as trade, tourism, agriculture, education, and cultural cooperation. Both leaders discussed boosting trade, with a focus on agriculture, herbal processing, and medical tourism, while Thailand offered to share expertise in agricultural technology and processing.

The countries also emphasized enhancing Buddhist tourism and medical tourism, with Nepal expressing interest in Thailand's expertise. Additionally, agreements were made between private sectors and academic institutions for collaboration in education, eye care, and food biotechnology. Both nations also committed to strengthening cooperation in regional forums like BIMSTEC and addressing climate change. [The Nation] [The Kathmandu Post 1] [The Kathmandu Post 2]

Thailand and Myanmar leaders hold bilateral meeting before 6th BIMSTEC Summit

(acs) Thailand hosted the 6th Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) Summit on April 4 in Bangkok, focusing on multidimensional cooperation in areas such as security, environment, trade, development, technology, and innovation. Prior to the summit, Thai Prime Minister Paethongtarn Shinawatra held a bilateral meeting with Myanmar's Prime Minister, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing.

The meeting addressed the aftermath of the March 28 earthquake in Myanmar, with Prime Minister Shinawatra pledging humanitarian aid, including food supplies. Both leaders discussed disaster prevention and agreed on joint efforts to mitigate the effects of such disasters. They also committed to cooperation in tackling cross-border crimes, including cybercrime, drug trafficking, and smuggling.

Thailand emphasized the importance of the 'Clear Sky Strategy' to combat air pollution and wildfires, aiming for regional collaboration with Laos. Both countries also discussed measures to prevent flooding and its devastating impacts in their shared border areas. [Royal Thai Government]

Prime ministers of Vietnam and Malaysia discuss ASEAN response to tariffs, Myanmar crisis

(lm) Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh held a phone conversation with Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim on April 6 to discuss bilateral relations and key regional developments, particularly ASEAN's response to the US reciprocal tariff policy and the crisis in Myanmar.

Prime Minister Anwar informed his Vietnamese counterpart that Malaysia, as the current Chair of ASEAN, will host the ASEAN Economic Ministers' Meeting on April 10 to discuss strategies for strengthening intra-bloc cooperation following the United States' recent tariff announcement. Prime Minister Pham welcomed the initiative and confirmed Vietnam would send its Minister of Industry and Trade to attend.

Pham also briefed Anwar on Vietnam's outreach to the US, including a recent phone call between Communist Party General Secretary To Lam and US President Donald Trump, which focused on promoting fair and sustainable trade ties. Anwar praised the call, saying it was well-received by Malaysia and other regional countries.

The two leaders also discussed the situation in Myanmar. Anwar shared that Malaysia had dispatched its foreign minister to Myanmar on April 5 as part of ongoing regional engagement. Pham acknowledged Malaysia's efforts and reiterated Vietnam's commitment to ASEAN-led solutions. He highlighted Vietnam's emergency response to the recent earthquake in Myanmar, including sending over 100 rescue personnel and USD 300,000 in humanitarian aid.

Both prime ministers reaffirmed their commitment to deepening the Vietnam–Malaysia comprehensive strategic partnership and enhancing cooperation for peace, stability, and prosperity in the region and beyond.[Government News, Vietnam]

Japanese firms deepen investment ties with Vietnam's Long An Province

(lm) Japanese corporations are expanding their footprint in Vietnam's Long An Province following a recent investment promotion program held in Tokyo. Organized by the provincial administration in cooperation with the Vietnamese Embassy in Japan and the Vietnam–Japan Economic Cooperation Promotion Association, the event resulted in multiple memorandums of understanding (MoUs) aimed at

boosting sustainable development and technological cooperation.

Sumitomo Corporation, a leading Japanese conglomerate known for its forestry and industrial investments, signed a key MoU to invest in a biomass raw material supply chain in Long An, building on its prior USD 110 million investment in the Vina Ecoboard project, which manufactures eco-friendly building materials. Chitose Group, a company specializing in advanced biotechnology solutions, reached an agreement with the Prodezi Industrial Park in Ben Luc District to introduce innovations in wastewater treatment, hydroponics, and organic fertilizer production.

The Long An People's Committee also received a letter of intent from the association outlining cooperation in areas such as high-quality human resource development, tourism integrated with high-tech agriculture, and the transfer of biotechnology and medical technology. Additionally, a major Japanese firm specializing in waste treatment and energy expressed interest in surveying an investment site in Thu Thua District.

