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Asia in Review

Grasp the pattern, read the trend

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Dear Readers,

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

I wish you an informative read and extend special greetings to everyone who celebrates Belgium's National Day, Egypt's Revolution Day, and Liberia's and the Maldives' Independence 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: Worst lead poisoning scandal in two decades exposes local corruption, governance failures

(dql) China's worst food safety scandal in nearly two decades has emerged in Tianshui, Gansu Province, where hundreds of children suffered lead poisoning after a kindergarten cook used lead-based paint to color food. Authorities announced on July investigations into ten local officials amid widespread criticism of local governance failures, including data falsification by a local hospital and the provincial disease control center.

The scandal revealed systemic corruption and negligence: the Maiji district education bureau ignored illegal kindergarten enrolments and failed to conduct food safety inspections for two years. Officials from the education and market supervision bureaus are under investigation for allegedly accepting bribes from the kindergarten owner, who, along with seven others, has

been detained. Parents only learned of the poisoning after seeking tests in a neighboring province.

Media reports and experts condemned the slow and secretive response, highlighting a “passive feedback mechanism” that obstructed public access to accurate information. The state broadcaster announced new food safety guidelines for schools in response.

This crisis recalls the 2008 melamine milk scandal and signals deep governance problems at the local level. Analysts warn that repeated scandals requiring higher-level intervention reveal escalating risks in China’s local governance. Former Global Times editor Hu Xijin criticized the authorities’ initial cover-up attempts, calling it a grave communication failure reflecting broader chaos in food safety management. [SCMP]

China: Beijing Court issues suspended death sentence to former Tibet

(dql) A court in Beijing has sentenced Wu Yingjie, the former Communist Party chief of China’s Tibet region, to death with a two-year reprieve after finding him guilty of accepting over CNY 343 million (USD 47.78 million) in bribes in return for favors granted to others related to project contracts and business operation. [Xinhua]

Wu, 68, spent most of his career in Tibet, holding various government positions from 2006 to 2021 before being removed from his party chief role and reassigned to Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), the country’s top legislature.

In December 2022, he was sanctioned by the U.S. Treasury in December 2022, for alleged human rights abuses in Tibet, including extrajudicial killings and mass detentions. Canada followed with similar sanctions in December 2024. [Reuters]

In another case, He Wenzhong, former deputy general manager of the state-owned China Electronics Technology Group Corp, has been sentenced to death with a two-year reprieve for accepting over USD 40 million in bribes. The charges relate to offenses committed during his tenure from 2006 to 2023. [The Straits Times]

China: Scrutiny of research funding to be tightened

(dql) The Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI), China's top anti-corruption body, has pledged to intensify scrutiny over scientific research funding, aiming to safeguard the country's high-tech development as a key driver of economic growth and global competitiveness. [CCDI, in Chinese]

CCDI chief Li Xi called for stricter oversight of project evaluation, fund allocation, and project management practices and vowed to crack down on abuses such as bribery and embezzlement in research funding, while proposing regulatory reforms, stronger governance, and enhanced daily supervision. He also urged greater use of digital technologies—including big data and artificial intelligence—to detect complex corruption schemes, arguing that these tools provide powerful means for monitoring and enforcement.

Several corruption cases have already emerged in 2025. In April, the National Natural Science Foundation of China announced investigations into 15 misconduct cases involving 13 universities and 24 individuals, including breaches of review protocols, plagiarism, and fraudulent grant labeling. Separately, a major probe in Guizhou province—a hub for China's big data industry—is underway, targeting senior officials involved in science and technology policy, including figures linked to the provincial big data administration and national defense research. [SCMP]

China: Construction commences on world's largest hydropower project

(efg) Chinese Premier Li Qiang announced the start of construction of the Yarlung Zangbo River hydropower project on July 19. He made the announcement while attending the groundbreaking ceremony in Nyingchi City, in the southwest of China's Xizang Autonomous Region (Tibet), describing the dam as a "project of the century." [Xinhua]

Touted as the world's largest dam, the project will consist of five cascade hydropower stations located on the lower reaches of the Yarlung Zangbo River, where the river drops 2,000 meters over a span of 50 kilometers. The total investment is estimated at CNY 1.2 trillion (USD 167.8 billion). The project aims primarily to generate electricity for external consumption, while also meeting local energy demands in Tibet. Once completed, the stations are expected to produce up to 300 billion kilowatt-hours of electricity annually, supplying power to both Tibet and the broader Chinese grid.

The project is expected to create significant demand for construction and building materials and generate thousands of jobs. It may also deliver considerable economic gains, boosting annual GDP and contributing to broader economic growth through public investment by the newly formed state-owned China Yajiang Group. [Reuters]

India and Bangladesh have expressed concerns that the project could lead to water being withheld or diverted from their territories (see article in this edition).

Environmentalists have also raised concerns about the region's wildlife, as well as the area's active tectonic activity, frequent landslides, and challenging terrain where the dam is planned to be built. [The Guardian]

China: 5.2 percent growth in second quarter 2025, defying U.S. tariffs

(dql) China's economy grew by 5.2 percent year-on-year in the second quarter of 2025, slightly below the 5.4 percent growth in Q1 but still on track to meet the government's full-year target of "around 5 percent" This performance was driven by state-led stimulus and accelerated exports ahead of potential tariff hikes amid a temporary pause in US-China trade escalations.

However, analysts caution that the growth may not be sustainable due to persistently weak domestic demand, falling prices, and a deepening real estate crisis that continues to burden local government finances. Despite expectations of additional stimulus measures at the upcoming July Politburo meeting, investor sentiment remains cautious about the second half of the year.

China's growing global trade footprint—now accounting for 16 percent of global exports—highlights its increasingly central role in the international economy and raises geopolitical stakes. Tensions with the United States remain high, particularly over trade, Taiwan, and advanced technologies. Although recent negotiations in May (see AiR No. 19, May/2025, 2) resulted in a temporary reduction of US tariffs from 145 percent to 30 percent and reciprocal Chinese cuts, the fragile détente could unravel.

A renewed escalation could prompt China to redirect surplus production to the EU, while the US may respond by redefining EU-based Chinese investments as Chinese-origin goods, potentially targeting EU businesses with additional tariffs. At the same time,

China is deepening its economic engagement in South America, countering US efforts to tighten trade restrictions in the region—underscoring the wider geopolitical implications of the US-China rivalry. [DW] [Financial Times]

China: Government rein in domestic EV price war

(lb/dz) Presiding over the July 16 meeting of the State Council, China's cabinet, Premier Li Qiang called for stronger pricing regulation in China's electric vehicle (EV) sector to curb intensifying price wars that are fueling deflationary pressures and undermining industrial profitability. He urged major automakers to exercise greater self-discipline in setting prices, ensure timely payments to suppliers, and improve competitiveness through innovation and quality upgrades.

The cabinet vowed to strengthen cost investigations and price monitoring while promoting the industry's high-quality development through both short- and long-term measures. Authorities also urged automakers to honor supplier payment terms and pledged support for innovation and quality upgrades to enhance competitiveness. [Xinhua] [Reuters 1] [The Standard, Hong Kong]

Li's remarks and the cabinet's pledge reflect mounting concerns over "involution"—destructive competition driven by oversupply—in sectors such as EVs, solar panels, and steel. State-owned automakers, such as GAC and JAC, are projecting record Q2 losses due to the aggressive price competition, signaling a broader financial strain on the industry. June data shows that, while China's auto sales rose 18.6 percent year-over-year, EV giants like BYD have seen growth decelerate, and rival brands like Li Auto reported double-digit sales declines—underlining continued instability. [Reuters 2]

By reining in destructive competition, China not only aims to preserve the health of its cutting-edge EV manufacturers but also to reinforce supply-chain stability, safeguard technological innovation, and prevent fragmentation in a sector that is key its ambitions in green transition, export resilience, and global EV leadership.

However, the broader challenge of managing industrial overcapacity extends beyond the EV sector, highlighting the complexity of balancing market correction with economic and social stability. While some sectors, including solar panels, cement, and

automobiles, have made progress in easing price cuts without state intervention, economists caution that tackling overcapacity without harming growth or employment remains a delicate balance. With external demand weakened by ongoing U.S.-China trade tensions, Beijing appears reluctant to implement deep production cuts that could jeopardize jobs. [CNBC]

China: Tighter grip on rare earth quotas

(lb/dql) China has reportedly issued its first rare earth mining and smelting quotas for 2025 without the customary public announcement, underscoring a deeper shift toward centralized control of the sector. Traditionally published in the first quarter via the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, this year's quotas were quietly communicated to select state-owned firms, with instructions not to disclose volumes.

Rare earths are tightly regulated through a quota system first introduced in 2006. While designed to curb environmental damage and overproduction, the system now also serves Beijing's broader goal of consolidating control over strategic resources through tighter industrial policy.

Delays in this year's quotas reportedly stemmed from internal debate over whether to include imported ore in the system. That proposal triggered opposition from companies reliant on external feedstock, who feared exclusion. The episode highlights growing friction within China's supply chain management as the government recalibrates its oversight mechanisms.

In 2024, China issued mining quotas of 270,000 metric tons and smelting quotas of 254,000 tons—growth of just under six percent and four percent, respectively. Access to these quotas has narrowed significantly, with only two state-owned firms—China Rare Earth Group and China Northern Rare Earth Group High-Tech—eligible last year, down from six previously.

These moves illustrate Beijing's intent to exert tighter command over output and industrial coordination, even as global trade partners look closely. [Reuters] [First Post]

They come as China's rare earth exports surged to 7,742.2 metric tons in June 2025, marking a 32 percent increase from May and 60 percent higher than June 2024. The figures signal a potential easing of trade tensions with the West. In the first half of 2025, total

exports reached more than 32,000 tons, up 12 percent year-on-year.

This sharp rise is widely seen as an early outcome of recent diplomatic breakthroughs between Beijing and Washington aimed at stabilizing rare earth supply chains disrupted by escalating trade disputes earlier in the year (see AiR No. 24, June/2025, 3). Analysts suggest the June surge reflects the partial implementation of bilateral agreements intended to restore the flow of critical materials essential to high-tech and automotive industries.

Despite the positive trend, industry experts caution that China's customs data still lacks transparency, as it does not distinguish between different rare earth elements. A more detailed breakdown, expected by July 20, may reveal which sectors are most likely to benefit from resumed exports.

China's recent signals, including assurances that European demand can be met, underscore its geopolitical strategy to reassert itself as a stable supplier amid Western concerns over resource dependence. However, industry feedback suggests that while supplies are recovering, full normalization has yet to be achieved, with manufacturers reporting only partial relief from previous shortages. [Indexbox] [Discovery Alert]

China's total exports grew by 5.2 percent year-on-year in June, surpassing expectations due to strong demand from non-U.S. markets and a temporary easing of U.S. tariffs. Imports rose 1.1 percent, marking the first increase this year despite continued weak domestic demand.

Although exports to the U.S. declined for a third consecutive month (down 16.1 percent), the pace of the drop slowed compared to May. In contrast, exports to Southeast Asia and the EU surged by 16.8 percent and 7.6 percent, respectively, highlighting China's pivot toward diversifying its export markets amid ongoing tensions with Washington.

In the first half of 2025, China's trade surplus reached USD 586 billion, a nearly 35 percent increase from the previous year, driven by 5.9 percent growth in exports and a 3.9 percent drop in imports. Economists warn, however, that this export momentum may not be sustainable due to persistent U.S. tariff pressures and limited room for Chinese firms to further boost global market share through price cuts. [CNBC]

China: Advancing drone capabilities with new tail-sitter UAV

(dql) A new tail-sitter unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) has been unveiled during a disaster rescue drill in southwestern Sichuan province, showcasing its capabilities for reconnaissance and real-time situational awareness in rugged terrain.

Developed by the state-owned Chengdu Aircraft Industry Group (CAIG), the drone features vertical take-off and landing (VTOL) capabilities and a modular design that allows for rapid payload changes. Resembling the U.S. military's MQ-35 V-BAT, the Chinese drone combines high-speed horizontal flight with vertical launch and landing, making it suitable for deployment in remote areas without the need for runways or launch equipment.

The drone is a control system, which enables autonomous operations such as route planning, threat avoidance, and swarm management. The system's automation enhances the drone's utility in both civilian and military contexts.

While China emphasized the drone's role in disaster response, its resemblance to the U.S. V-BAT—already in use in conflict zones like Ukraine—underscores its potential dual-use function, including for military surveillance and reconnaissance.

The development highlights China's growing sophistication in UAV technology and its push to match or surpass U.S. drone capabilities. The integration of swarm control further signals China's ambitions in next-generation unmanned warfare. [SCMP] [Interesting Engineering]

China – Hong: Appeal hearings conclude for 12 activists in landmark subversion case

(dql) A Hong Kong court concluded on July 17 a hearing for 12 pro-democracy activists appealing their convictions and sentences. The judgement is expected within nine months.

The case is part of a broader prosecution of the so-called "47 democrats," who were charged with conspiracy to commit subversion in the wake of an unofficial primary held in July 2020, shortly after Beijing imposed the Hong Kong National Security Law. The city government claims that the primary election was

aimed at electing candidates to win a legislative majority to paralyze the executive by indiscriminately vetoing budget proposals and forcing the Chief Executive to resign (see AiR No. 28, July/2020, 2). Under the Basic Law, the city's constitution, the Chief Executive must step down if the legislature twice rejects the government's budget.

Of the 47, 45 were convicted in 2023 and sentenced to between four and seven years in prison. Eleven are now appealing conviction and sentence, while one challenges her sentence only (see AiR No. 28, July/2025, 3). [Reuters]

Japan: Ruling coalition loses majority after defeat in Upper House election

(ja) The ruling coalition of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the Komeito party failed to meet their pre-election goal of winning at least 50 of the 125 contested seats in the July 20 Upper House election, securing only 47 seats. As a result, they lost their majority in the House of Councillors and now lack majority control in both chambers of the Diet, after its defeat in the House of Representatives election in October (see AiR No. 44, October/2024, 5)

The disappointing outcome is widely attributed to growing public dissatisfaction with the government's handling of rising living costs, stagnant wage growth, and a lack of progress in negotiations with U.S. President Donald Trump over his administration's new tariff policy.

Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba, who vowed to remain in office, is facing mounting pressure from within his own party. Critics, including long-time allies, accuse him of clinging to power despite the party's dismal performance. High-profile LDP figures such as Takayuki Kobayashi and Shoji Nishida have publicly urged Ishiba to step down. Taro Kono, acting chair of the party's Election Strategy Committee, resigned to take responsibility for the electoral loss and suggested that LDP Secretary-General Hiroshi Moriyama should also be held accountable if Ishiba remains in office. [The Asahi Shimbun 1] [The Asahi Shimbun 2]

Center-right opposition Democratic Party for the People (DPP) leader Yuichiro Tamaki dismissed the possibility of joining the coalition, saying it was "out of the question." His party, which had previously coordinated with the ruling bloc on some policy matters, quadrupled its seats from four to sixteen. Leaders of the center-right Japan Innovation Party (JIP)

and the center-left Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan (CDPJ) expressed similar opposition to joining the ruling coalition. [Kyodo News] [Reuters] [AP News]

Among opposition parties, the right-wing populist Sanseito party emerged as a strong contender, securing 14 seats, marking a substantial jump from the single seat won in the last election in 2022.

Sanseito leader Sohei Kamiya stated that while his party is open to policy-based cooperation with the ruling coalition, it would not join the government unless it gains more seats in the Lower House. "If Sanseito wins 50 or 60 seats in the next Lower House election, it may be possible to form a coalition government with smaller parties, like in Europe. Sanseito will aim to be part of that," he said.

Although the party fell short of its goal of winning 20 seats—which would have allowed it to submit budget bills—it gained enough seats (at least ten) to submit non-spending legislation.

Sanseito's nationalist rhetoric, particularly its "Japanese First" slogan, has sparked controversy, with critics labeling it xenophobic. Kamiya defended the party's stance as one of opposing globalism and prioritizing the well-being of Japanese citizens. He rejected claims that Sanseito seeks to discriminate against or expel foreigners. [The New York Times] [The Conversation]

Sanseito has pledged to limit the number of foreign nationals in Japan—including skilled workers and tourists—by capping the proportion of foreign residents at 5 percent of the Japanese population in each municipality. It also aims to make naturalization and permanent residency more difficult and to ban naturalized citizens from running for public office. [The Japan Times]

Japan: Command center on foreign nationals launched amid immigration-dominated Upper House election campaign

(fw/dql) The Japanese government has launched a new administrative office dedicated to creating cohesive and firm policies addressing issues related to foreign nationals.

The newly formed "Office for Promoting a Society of Orderly Coexistence with Foreign Nationals" operates within the Cabinet Secretariat and includes

approximately 80 officials from the Justice Ministry, Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry, National Police Agency, and other relevant bodies. Its mission is to unify government efforts in tackling challenges connected to foreign residents and visitors.