Japan currently ranks fourth among foreign investors in Long An, with 161 projects and pledged capital exceeding USD 1.2 billion. [tuoi tre news]

Vietnam seeks tariff delay and zero-duty deal as US pressure reshapes trade terms

(cmc) Facing steep new U.S. tariffs, Vietnam is pursuing an urgent diplomatic campaign to delay their implementation and avoid deeper economic fallout. The government has offered to eliminate tariffs on U.S. imports, increase purchases of American defense and civilian goods, and address long-standing trade concerns, signaling the extent to which Washington now holds the upper hand in bilateral economic relations.

President Donald Trump's 46 percent tariff—scheduled to take effect this week—targets Vietnamese exports including electronics, garments, furniture, and footwear. The measure threatens a core pillar of Vietnam's export-driven economy, with nearly 30 percent of the country's total exports going to the U.S. market and a bilateral trade surplus exceeding USD 123 billion in 2024. [VNExpress1, in Vietnamese]

Vietnam's two-track strategy—anchored in both high-level diplomacy and swift trade concessions—

underscores the urgency with which Hanoi is approaching the crisis. In a phone call on April 4, Communist Party General Secretary To Lam asked Trump to delay the tariff implementation by at least 45 days and proposed reducing Vietnamese tariffs on U.S. goods to zero. He also invited Trump to Washington for direct talks. Trump later described the call as "very productive." [Wall Street Journal] [Viet Nam News 1]

To advance negotiations, Deputy Prime Minister Ho Duc Phoc is leading a delegation to Washington from April 6 to 14. Foreign Minister Bui Thanh Son, who heads Vietnam's internal task force on U.S. trade policy, also met U.S. Ambassador Marc Knapper in Hanoi, reiterating Vietnam's view that the tariffs contradict the spirit of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership signed in 2023. Knapper praised Hanoi's responsiveness and pledged U.S. support for further talks. [Viet Nam News 2]

In parallel, the Vietnamese Ministry of Trade officially requested that the U.S. delay implementing the tariffs, while the Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI) and the American Chamber of Commerce in Hanoi (AmCham) jointly petitioned U.S. Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick to reconsider the "shockingly high" 46 percent tariff, arguing it would harm both economies. [Bangkok Post] [Reuters 1] [Viet Nam News 3]

However, in the days following the high-level phone call, U.S. trade adviser Peter Navarro dismissed Hanoi's initial offer to cut tariffs to zero, calling it insufficient. "It's the non-tariff cheating that matters," he said, citing concerns over the rerouting of Chinese goods, Vietnam's value-added tax regime, and intellectual property practices. The zero-duty proposal, he argued, was only a "small first step." [CNBC]

Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh responded domestically by confirming that Vietnam would step up purchases of U.S. goods—including defense and security equipment—and seek faster delivery of commercial aircraft already on order. He added that Vietnam would also review its monetary policy, exchange rate mechanisms, and non-tariff barriers—issues Washington has flagged as problematic. [Channel NewsAsia] [VNExpress2, in Vietnamese] [Viet Nam News 4] [Viet Nam News 5]

Shortly after, reports confirmed Vietnam's intent to expedite military purchases from the U.S.—a major policy shift. Since the lifting of Washington's arms embargo in 2016, defense exports to Vietnam have remained modest, but talks are reportedly underway for the sale of Lockheed Martin C-130 transport planes.

The move is seen as an attempt not only to ease trade tensions, but also to reinforce Vietnam's strategic value to Washington amid its Indo-Pacific realignment. [The New York Times] [Reuters 2]

Despite the outreach, the costs of the looming tariffs are already being felt. Vietnam's benchmark stock index has dropped nearly 14 percent since the announcement. Analysts warn that the tariffs could wipe out up to 5.5 percent of GDP, making Vietnam one of the hardest-hit countries in Asia if no agreement is reached.

Hanoi had earlier reduced tariffs on 16 U.S. product groups, including automobiles and wood products, and expanded imports of American agriculture and technology, but these steps failed to forestall the current escalation. The rapid concessions offered in recent days—and Washington's central role in setting the terms—reflect a stark shift in the bilateral dynamic, with Vietnam now on the defensive.