Key directives given to the office include rigorous immigration control, prevention of social insurance nonpayment, regulation of land transactions involving foreigners, and enhanced information sharing between national and local governments.

During the inauguration ceremony on July 15, Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba highlighted the significance of foreign labor and talent to Japan's economic vitality but acknowledged growing public unease. He also underscored the need for strict enforcement against those violating rules and called for updates to policies that no longer adequately address current realities concerning foreigners. [Asia News Network]

The new command center comes ahead of the July 20 House of Councillors election, with polls indicating that Ishiba's Liberal Democratic Party and its junior ruling coalition partner, Komeito, will lose their majority (see article above). [Reuters]

Amid a rise in foreign residents and visitors—with record-high 21.5 million arrivals recorded in the first half of 2025—Japan has seen an increase in incidents involving foreigners, including disruptive behavior such as noise disturbances, bad driving manners, and misuse of the medical insurance system. [Kyodo News 1] [Kyodo News 2] [CNN]

Growing public concern and frustration over these issues has elevated immigration-related matters into a key topic in the electoral campaign, with civil society organizations condemning xenophobic campaign rhetoric (see AiR No. 28, July/2025, 3). [The Asahi Shimbun]

Far-right parties are attempting to exploit rising anti-immigration sentiment to challenge Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba and his ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), whose popularity has declined. These far-right groups, inspired by the U.S. MAGA movement and Europe's anti-immigrant populism, are capitalizing on public frustration over tourism-related disturbances and media reports of crimes committed by foreigners. High-profile criminal cases involving foreign nationals have further fueled xenophobic narratives, despite overall crime by foreigners declining in recent years.

Right-wing populist Sanseito, established in 2020, and its leader Souhei Kamiya, who admitted that he had

learned from what he called “bold political style” of US President Donald Trump, have called for strict limitations on foreign labor, promoting a vision of a self-reliant and culturally exclusive Japan. Kamiya claims many migrant workers turn to crime after abandoning designated jobs. Similarly, Yoichi Shimada of the Conservative Party of Japan—a right-wing party, too—has raised national security concerns about Chinese land purchases, alleging ties to the Chinese Communist Party. [DW] [The Guardian]

Japan: Inflation eases in June amid persisting economic risks

(dql) Japan’s core inflation eased to 3.3 percent in June, down from 3.7 percent in May, aligning with economists’ expectations and marking a retreat from a 29-month high. Despite the slowdown, this is the 39th consecutive month inflation has exceeded the Bank of Japan’s (BOJ) 2 percent target. The “core-core” inflation rate, which excludes both fresh food and energy and is closely monitored by the BOJ, edged up slightly to 3.4 percent. [Reuters]

The moderation in inflation is attributed in part to easing rice prices, which had surged due to poor harvests in 2023 but have begun to stabilize following government stockpile releases. Nonetheless, prices remain elevated, and inflationary pressures persist for items not covered by subsidies.

Economists expect inflation to gradually cool further, aided by energy containment measures and continued rice stock releases. However, risks remain. A weaker yen could raise import costs, and falling real wages may dampen consumer spending.

Additional headwinds stem from external factors. U.S. President Donald Trump’s announcement that no trade deal with Japan is expected has heightened concerns over tariffs. A 25 percent tariff on Japanese automobiles—the country’s top export to the U.S.—remains in place, with an additional 25 percent tariff set to begin on August 1. Japan’s GDP shrank 0.2 percent in the first quarter of 2025, reflecting declining exports and broader growth concerns. [CNBC] [East Asia Forum]

Japan: Canadian Couche-Tard withdraws 7-Eleven takeover bid

(dql) Canadian retail giant Alimentation Couche-Tard has withdrawn its acquisition proposal for Seven & i Holdings, one of the world's largest one of the largest retail companies and parent company of 7-Eleven, citing a persistent lack of constructive engagement in negotiations.

Despite offering JPY 2,600 (USD 17.51) per share in cash—a 47.6 percent premium—Couche-Tard accused Seven & i of obfuscation, delays, and unproductive meetings. The move ends more than a year of efforts to strike a deal, following a previously rejected JPY 2,200 (USD 14.82) per share offer in 2024.

Seven & i responded by defending its conduct and reaffirming commitment to its standalone growth strategy, which focuses on unlocking value in its global convenience store operations, especially in North America.

Seven & i reported first-quarter profits of JPY 49 billion (USD 330 million), largely driven by asset sales. Despite challenges, the company's iconic 7-Eleven brand—with over 85,000 outlets globally—continues to perform steadily, aided by a favorable exchange rate boosting overseas earnings. [The Asahi Shimbun]

Japan: Key defense deployment delayed over surge fighter jet upgrade costs

(dql) The cost of upgrading Japan's Air Self-Defense Force (ASDF) F-15 fighter jets with long-range standoff missiles is believed to have soared to over JPY 1 trillion (USD 6.7 billion), significantly exceeding the Defense Ministry's original estimate of JPY 646.5 billion (USD 4.3 billion). The surge—driven by inflation, a weakened yen, and rising development and testing costs—is expected to delay the deployment of the upgraded jets beyond the initial fiscal 2027 target.

A total of 68 relatively newer F-15s will be outfitted with Joint Air-to-Surface Standoff Missiles-Extended Range (JASSM-ER), which have a range of about 900 km, along with enhanced radar and electronic warfare systems. The program, initiated in 2019 and revised in 2021 due to rising costs, is a key component of Japan's broader strategy to counter China's maritime expansion and enhance its deterrence capabilities.

Despite ongoing budgeting for the standoff missiles since fiscal 2023, their deployment may be affected by delays in aircraft readiness. The upgraded F-15s are expected to remain in operation until around 2050, but cost overruns and scheduling uncertainties underscore

the complexities of Japan's defense modernization amid escalating regional tensions. [The Asahi Shimbun]

Mongolia: Government dissolves 29 state committees

(fs) The Mongolian government has decided to dissolve 29 national committees and councils as part of broader efforts to reduce inefficient spending, avoid overlapping responsibilities, and promote budget austerity (see AiR No. 17, April/2025, 5). The move is expected to save approximately USD 11.6 million annually.

Committees to be abolished include the National Wealth Fund, Vision-2050 Coordination Committee, National Port Revitalization Committee, and the National Road Safety Council, among others. Although the entities will be dissolved, their functions will be transferred to relevant ministries and the General Directorate of Public Administration. [News.mn]

North Korea: Crackdown on drug-manufacturing state trading companies

(fw) North Korea Ministry of Social Security is reportedly carrying out a crackdown on major trading companies accused of producing and exporting illegal drugs, mainly to China. The Myohyang and Ponghwa Trade Bureaus are under investigation following reports that these companies were running drug labs disguised as oil extraction sites.

Authorities launched coordinated raids on the bureaus' headquarters and related factories. Officials discovered that senior managers profited by exporting drugs, using the money to buy luxury goods and electronics. [Daily NK]

North Korea: Expansion of domestic semiconductor manufacturing and AI capabilities

(fw) North Korea is making progress in artificial intelligence (AI) and semiconductor production, reflecting its broader goal of technological modernization and military self-sufficiency.

On July 15, a nationwide exhibition “Exhibition of Informatization Achievements” will showcase advancements including a wireless localized network system and indigenous software such as Ryomyong, a multilingual AI-powered machine translation program, alongside a Korean-language word processor called Hyangdo. These developments underline Pyongyang’s focus on expanding its digital technology ecosystem, with institutions like Kim Il Sung University prioritizing AI research and education at a national level. [The Chosun Daily]

Supporting this, South Korea’s unification minister nominee Chung Dongyoung revealed during a confirmation hearing on July 14 that North Korea operates three semiconductor plants—located in Pyongyang, Phyongsong, and Wonsan—including two previously unreported factories. These facilities produce chips for domestically made mobile phones, aligning with the regime’s emphasis on technological self-reliance.

Chung also indicated that North Korea may be developing its own version of ChatGPT, suggesting ambitious strides in generative AI and natural language processing. This aligns with prior sightings of AI-focused research efforts and the establishment of dedicated research centers, which are likely central to North Korea’s plans to integrate AI into military applications such as autonomous drones and cyber operations.

Despite these advancements, experts caution that North Korea’s semiconductor industry faces significant challenges, including low production yields and limited capacity to manufacture advanced chips needed for sophisticated AI hardware. Historically reliant on imports and technology transfers, Pyongyang may be seeking technological assistance from allies like Russia and China through strategic partnerships and resource exchanges. [NK News]

North Korea: Locals bear cost of new flood prevention orders

(fw) North Korea has ordered large-scale flood control efforts in Ryanggang province ahead of seasonal heavy rains, but locals are being forced to pay for all materials and tools themselves. Residents from factories, farms, and neighborhood watch units have been mobilized to repair embankments and waterways, yet no equipment or financial aid has been provided by the government.

In cities like Hyesan, authorities require each neighborhood group to supply building materials, such as dirt, gravel, and funds for concrete; with individuals expected to bring their own shovels and pickaxes. Despite recent embankment work near the Yalu River, many at-risk areas remain unfinished.

Frustrated residents reportedly criticize the state for ordering preventive action without providing support, pointing out that recurring government neglect, careless deforestation, and poor planning are worsening annual flood risks. Locals see these efforts as another sign of official indifference, with meaningful action and assistance still lacking. [Daily NK]

North Korea: New maritime pier signals expanded rocket capabilities

(fw) Recent satellite imagery has confirmed the completion of a significant maritime pier at North Korea's Sohae Satellite Launching Station. According to analysis by Polish–Finnish space satellite operator ICEYE, the new infrastructure will enable the transport of larger rocket components than was possible with previous rail-based logistics, supporting the assembly and launch of rockets with greater range and payload capacity.

The Sohae facility has long been a centerpiece of North Korea's satellite and missile development, hosting spy satellite launches and engine tests that use technology similar to intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). North Korean leader Kim Jong Un called for the facility's expansion during a 2022 inspection, emphasizing its role in boosting the nation's military and surveillance capabilities. [The Independent]

Satellite photos from ICEYE and Planet Labs taken between December 2024 and July 2025 depict the pier's construction progress and, as of July 9, show a new jetty and docked vessels, suggesting operational readiness. ICEYE reports that the project took approximately 28 months to complete, while additional upgrades to road and rail infrastructure continue.

North Korea's efforts have not been without setbacks. While Pyongyang successfully orbited its first spy satellite in November 2023, the latest launch attempt in May 2024 failed. Despite this, Kim Jong Un remains committed to advancing the country's space reconnaissance program, describing it as vital for national defense.

Amid these developments, Western and South Korean officials allege that North Korea has received technical assistance from Russia for its satellite program—potentially in exchange for North Korean troops supporting Russia's war in Ukraine. This cooperation, if confirmed, could further accelerate North Korea's military space activities. [Reuters]

North Korea: Exhibition of U.S. aircraft wreckage ahead of 72nd armistice anniversary

(fw) North Korea has publicly displayed the wreckage of what it claims is a US fighter jet from the 1950-53 Korean War, just days before the nation observes the 72nd anniversary of the armistice that ended hostilities.

The wreckage that reportedly retrieved from the Yellow Sea last year, is being used to reinforce anti-US sentiment and national pride ahead of the "Day of Victory", which commemorates the July 27, 1953, signing of the Korean War armistice. The wreckage was recently installed at the Victory Museum of the Fatherland Liberation War in Pyongyang.

The display is drawing significant attention, particularly from young North Koreans, as they are shown in images inspecting the remnants of the aircraft, described as having been "shot down by the wild firepower of the people's armed forces after circling our sacred airspace since July 1950". [MenaFN] [The Korea Times]

North Korea: Construction of additional 5,000-ton destroyer by October 2026

(fw) North Korea has announced plans to build an additional 5,000-ton destroyer by October 2026, reinforcing its efforts to expand and modernize its naval forces. This development follows the earlier launches of two destroyers in the same class this year.

A rally held at the Nampho dockyard on the western coast saw workers pledge to complete the new warship by the anniversary of the ruling Workers' Party of Korea. The first 5,000-ton destroyer, Choe Hyon, was revealed in April as part of North Korea's push to enhance its naval warfare capabilities. In June, the Kang Kon destroyer was successfully launched after

repairs, recovering from damage sustained during a failed initial launch attempt in May. [The Korea Times]

During the Kang Kon launch ceremony, leader Kim Jong-un directed the construction of two Kang Kon-class or larger destroyers annually beginning in 2026, signaling a sustained and ambitious naval shipbuilding program. A dockyard manager emphasized the need to meet deadlines to support the party's vision for building a "powerful military". [Yonhap News Agency]

South Korea: Ex-president Yoon Suk-yeol challenges arrest amidst investigation

(fw) Former South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol currently detained at the Seoul Detention Center in Uiwang, has repeatedly challenged the legality of his arrest and refused to cooperate with prosecutors, escalating tensions in the prolonged investigation led by special counsel Cho Eun-suk.

On July 16, Yoon's legal team filed a petition with the Seoul Central District Court requesting a review of his detention. Yoon described his arrest as "illegal" and "unjust", asserting that it was unwarranted. This petition follows a previous successful appeal that secured his release earlier in the year after a prior arrest related to the same charges. The court convened a closed-door hearing on July 18 to determine whether Yoon's detention should be upheld, weighing the prosecution's concerns about the severity of the charges, as well as risks posed by potential evidence tampering or witness influence. The court was tasked with delivering a ruling within 24 hours. [Yeni Safak] [The Korea Herald]

Meanwhile, Yoon has skipped his insurrection trial hearings twice, insisting that special counsel Cho Eun-suk's team be removed from the proceedings. He claims the investigation is "illegal" and accuses the team of seriously violating his rights. His lawyers stated that unless the special counsel is dismissed, Yoon will continue to refuse participation. The court has urged Yoon's representatives to persuade him to appear physically or provide legitimate health documentation explaining his absence. The prosecution, emphasizing the defendant's obligation to attend hearings, has petitioned the court for a warrant to compel Yoon's attendance by force if necessary. [Yonhap News Agency 1]

Expansion of investigation

The investigation intensified further as special counsel Cho's team expanded scrutiny beyond Yoon himself. On July 17, they interrogated Maj. Gen. Kim Yong-dae, head of the Drone Operations Command (DOC). The probe concerns allegations that Yoon ordered a provocative drone operation into North Korean airspace in October 2024. Prosecutors suspect the drone mission was intended to provoke a North Korean retaliatory response that could justify the imposition of martial law. A recorded call allegedly captures a military officer claiming Yoon personally instructed the mission bypassing the Defense Ministry and Joint Chiefs of Staff, with the operational goal of inciting tension through leaflet drops. Kim has denied these accusations, insisting the mission was authorized properly and unrelated to Yoon's martial law attempt. [Yonhap News Agency 2]

In parallel, prosecutors conducted a raid on the home of former Interior Minister Lee Sang-min in Seoul's Gangnam District as part of the investigation. Lee is suspected of conspiring to enforce a media blackout during the martial law attempt by ordering the National Fire Agency to cut utilities to critical news outlets including Hankyoreh, Kyunghyang Shinmun, and MBC. Furthermore, Lee may have been involved in plotting a subsequent martial law declaration following the initial decree's swift repeal by the National Assembly. The search aimed to uncover evidence that could link Lee directly to these alleged actions. [Yonhap News Agency 3]

Several high-profile Cabinet members who attended the restricted emergency meeting have also been summoned for questioning. Former Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul provided testimony about his opposition to martial law, warning Yoon of potential diplomatic and economic consequences, and disclosed receiving controversial guidance on managing foreign diplomatic missions under martial law. Former Unification Minister Kim Yung-ho similarly testified that he cautioned against the decree due to risks to the nation's economy and U.S. relations. [The Korea Times 1] [The Korea Times 2]

Former Prime Minister Han Duck-soo faces allegations of perjury linked to martial law attempts. The special counsel has accused Han of giving false testimony regarding his knowledge of the martial law declaration documents and is investigating his role in fabricating official records post-decree. Surveillance footage reportedly contradicts Han's claims about discovering the decree only after it was lifted, raising speculation about whether an arrest warrant will be sought. [Yonhap News Agency 4]

South Korea: Special counsel tightens investigation into former First Lady Kim Keon-hee

(fw) The special counsel investigating former first lady Kim Keon-hee has escalated efforts amid growing suspicions of wrongdoing. On July 16, a local court issued a detention warrant for Kim Ye-seong, a close aide to Kim Keon-hee and often described as her "butler", over concerns that he evaded summons by fleeing abroad and might continue to avoid cooperation with authorities.