US pledges continued support for war legacy remediation in Vietnam's Quang Tri

(hn) U.S. Ambassador Marc Knapper has reaffirmed Washington's commitment to supporting Vietnam in addressing the legacy of war, with a focus on Quang Tri - one of the country's most heavily bombed provinces. During a working visit on April 2, Knapper emphasized the importance of "being honest about the past and looking toward a prosperous future" as a guiding principle of bilateral cooperation.

Vice Chairman of the Quang Tri People's Committee Hoang Nam expressed appreciation for U.S. funding for bomb and mine clearance efforts and called for expanded cooperation in locating the remains of both U.S. and Vietnamese soldiers missing in action (MIA). He also urged continued financial support through international NGOs to help the province meet its 2025 goal of becoming "mine-safe." [Viet Nam News]

Legislative leaders of Vietnam and Armenia agree to boost bilateral cooperation

(lm) Vietnam and Armenia have pledged to deepen their legislative cooperation during a meeting between Vietnamese National Assembly Vice Chairman Tran Quang Phuong and Armenian Deputy Speaker Hakob

Arshakyan on April 4 in Yerevan. The meeting was held on the sidelines of National Assembly Chairman Tran Thanh Man's official visit to Armenia.

Both sides emphasize the significance of the recent high-level exchanges, including Armenian National Assembly President Alen Simonyan's visit to Vietnam in 2024 and Man's reciprocal visit, as signals of strengthened bilateral ties.

Phuong highlighted Vietnam's readiness to support government agencies and businesses from both countries in exploring cooperation opportunities. Arshakyan, in turn, proposed signing a double tax avoidance agreement and establishing direct flights to promote trade, investment, tourism, and education ties.

The two leaders also agreed to implement their recently signed legislative cooperation agreement actively and to enhance delegation exchanges at all levels. They further reaffirmed their commitment to maintaining mutual support in multilateral and inter-parliamentary forums. [Viet Nam News]

Vietnam, Belarus aim to deepen economic and strategic ties

(cmc/hn) Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh met with Belarusian Deputy Prime Minister Anatoly Sivak in Hanoi on April 2, 2025, reaffirming Vietnam's commitment to advancing its long-standing friendship and strategic partnership with Belarus through stronger economic and sectoral cooperation.

The meeting focused on expanding trade and investment ties. Prime Minister Chinh called for Belarus to facilitate the export of key Vietnamese products such as textiles, seafood, and electronics. In response, the Belarusian side expressed strong interest in enhancing cooperation in high-tech industries, agricultural machinery, and automobile production.

The leaders also discussed financial cooperation, agreeing to promote trade settlements in national currencies as a means to reduce reliance on third-party currencies and strengthen economic resilience. Additionally, both sides acknowledged the need to establish direct flights between Vietnam and Belarus to boost business and tourism exchanges. They pledged to explore viable options to make this initiative a reality.

Beyond trade, the discussions covered wide-ranging areas for cooperation including defense, information technology, clean energy, logistics, pharmaceuticals, agriculture, education, and cultural exchange. Chinh emphasizes the importance of increased high-level delegation visits, educational scholarship programs, and expanded people-to-people links. Belarus reaffirmed its commitment to working with Vietnam on technology transfer and mutually beneficial development projects. [Viet Nam News] [Baochinhphu] [Belta]

Belgium's royals complete five-day state-visit to Vietnam

(hn/lm) King Philippe and Queen Mathilde of Belgium concluded a five-day state visit to Vietnam on April 4, marking the first such head-of-state-level exchange between the two nations since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1973. The visit, celebrated as a milestone in Vietnam–Belgium ties, aimed to deepen cooperation in trade, green energy, education, and sustainable development.

During the visit, King Philippe met with top Vietnamese leaders, including Communist Party General Secretary To Lam, President Luong Cuong, Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh, and National Assembly Chairman Tran Thanh Man. The leaders welcomed the high-level Belgian delegation—which included senior officials, CEOs, and academic representatives—and expressed confidence that the visit would inject new momentum into bilateral ties. [VietnamPlus]

Key outcomes included several cooperation agreements in trade, healthcare, environmental protection, culture, and support for victims of Agent Orange/dioxin. Notably, Belgian engineering group John Cockerill signed preliminary deals with Vietnamese partners for future investment in green hydrogen production, including a potential factory to manufacture electrolysers for Southeast Asia. Vietnam has set a target of producing 15 gigawatts of hydrogen-based power by mid-century. [FCW.]

Vietnam reiterated its call for Belgium to ratify the EU–Vietnam Investment Protection Agreement (EVIPA) and to advocate for the removal of the European Commission's "yellow card" on Vietnamese seafood over illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing. Belgian lawmakers responded positively, affirming support for deeper parliamentary cooperation and highlighting Belgium's historical solidarity with

Vietnam, including its resolution in support of Agent Orange victims. [Voice of Vietnam]

In bilateral trade, Belgium remains Vietnam's sixth-largest trading partner within the European Union, with 2024 trade reaching an estimated USD 4.45 billion. Belgian investment in Vietnam currently exceeds USD 1.1 billion, focusing on sectors such as logistics, industrial parks, and renewable energy. [The Pinnacle Gazette]

Spanish prime minister's visit to Vietnam expected to deepen strategic partnership and boost economic ties

(lm) Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez is currently on an official visit to Vietnam from April 8 to 10, at the invitation of Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh. The visit, the first by a Spanish head of government since diplomatic ties were established in 1977, is expected to elevate the bilateral strategic partnership to a new level of depth and effectiveness.

Vietnamese Ambassador to Spain Doan Thanh Song emphasizes the symbolic importance of the trip, which comes shortly after the two countries marked the 15th anniversary of their strategic partnership in 2024 and ahead of the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations in 2027. Sánchez has selected Vietnam and China as his first Asian destinations in 2025, reflecting Spain's growing interest in Asia and recognition of Vietnam's regional importance.

During the three-day visit, Sánchez will hold talks in both Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City focused on expanding cooperation in politics, trade, investment, defense, security, education, and sustainability. The two governments are expected to sign new cooperation agreements, especially in infrastructure, urban transport, and renewable energy. Nearly 20 major Spanish firms are accompanying Sánchez, signaling increased interest in Vietnam's market, particularly in sectors where Spain holds strengths and Vietnam seeks high-tech investment.

Spain was the first European Union country to establish a strategic partnership with Vietnam and remains one of its leading trade partners in Europe. Bilateral trade has grown steadily, reaching USD 4.7 billion in 2024. Vietnam mainly exports phones, steel, textiles, and footwear to Spain, while importing pharmaceuticals, machinery, and industrial chemicals.

With Spain having already ratified the EU–Vietnam Investment Protection Agreement (EVIPA), officials expect Sánchez's visit to catalyze further growth in bilateral commerce. Spain currently has 96 investment projects in Vietnam worth nearly USD 144 million, with recent projects focusing on renewable energy and digitalization.

Cultural ties have also flourished, with over 85,000 Spanish tourists visiting Vietnam in 2024 and around 1,000 Vietnamese children adopted into Spanish families. The ambassador noted that stronger ties with Spain could help Vietnam broaden its reach into Southern Europe, Latin America, and North Africa—regions where Spain wields significant influence. [Viet Nam News 1] [Viet Nam News 2]

Foreign ministers of Vietnam and Russia hold talks in Moscow, reaffirm strategic partnership

(hn) Vietnamese Foreign Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Bui Thanh Son held talks with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in Moscow on April 2, during his official visit to Russia from April 2 to 4. The two ministers reaffirmed the importance of the Vietnam–Russia comprehensive strategic partnership, pledging to deepen cooperation across key sectors and promote high-level exchanges.

Both sides highlighted the positive trajectory in political, economic, and trade relations. They agreed to further develop cooperation in energy, transport, science and technology, logistics, agriculture, and education. The ministers emphasized the role of the free trade agreement between Vietnam and the Eurasian Economic Union, committing to implement key projects and launch new initiatives to make economic cooperation a central pillar of bilateral ties.

Minister Son urged Russia to support the Vietnamese community living in the country and to consider visa exemptions for holders of ordinary Vietnamese passports. He also emphasized Vietnam’s support for multilateralism and its willingness to cooperate with Russia in international forums such as the United Nations, ASEAN, and BRICS, particularly in addressing non-traditional security challenges. [Viet Nam News]

Australia and Vietnam formalize 2025–2030 development partnership plan

(cmc) Australia and Vietnam have formalized their development cooperation through the Development Partnership Plan 2025–2030 (DPP), strengthening their Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and building on over five decades of bilateral engagement. The DPP aligns with Australia's 2023 International Development Policy and outlines four core objectives with structured implementation and monitoring frameworks to ensure Australia's development support effectively contributes to Vietnam's national priorities.