According to the special counsel team led by Min Joong-ki, Kim Ye-seong reportedly fled to Vietnam in April and has ignored investigative requests without valid reasons. The aide is suspected of receiving suspicious investments totaling around KRW 18 billion won (USD 13.1 million) through his rental car company, IMS, during 2023. Following the court decision, the special counsel is expected to move swiftly to revoke Kim's passport to prevent further flight risks. [Yonhap News Agency 1]

Meanwhile, special counsel prosecutors extended their probe to the religious organization linked to alleged luxury gifts received by the former first lady. On July 18, investigators conducted raids at the Unification Church's international headquarters in Gapyeong and Seoul's Yongsan district, as well as at the residences of church leader Han Hak-ja and a senior church official implicated in the case. The investigation centers on accusations that Kim accepted a diamond necklace and an expensive bag from a high-ranking Unification Church official through an intermediary shaman between April and August 2022, shortly after President Yoon Suk Yeol took office. This official reportedly sought business favors from the Yoon administration in exchange for the gifts. [The Korea Herald]

Earlier last week, the special counsel also raided the shaman's office. The shaman, Jeon Seong-bae, also known as Geon Jin, admitted to receiving the gifts but claimed they were lost. Prosecutors secured documents and computer files from Jeon's Yeoksam-dong office in Seoul to further the investigation into this alleged gift scandal. [The Korea Times 1]

In addition, the probe has expanded to include a former senior Unification Church official accused of giving the luxury gifts through Jeon. Investigators are examining whether the church sought government favors in return, including support for business projects in Cambodia, acquisition of media outlets, and

invitations to state events like the presidential inauguration. Searches were also conducted at the homes and offices of political figures linked to the case, including legislator Kweon Seong-dong, a close ally of former President Yoon, suspected of receiving covert church support during party leadership contests. The special counsel is investigating possible political interference and whether Kim Keon-hee influenced appointments within the National Intelligence Service through her associates. [The Korea Times 2]

Yet, the investigation has further deepened, uncovering connections between her network and suspicious financial transactions and influence-peddling involving prominent business and political figures. The special counsel team is intensifying its inquiry into a series of illicit investments and corruption allegations tied to Kim's close associates.

Central to the investigation is the 2023 funding of IMS Mobility, a rental car company founded by Kim Ye-seong, known as a confidant and "butler" to the former presidential couple. Approximately KRW 18.4 billion (USD 13.2 million) was funneled to IMS Mobility through various entities including Korea Securities Finance Corp., Daou Kiwoom Group, HS Hyosung affiliates, Kakao Mobility, and Shinhan Bank—investments made despite IMS Mobility's severe financial instability and significant liabilities surpassing its net assets. The special counsel suspects these transactions were not typical business decisions but designed to manage legal risks for investors connected to Kim's circle. [The Korea Times 3]

The special counsel raided the residence and car of Lee Jong-ho, former head of investment firm Blackpearl Invest, who is a pivotal figure tied to Kim's network. Lee is accused of receiving KRW 81 million (USD 58,000) from a Kim confidant to use influence for securing a suspended sentence in a stock manipulation case involving Deutsch Motors.

Lee himself was previously sentenced to a suspended prison term for illegal trading between 2009 and 2012. Investigators believe Lee managed accounts related to the former first lady and manipulated stock prices in additional cases, including one involving Sambu Construction Co. Furthermore, Lee is suspected of leveraging his connections to remove former Marine commander Lim Seong-geun from responsibility in a separate military death investigation. [The Korea Times 4]

The special counsel is simultaneously probing 19 criminal allegations against Kim Keon Hee, ranging

from financial crimes to corruption linked to a shaman and the Unification Church. The investigators also raided the state-run Export-Import Bank of Korea's headquarters, examining transactions related to state-funded development projects in Cambodia allegedly influenced by illicit payments to Kim. [Yonhap News Agency 2]

South Korea: President Lee withdraws education minister nomination

(fw) President Lee Jae-myung officially withdrew the nomination of Lee Jin-sook for Education Minister following mounting allegations of thesis plagiarism, academic misconduct, and legal concerns regarding her daughter's overseas education on July 20. The withdrawal came after intense public scrutiny and bipartisan consultations, marking a rare presidential intervention in South Korea's Cabinet appointment process. Meanwhile, the administration decided to move forward with the controversial appointment of Kang Sun-woo as Gender Equality Minister, despite serious abuse of power accusations against her.

Lee Jin-sook, former president of Chungnam National University, faced accusations of plagiarizing a former student's thesis—a claim she denied, attributing the issue to academic misunderstandings. She also apologized during a National Assembly confirmation hearing for sending her daughter to study in the United States without proper parental supervision, which was later revealed to potentially violate Korea's compulsory education laws. Opposition lawmakers criticized Lee for questionable authorship claims on research papers, arguing she inappropriately listed herself as lead author despite students doing much of the experimental work. [The Korea Times 1] [Korea JoongAng Daily]

Despite similar and escalating allegations of workplace abuse, including forcing aides to perform personal errands, repeatedly replacing staff, and concealing assets, Gender Equality Minister nominee Kang Sun-woo's appointment is proceeding. As a sitting lawmaker from the ruling Democratic Party (DP), Kang has faced widespread criticism not only from the opposition People Power Party (PPP) but also from civic groups, former ministers, and members within her own party. Allegations include frequent staff turnover (28 to 46 aides over five years), unpaid wages, and abusive workplace practices. Kang apologized during confirmation hearings but denied intending to take legal action against whistleblowers or committing

financial disclosure violations linked to undeclared stock options. [The Korea Times 2]

The opposition PPP fiercely condemned the administration's decision to retain Kang while withdrawing Lee's nomination, accusing the government of arrogance, cronyism, and moral failure in appointing a minister accused of abuse of power. [The Korea Times 3]

Senior presidential secretary Woo Sang-ho explained that President Lee's decisions followed detailed private consultations with party leaders, including opposition calls for withdrawing both nominees. The choice to rescind Lee's nomination but retain Kang appears to reflect political calculations accounting for the rarity and risk of withdrawing a sitting lawmaker's nomination. [The Korea Herald]

South Korea: Presidential secretary for national integration resigns

(fw) Kang Jun-wook, the presidential secretary for national integration, resigned on July 22 amid controversy surrounding his remarks defending former President Yoon Suk Yeol's unsuccessful attempt to impose martial law. Appointed just weeks earlier by President Lee Jae Myung to promote social cohesion and gather public opinion, Kang faced mounting pressure due to his past statements that sparked public outrage.

In a book published earlier this year, Kang portrayed Yoon's martial law bid as an expression of frustration over political deadlock and criticized characterizations of the move as rebellious, warning they could inflame public sentiment. His previous social media posts, which echoed controversial Japanese claims about its colonial rule over Korea and denied forced wartime labor, further fueled criticism.

The Presidential Office said the resignation was accepted by President Lee after strong public backlash that Kang's views conflicted with the administration's core values. A replacement will be chosen from conservative figures aligned with the government's philosophy and its commitment to national unity. [Yonhap News Agency]

South Korea: Parliament approves key cabinet nominees

(fw) On July 18, South Korea's National Assembly approved the confirmation hearing reports for the nominees of the foreign, finance, and industry ministries, enabling President Lee Jae Myung to formally appoint them. The parliamentary committees endorsed Cho Hyun as Foreign Minister, Kim Jung-kwan as Industry Minister, and Koo Yun-cheol as Finance Minister. Although ministers can assume office without formal parliamentary approval, the adoption of these reports is a significant procedural step.

The opposition People Power Party (PPP) initially resisted endorsing President Lee's cabinet nominees. However, ahead of critical tariff negotiations with the United States, the party reversed its stance. PPP interim leader Song Eon-seog explained that the decision was intended to allow the ministers to promptly engage in discussions with the United States, which recently postponed imposing 25 percent tariffs on Korean imports until August 1, providing South Korea additional time to negotiate a trade agreement. [The Korea Times]

South Korea: Labor minister nominee Kim Young-hoon pledges labor reform

(fw) Kim Young-hoon, nominee for South Korea's labor minister, has promised to quickly advance the "yellow envelope bill," push for a shorter workweek, and raise the retirement age.

At his parliamentary confirmation hearing on July 16, Kim, the former head of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, said he would work with the government and ruling party to pass the so-called yellow envelope bill.

The bill seeks to expand labor protections, preventing companies from claiming damages for legal union activities and covering all types of workers. Previous attempts to pass the bill were vetoed by former President Yoon Suk Yeol due to opposition from business groups and conservatives.

Kim also supports introducing a 4.5-day workweek, starting with voluntary pilot programs at major companies, with government assistance to ensure smaller companies are not left behind.

He also emphasized the need to extend the retirement age this year but noted it should apply fairly across companies to avoid reducing job opportunities for younger workers. Kim called for social dialogue to

balance concerns between older and younger generations. [Yonhap News Agency]

South Korea: Veteran lawmaker Cho Kyung-tae announces bid for leadership of main opposition party

(fw) Rep. Cho Kyung-tae, a six-term member of South Korea's opposition People Power Party (PPP), officially declared his candidacy for the party's top leadership position on July 21. Speaking at a National Assembly press conference, Cho emphasized the urgent need for extensive personnel reforms within the party following the political fallout from former President Yoon Suk Yeol's failed martial law attempt.

Cho stated, "Only a bold personnel reshuffle can bring the People Power Party back." He emphasized that the party's future looks bleak unless it decisively breaks away from entrenched interests and outdated factions, which he believes have played a key role in causing its current crisis.

To facilitate genuine reform, Cho proposed establishing a permanent reform committee that includes citizen participation, aiming to align the party's transformation with public expectations.

The PPP plans to elect its new leader at a national convention scheduled for August 22, 2025, with Cho poised as a key contender in the race to reshape the party's future. [Yonhap News Agency]

South Korea: Ex-marine corps commandant faces legal action

(fw) The investigation into the 2023 death of Marine Corporal Chae Su-geun has intensified, with former Marine Corps Commandant Kim Kye-hwan at the center of scrutiny. Special Prosecutor Lee Myeong-hyeon's team summoned Kim for questioning on July 17, marking his second appearance in the case. The investigation is focused on suspicions that senior officials, including former President Yoon Suk Yeol and military leaders, tried to influence the original inquiry into Corporal Chae's death [Yonhap News Agency 1].

Cpl. Chae died in July 2023 while searching for victims of torrential rains, reportedly without adequate safety equipment. The circumstances of his death led to a military investigation, whose findings put the

responsibility on a senior Marine commander. Allegations have since emerged that President Yoon, angered by the report's outcome during a meeting of his top aides on July 31, 2023, exerted pressure over the investigation's process and conclusions (see AiR No. 28, July/2025, 3).

In his previous questioning and court statements, Kim has denied any accusations of external interference instigated by Yoon or his office. Nevertheless, following a 12-hour interrogation earlier in the month and his latest questioning, the special counsel's office moved to secure an arrest warrant for Kim on July 18, specifically on charges of perjury. [Yonhap News Agency 2]

Former Marine Corps Commandant Kim Kye-hwan appeared at Seoul Central District Court on July 22 for a hearing on his arrest warrant, which was requested by the special counsel investigating alleged interference in the 2023 military probe into the death of Corporal Chae Su-geun. Kim is accused of obstructing justice by allegedly intervening in the investigation and providing false testimony regarding a July 2023 incident in which then-President Yoon Suk Yeol reportedly expressed anger over the probe's findings that implicated a senior Marine officer. Despite denying these allegations in previous testimonies, the special counsel charged Kim with perjury and sought his arrest amid fears he may destroy evidence. [Yonhap News Agency]

South Korea: Constitutional Court dismisses impeachment case against senior prosecutor Son Jun-sung

(fw) The Constitutional Court of South Korea has dismissed the impeachment case against Son Jun-sung, the deputy chief prosecutor at the Daegu High Prosecutors Office, who was accused of conspiring in 2020 with an opposition lawmaker to file complaints against ruling party figures.

Son was impeached by the National Assembly in December 2023 over allegations that he asked People Power Party lawmaker Kim Woong, prior to the 2020 general elections, to submit complaints targeting three pro-government individuals connected to negative news coverage about then-President Yoon Suk Yeol's wife. Alongside his impeachment, Son faced criminal charges but was acquitted in court, which was upheld by the Supreme Court in April 2025.

The Constitutional Court began initial hearings on the impeachment in March last year but paused to await the criminal trial's outcome. In its ruling, the court acknowledged that Son had violated constitutional and legal requirements demanding political neutrality from prosecutors. However, it determined that these violations did not rise to a level justifying Son's removal from office and dismissed the impeachment. [Yonhap News Agency]

South Korea: Reward for soldiers who resisted unlawful orders during failed martial law attempt

(fw) The South Korea's Defense Ministry announced the plan to recognize and reward soldiers who refused to comply with "unjust" orders during former President Yoon Suk Yeol's failed attempt to impose martial law last December.

The martial law bid in December 2024 drew intense scrutiny after troops were deployed to the National Assembly to obstruct lawmakers attempting to revoke the decree. This has led to ongoing investigations, with former Defense Minister Kim Yong-hyun currently on trial for alleged involvement in a conspiracy to commit insurrection.

Amid this backdrop, the Defense Ministry's inspection bureau has begun verifying which troops rejected what it terms "illegal or unjust" orders during the events of December 3. The process to identify such personnel is expected to take several weeks or possibly over a month, with rewards or similar encouragements to follow for those confirmed.

Newly nominated Defense Minister Ahn Gyu-back has pledged to restore trust in the military by reinforcing internal morale by rewarding meritorious service and holding individuals accountable for wrongdoing. Vice Defense Minister Lee Doo-hee also emphasized the importance of recognizing those who faithfully protected citizens' lives and property during the crisis.

Regarding concerns about the timing and appropriateness of implementing such rewards amid the ongoing special counsel investigation into the martial law incident, the Defense Ministry affirmed its full cooperation with legal authorities. To address potential ambiguity in reward criteria, officials committed to a thorough verification process and the establishment of clear guidelines for recognizing deserving soldiers. [The Korea Times]

South Korea: Seven-decade old child adoption system overhauled

(fw) On July 19, South Korea transfered full responsibility for domestic and international adoptions from private agencies to the state, ending over 70 years of privately managed placements. Two new laws: the Special Act on Domestic Adoption and the Act on Intercountry Adoption, that passed in 2023, will regulate adoption processes separately. The Ministry of Health and Welfare will oversee policy, while local governments and the National Center for the Rights of the Child (NCRC) will manage case handling.

Historically, South Korea has been one of the largest exporters of adopted children, with over 170,000 sent abroad since the Korean War. The new system shifts adoption control to public institutions to ensure child welfare and compliance with the Hague Adoption Convention, which South Korea ratified effective October 1, 2025. This international treaty aims to prevent child trafficking and establish ethical adoption standards.

Current laws restrict adoptees' access to their biological origins, limiting disclosure to narrow legal or medical cases. Under the reforms, local governments will identify children needing placement, and certified agencies will support adoptive families with counseling and home studies. Courts retain authority to approve adoptions and can now grant temporary custody to promote early bonding. For international cases, the state acts as the central authority, negotiating with foreign governments and overseeing post-adoption welfare. [The Korea Herald]

The ratification of the Hague Convention and the shift to government oversight mark a major change in South Korea's adoption system. Successful implementation will depend on transparency, addressing adoptee concerns, and adequate resources. [Bloomsbury Intelligence and Security Institute]

South Korea: Task force established to develop fully renewable energy powered industrial zones

(fw) South Korea plans to establish special industrial zones powered entirely by renewable energy, known as "RE100" zones, to address regional power imbalances by shifting electricity demand from Seoul

to renewable-rich southwestern areas. A government task force was established to create RE100 industrial complexes fully powered by renewable energy (AiR No. 28, July/2025, 3).

The task force, including officials from industry, finance, land, and environment ministries, met for the first time on July 16. They plan to build renewable energy infrastructure, attract corporate investment, and offer incentives such as better living conditions and electricity discounts to companies in these zones.

To facilitate the development of these zones, the task force intends to propose special legislation by the end of this year. First Vice Industry Minister Moon Shin-hak emphasized treating RE100 not as a regulatory hurdle but as a chance to promote balanced regional development and accelerate the energy transition. [The Korea Times]

South Korea: Digital Asset Innovation Act faces delay

(fw) South Korea's Digital Asset Innovation Act which designed to create a comprehensive legal framework for digital assets including stablecoins, has been postponed by one to two months due to ongoing disagreements among regulators and industry stakeholders. This delay heightens uncertainty in South Korea's crypto sector, which is already awaiting clear guidance beyond the Virtual Asset User Protection Act passed in 2023.

The delayed legislation intends to clearly define digital assets and won-backed stablecoins, set regulatory standards for issuance and trading, and establish guidelines for digital asset service providers. It also aims to enhance investor protection by addressing issues like market manipulation and fraud. However, differing views between entities such as the Financial Services Commission and the Bank of Korea over stablecoin governance and classification remain unresolved. Disputes extend to the appropriate regulatory authority over central bank digital currencies (CBDCs), complicating consensus-building.

Despite the setback, government commitment remains strong, with ongoing debates on stablecoin regulation and authority shaping South Korea's digital finance future. [AInvest] [PANews]

Taiwan: Pro- and anti-recall rallies held

(yl/acl) Civic groups held a rally in Taipei on July 19 to support the recall of 24 opposition Kuomintang (KMT) legislators, whose recall votes are scheduled for July 26.