The agreement spans the full range of Australia's development assistance—covering bilateral Official Development Assistance (ODA), regional and global ODA, and non-ODA initiatives. While continuing to support economic growth, skills development, and social equality in line with Vietnam's Socio-Economic Development Strategy 2021–2030, the DPP introduces new priorities including climate adaptation, mitigation, and digital transformation. [Australian Government, Department for Foreign Affairs and Trade] [Vietnam Briefing]

Top legislators of Vietnam and Uzbekistan agree to deepen ties, sign parliamentary cooperation deal

(lm) Vietnam's National Assembly Chairman Tran Thanh Man held talks with Tanzila Narbaeva, President of the Senate of Uzbekistan, on April 5 in Tashkent, marking the first official visit by a Vietnamese top legislator to the Central Asian country since diplomatic relations were established. The meeting took place alongside Man's participation in the 150th Inter-Parliamentary Union Assembly.

Both leaders praised the long-standing friendship between Vietnam and Uzbekistan and reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening bilateral cooperation across multiple channels, including party, state, and parliamentary institutions, as well as people-to-people ties. The talks concluded with the signing of a parliamentary cooperation agreement.

The two sides agreed to enhance exchanges between high-level delegations, specialized parliamentary committees, and youth and women's groups. They also stressed the need to monitor the implementation of intergovernmental agreements, particularly in trade and investment, and emphasized joint efforts to support each other in expanding parliamentary cooperation in the region.

Recognizing untapped potential in economic ties, both parties agreed to focus on increasing information exchange, promoting business and investment collaboration, and developing cooperation in sectors such as energy, oil and gas, agriculture, textiles, health care, tourism, education, and transport. The leaders welcomed the launch of direct flights between Khanh Hoa and Tashkent in 2024 as a step towards boosting people-to-people exchange.

Man expressed Vietnam's readiness to act as a bridge between Uzbekistan and ASEAN and called for Uzbekistan's support on the peaceful resolution of disputes in the South China Sea based on international law, including the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. Narbaeva, in turn, reaffirmed support for the Vietnamese community in Uzbekistan and accepted an invitation to visit Vietnam with a joint Senate and Legislative Chamber delegation. [Viet Nam News]

Announcements

Upcoming online events

8 April 2025 @ 10:00 – 10:45 a.m. (GMT-5), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, USA

What Comes Next for Israel? A Conversation With Former Shin Bet Director Ami Ayalon

This online conversation features Ami Ayalon, Director of Israel's domestic intelligence and security service, who share his views on the future of Gaza and prospects for a longer-term agreement. For more information, see [Carnegie].

9 April 2025 @ 10:00 – 11:15 a.m. (GMT-5), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, USA

Risks and Opportunities for Climate Mitigation and Adaptation in the MENA Region

This webinar features a discussion about knowledge and policy gaps between climate change, socioeconomic vulnerabilities, governance and stakeholder capacities in the MENA region. For more information, see [Carnegie].

9 April 2025 @ 9:30 a.m. – 3:30 p.m. (GMT+2), Bruegel, Belgium

Conference on globalisation and geo-economic fragmentation

At this online conference academics, policymakers, and market participants will discuss key aspects surrounding globalization and geo-economic fragmentation. For more information, and to register online, please visit [Bruegel].

10 April 2025 @ 4:00 – 5:00 p.m. (GMT+3), Finnish Institute of International Affairs, Finland

Transatlantic Currents: The US Role in Bolstering European Defence Capabilities and Possible Changes Under the Trump Administration

This webinar examines the US Defense Department's role in formulating and executing US policies regarding cooperation with Allies and partners, with a focus on Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine.

For more information, see [FIIA].

10 April 2025 @ 2:00 – 3:00 p.m. (GTM), Chatham House, UK

Yemen: What has a decade of military intervention achieved?

At this webinar experts discuss the impact of a decade of regional and international military intervention in Yemen and implications for the country's future. For more information, see [Chatham House].