The campaign, ongoing since January and widely backed by the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), frames the recall as a way to counter what they describe as the KMT's pro-China stance and obstruction in the legislature, referring legislative motions that in their eyes have undermined Taiwan's constitutional order and weakened efforts to strengthen its defense against growing military threats from China. KMT leaders reject the accusations, defending their actions as constitutional oversight.

Another seven KMT lawmakers are set to face recall votes in August, with the potential to shift the balance of power in the 113-seat Legislative Yuan, Taiwan's parliament, where KMT and the smaller opposition Taiwan People's Party (TPP) currently hold a combined majority of 61 seats. [Focus Taiwan 1]

In a counter-rally on the same day, the KMT urged voters to reject the recall of its legislators, calling the effort a politically motivated move by President Lai Ching-te and the DPP, aimed at undermining opposition forces.

KMT Chairman Eric Chu accused Lai of orchestrating an unprecedented and undemocratic campaign to remove opposition lawmakers, urging voters to cast "no" votes in the recall election, framing it as a referendum against Lai and a defense of Taiwan's democracy. KMT Legislative Speaker Han Kuo-yu described the recall effort as a "dictatorial" abuse of state power aimed at silencing dissent.

TPP Chairman Huang Kuo-chang echoed these concerns at a separate rally in Taichung, accusing Lai and the DPP of dividing the nation and betraying democratic principles. [Focus Taiwan 2]

KMT legislator investigated for alleged breach of administrative neutrality

In a separate development, the Taoyuan City Election Committee has launched an investigation into the alleged breach of administrative neutrality by opposition Kuomintang (KMT) legislator Lu Ming-Che. Lu was accused by the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) of distributing official election committee documents alongside anti-recall materials, raising concerns about potential interference as the recall campaign reaches a critical phase. [Taiwan News]

Several DPP members described the incident as a deliberate violation of administrative neutrality and alleged it was an attempt by the KMT to interfere with ongoing recall efforts. Lu's office denied the allegations, stating that the materials may have been distributed by independent supporters.

At the same time, concerns over political impartiality have also been directed at President Lai Ching-Te, who has faced a dropping approval rating in recent weeks (see article below), partly due to his public support for the recall efforts. Critics argue that his endorsement undermines democratic norms and institutional neutrality. [South China Morning Post]

Taiwan: Approval rating for President Lai falls

(acl) Recent polls showed that President Lai Ching-Te's approval rating fell to below 45 percent for the second time since taking office in May 2024. The decline follows backlash over his response to Typhoon Danas and his support for the ongoing recall campaign targeting opposition lawmakers.

A survey by the Taiwan Public Opinion Foundation found that only 42.9 percent of respondents were satisfied with Lai, a decline of 5.8 percentage points from June. The disapproval rating surpassed approval at 44.5 percent for the second time since his inauguration.

The decline has been attributed to his perceived lack of sympathy for typhoon victims and endorsement of the recall campaign. Critics argue that the campaign, which targets over 30 lawmakers from main opposition party, the Kuomintang (KMT), represents an "abuse of democratic mechanisms for partisan advantage".

Lai also drew criticism during a July 11 visit to a flood-stricken district in Tainan. Lai sparked outrage with his remarks to elderly residents who were seeking military assistance to clear their flood-damaged homes that "not everything can rely on the military". [South China Morning Post]

While the recall campaign was initiated by civil society groups in response to the KMT's legislative reforms – seen by some as weakening the executive branch – there are concerns that the mass recall campaign exhibits authoritarian tendencies. Critics warn that it could undermine democratic norms and deepen political polarization.

Taiwan: Detention of former chair of opposition party extended

(dql) The Taipei District Court extended on July 21 the detention of Ko Wen-je, the former chairman of the opposition Taiwan People's Party (TPP), and ex-Taipei Mayor and Kuomintang (KMT) Taipei City Councilor Ying Hsiao-wei over concerns of potential witness collusion in an ongoing corruption investigation. The court cited unresolved witness testimonies and the risk of interference as grounds for the decision.

Two other co-defendants in the case, real estate tycoon Sheen Ching-jing and Ko's former mayoral office head Lee Wen-tsung were granted bail.

Prosecutors accused Ko of leveraging his political influence to pressure witnesses and manipulate public perception, including through the use of social media and a generative AI video published by the TPP defending him. [Taiwan News]

Ko's party, condemned the ongoing detention of its founder and 2024 presidential candidate, as politically motivated persecution. The party accused the ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and the judiciary of violating Ko's human rights by detaining him without substantial evidence, relying instead on speculation to justify his continued incommunicado custody. [Focus Taiwan]

In the investigation against Ko, who has been held in detention since September, prosecutors allege that Ko accepted a total of NTD 17.1 million (USD 520,000) in bribes from Sheen Ching-jing, chair of developer Core Pacific Group, in exchange for approving a dramatically increased floor area ratio (FAR) in a Songshan District redevelopment project—Core Pacific City. The FAR was reportedly raised from 392 percent to 840 percent, massively boosting property value by NTD 12–40 billion (USD 370–625 million).

Taiwan: Exports surge in first half of year

(dql) Taiwan's export value surged to a record NTD 9.2 trillion (USD 283 billion) in the first half of 2025, marking a 26 percent year-on-year increase and outperforming key regional economies including Singapore, China, and Japan. The Ministry of Finance attributed the growth to companies accelerating shipments ahead of new U.S. tariff policies and rising

global demand for AI and high-performance computing technologies.

Information and communication technology (ICT) products led the export boom, with a 63 percent increase. Notably, exports of graphics cards and servers jumped by 81 percent and computer components by 77.6. Electronic components followed as the second-largest export category, up 22.2 percent, driven by soaring demand for advanced integrated circuits. Together, ICT and electronic components accounted for nearly 71 percent of total exports, rising 40% year-on-year. Outside the tech sector, machinery exports grew 4.3 percent, with notable increases to the U.S. and Japan.

However, exports in traditional industries such as petroleum, chemicals, plastics, rubber, and textiles declined due to softer global demand and intensified Chinese competition.

Geographically, China remained Taiwan's top export destination at NTD 2.33 trillion (USD 79 billion), up 12.7 percent, closely followed by the U.S. at NTD 2.32 trillion (USD 78 billion)—a record 51.4 percent increase. ASEAN markets also saw strong growth of 31.4 percent, while Japan rose 12.2 percent. In contrast, exports to Europe fell by 7.7 percent. [Taiwan News]

Taiwan: National robotics industry alliance established

(dql) Taiwan has launched the AI Robotics Industry Alliance, aiming to position the country as a global powerhouse in robotics. Backed by six major industry associations, including the Taiwan Machine Tool and Accessory Builders' Association and the Taiwan Intelligent Automation and Robotics Association (TAIROA), the alliance seeks to integrate Taiwan's hardware and software strengths under a unified national strategy.

The alliance outlined four primary goals: developing five types of domestically produced robot platforms, deploying AI-powered robots across eight sectors such as healthcare, manufacturing, food service, and disaster response, and establishing four core systems —decision-making, motion control, sensing, and power —under a "Made-in-Taiwan" framework. It also aims to boost the robotics industry's output value to NTD 1 trillion (USD 33.96 billion) by 2030.

The launch coincides with the Cabinet's approval of a national smart robotics program in May, reinforcing

the government's commitment to innovation-led growth. [Taiwan News]

Taiwan: Military and urban resilience drills intensify under Han Kuang 2025

(yl) As part of the 2025 Han Kuang exercises, Taiwan is conducting its longest-ever live-fire and civil defense drills to prepare for potential military conflict and gray-zone threats from China. President Lai Ching-te on July 15 conducted an unannounced inspection of extended-range Hsiung Feng III anti-ship missiles and coastal defense deployments in New Taipei's Bali District. The drill featured mobile naval defense units, tactical drones, and layered barricades simulating the defense of the Port of Taipei, part of a strategic "defense triangle" guarding Greater Taipei from amphibious assault. [Focus Taiwan 1]

In parallel, nationwide urban resilience drills began on July 16, involving air raid alerts, traffic control, public sheltering simulations, and post-strike disaster relief exercises. These drills aim to increase civilian awareness and demonstrate societal readiness to both domestic and international audiences. [Focus Taiwan 2]

On the same day, central Taiwan cities like Taichung and Changhua launched detailed urban response simulations, including metro evacuations, medical triage setups, and bomb threat scenarios. Changhua even introduced digital emergency response tools in its industrial park, while Nantou simulated telecom infrastructure damage. Local officials stressed the importance of these efforts in enhancing community-level preparedness in wartime scenarios. [Focus Taiwan 3]

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

Bangladesh: Curfews, mass arrests, and rights concerns follow deadly crackdown on student-led rally

(lm) Bangladesh's political transition faces renewed uncertainty after violent clashes in Gopalganj—the ancestral home of deposed Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina—left at least four civilians dead and over 50 injured during a July 16 rally organized by the National Citizen Party (NCP), a new political movement led by student activists behind the 2024 uprising that ousted Hasina. The event, part of the NCP's "March to Rebuild the Nation" campaign, was intended to mark one year since the regime change but instead descended into violence allegedly instigated by affiliates of the banned Awami League and its student wing.