10 April 2025 @ 6:00 – 7:00 p.m. (GTM), Chatham House, UK

US–Russia rapprochement: What is the end game?

This webcast discusses the US strategy towards Russia, implications for the war on Ukraine and China's perspective on warming relations between the two countries. For more information, see [Chatham House].

11 April 2025 @ 9:00 – 10:15 a.m. (GMT-5), Center for Strategic & International Studies, USA

After Impeachment: South Korean Presidential Election

This hybrid event discusses the impacts of the Constitutional Court decision to uphold the impeachment of President Yoon Suk Yeol on April 4, that pave the path for a snap presidential election in 60 days. For more information, see [CSIS].

11 April 2025 @ 1:00 – 4:00 p.m. (GMT-5), Center for Strategic & International Studies, USA

Deepening the U.S.-Japan Space Security Relationship

This hybrid event examines the significance of the U.S.-Japan collaboration in space security, assess achievements to date, and identify avenues for enhancing this partnership in space. In addition, it delve into the wider U.S.-Japan security alliance, the integration of space into each country's national security framework, and key elements for advancing cooperation in space security. For more information, see [CSIS].

14 April 2025 @ 9:00 – 10:15 a.m. (GMT-5), Brookings Institution, USA

Global responses to an American reset of international trade

This webinar discusses how states and governments across the globe are responding to US President Trump's tariff actions in diverse ways, from negotiation to retaliation and diversification. For more information, see [Brookings].

15 April 2025 @ 10:00 – 11:30 a.m. (GMT-5), ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore

Assessing the Prabowo Administration's "Free Nutritious Meals" Programme

This hybrid event reviews President Prabowo Subianto's plan to feed Indonesia's schoolchildren and pregnant mothers. Issues addressed include the meals' nutritional value, governance, fiscal and social sustainability.

For more information, see [ISEAS].

Recent Book Releases

Mark Evans, Patrick Dunleavy, John Phillimore (eds.), ***Australia's Evolving Democracy: A New Democratic Audit***, Lse Press, 626 pages, published December 5, 2024. For a review, see [LSE].

Benjamin Wallace, ***The Mysterious Mr. Nakamoto: A Fifteen-Year Quest to Unmask the Secret Genius Behind Crypto***, Crown, 352 pages, published, March 18, 2025. For a review, see [The New York Times].

Lizhi Liu, ***From Click to Boom: The Political Economy of E-commerce in China***, Princeton University Press, 328 pages, published November 12, 2024. For a review, see [Asian Review of Books].

Kate Conger, **Ryan Mac**, ***Character Limit: How Elon Musk Destroyed Twitter***, Penguin Press, 480 pages, published September 17, 2024. For a review, see [Foreign Affairs].

Anthony J. Spires, ***Everyday Democracy: Civil Society, Youth and the Struggle Against Authoritarian Culture in China***, Columbia University Press, 312 pages,

published November 19, 2024. For a review, see [Foreign Affairs]

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

The **United Nations Development Programme** is looking for a **National Project Assistant - St. Lucia**. The deadline for application submission is April 25, 2025. For more information, see [UNDP].

The **United Nations Development Programme** is looking for an **Executive Secretary**. The deadline for application submission is May 17, 2025. For more information, see [UN Careers].

The **Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights** is looking for a Senior Human Rights Officer. The deadline for application submission is April 15, 2025. For more information, see [UN Careers].

NATO is looking for a **Team Leader, AV Operations**. The deadline for application submission is April 30, 2025. For more information, see [NATO].

NATO is looking for a **Political Advisor** (Allied Maritime Command). The deadline for application submission is April 28, 2025. For more information, see [NATO].

The **European Stability Mechanism** is looking for a **Senior Procurement Officer.** The deadline for application submission is April 24, 2025. For more information, see [ESM].

The **Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance** is looking for a **Head of Office, Brussels**. The deadline for application submission is April 27, 2025. For more information, see [DCAF].

Client Earth is looking for a **Regional Director of Programmes, Europe**. The deadline for application submission is April 21, 2025. For more information, see [Client Earth].

A&O Shearman Luxembourg is looking for a **Junior EU Policy advisor**. The position is open until filled. For more information, see [A&O Shearman].

The **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].

The **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].

The **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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