Security footage and eyewitness reports indicate that pro-Hasina groups attacked the rally using crude weapons and explosives, prompting clashes with over 1,500 deployed security personnel, including army and border guards. Authorities imposed an immediate curfew and Section 144 restrictions—a colonial-era emergency provision banning public gatherings—to contain further unrest. Armored vehicles patrolled the district, and military forces were observed firing tear gas and sound grenades. The interim government later confirmed that the four deceased victims were civilians with no political affiliations, none of whom underwent formal postmortem examinations. [The Daily Star 1] [The Daily Star 2] [The Daily Star 3]

The episode has triggered widespread concern over the rule of law and the capacity of the interim administration, led by Muhammad Yunus, to deliver on its promise of a stable transition to elections, currently slated for February 2026. While Yunus condemned the attack as a "shameful violation of fundamental rights" and pledged accountability through a Home Ministry inquiry, criticism has mounted over the government's apparent failure to prevent foreseeable violence, despite reported advance intelligence. [The Daily Star 4] [The Daily Star 5]

Civil society actors have condemned what they characterize as a broad-based crackdown following the incident. Authorities have filed eight criminal cases naming over 8,400 individuals, with more than 320 arrests to date. Reports of mass detentions without warrants, including minors, have raised concerns about due process, politicized policing, and retaliatory justice. Human rights advocates and local leaders warn that these actions are eroding public trust in the interim government and could destabilize the electoral roadmap. [The Daily Star 6] [The Daily Star 7] [The Daily Star 8] [The Daily Star 9]

Meanwhile, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the main archrival to the ousted Awami League, has accused the government of enabling a breakdown in security and warned against attempts to delay elections. The banned Awami League, conversely, has claimed that the victims of gunfire were its own supporters and blamed the interim authorities for the fatalities. The NCP, for its part, has vowed to continue its nationwide campaign and called for the arrest of "fascist" actors behind the violence. [Al Jazeera] [Reuters]

Bangladesh: Reform process enters final stretch as interim leader declares key elements non-negotiable

(lm) Bangladesh's National Consensus Commission (NCC) has entered the final phase of its second-round political dialogue, aiming to finalize a new constitutional framework—informally known as the "July Charter"—by July 31. The talks resumed on July 22 and include 30 political parties. Among them are the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the main rival to the Awami League of ousted former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina; Jamaat-e-Islami, the country's largest Islamist party; and the National Citizens Party (NCP), a new political force that emerged earlier this year from two key institutions involved in last year's protests that led to Hasina's removal. [Dhaka Tribune]

At the opening of this decisive phase, interim leader and Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus declared several core reforms non-negotiable. These include the reinstatement of the caretaker government system, the creation of a bicameral legislature, direct elections for reserved women's seats, and constitutional definitions for key state institutions. Yunus emphasized that these elements will be central to the July Charter, regardless of whether full consensus is reached on every issue. [The Daily Star 1]

NCC Vice Chair Ali Riaz confirmed that consensus has already been achieved on eight of the proposed reforms, while dialogue continues on seven more. Areas of disagreement will be formally documented in the final charter. The Commission's proposed model for appointing future caretaker government leaders remains a key point of contention. The latest plan suggests a five-member search panel—comprising the prime minister, opposition leader, Speaker, deputy Speaker from the opposition, and a representative from the third-largest party—to select a chief adviser through consensus or fallback voting if necessary.

Party responses remain divided. Jamaat-e-Islami supports the search panel's composition but demands strict consensus-based selection and rejects ranked-choice voting. The NCP supports the framework but insists that the chief adviser must not come from the judiciary. The BNP is still deliberating internally but has long pushed for reinstating a neutral caretaker government.

The now-defunct caretaker system, which operated from 1996 to 2011, was originally intended to ensure neutral oversight during elections. Its abolition by the former Awami League government sparked a decade of political unrest and allegations of election rigging. Its proposed revival marks a rare point of cross-party convergence, though deep disagreements remain over implementation details.

Other contentious issues include the concentration of executive power. Several parties, including Jamaat and the NCP, object to one individual holding the roles of prime minister, Leader of the House, and party chief simultaneously, arguing that it undermines institutional balance and obstructs leadership renewal. The BNP has linked this power consolidation to broader concerns over partisan influence in public institutions.

Parties have also debated the design of the proposed upper house of parliament. While there is broad support for a bicameral system, Jamaat and the NCP favor proportional representation based on national vote share, whereas the BNP prefers allocation based on lower house seat shares. Leftist parties oppose the creation of a second chamber entirely.

The NCC, formed in February 2025 under Yunus's leadership, was tasked with building cross-party consensus on nearly 20 constitutional issues. The current dialogue phase follows an initial round held between March and May with 33 political parties and alliances. The July Charter is expected to enshrine both the agreed reforms and formally registered dissenting

views. [The Daily Star 2] [The Daily Star 3] [The Daily Star 4]

Bangladesh: Main opposition party accuses rivals of plotting to block February 2026 election

(lm) The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the archrival to the Awami League of ousted ex-Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, has warned of a coordinated attempt to sabotage the planned February 2026 general election, accusing rival political forces of trying to destabilize the fragile post-uprising political order and delay the transition to democratic governance.

Party leaders pointed to a recent attack on a rally by the National Citizen Party (NCP) – a political movement that emerged earlier this year from two key organizations behind last year's mass uprising that ousted Hasina – in Gopalganj, are part of a coordinated strategy to destabilize the political climate and portray the government as incapable of maintaining law and order.

At multiple public events in Dhaka and Munshiganj, BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir reiterated the party's resolve to see the election proceed on schedule and warned that former Prime Minister Hasina and her allies must be held accountable for their alleged role in the violent suppression of the July–August 2024 mass uprising, which culminated in Hasina's ouster. Fakhrul accused state security forces of killing and injuring protesters and pledged that a future BNP-led government would bring those responsible to justice, describing Hasina as "a stain on humanity." He also confirmed that the BNP will establish a party-administered fund to support the families of those killed or injured in the uprising, calling it a moral obligation for any future administration. [The Daily Star 1]

The BNP has framed its post-uprising agenda around building a "rainbow state" that incorporates diverse ideological strands—democratic, socialist, and welfare-oriented—as originally envisioned by party matriarch Khaleda Zia. Fakhrul affirmed that the party's goals include ending repression, combating corruption, and constructing a pluralistic, accountable state. He portrayed Acting Chairman Tarique Rahman, Khaleda's son, as central to that effort, citing his London meeting with interim leader Muhammad Yunus, which yielded an agreement on the February 2026 election timeline. [The Daily Star 2]

Fakhrul also used the platform to recount the BNP's historical contributions to multiparty democracy, crediting party founder Ziaur Rahman with ending one-party rule. He emphasized that despite enduring extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, and nearly 6 million politically motivated legal cases, BNP members remain mobilized and committed. Other senior leaders warned that any effort to delay the election would betray the public trust and reignite instability. [The Daily Star 3] [Dhaka Tribune]

Bangladesh: Election Commission seeks data on officials from past three national polls

(lm) Bangladesh's Election Commission (EC) has formally requested detailed personal data on officials who administered the country's last three national elections—held in 2014, 2018, and 2024—following a criminal case concerning electoral irregularities. The request was initiated by the Police Bureau of Investigation (PBI), which is probing a case filed on June 22 under the Dhaka Metropolitan Police.

In a letter dated July 20, the EC asked all divisional commissioners and deputy commissioners to urgently submit names, national ID and passport numbers, contact details, and addresses—organized by polling center—of returning officers, presiding officers, assistant presiding officers, and polling officers. These include deputy commissioners (DCs), who typically serve as returning officers, and Upazila Nirbahi Officers (UNOs)—subdistrict-level executive officials responsible for local administration and development coordination—who act as assistant returning officers. District and upazila election officials, along with approximately 200,000 temporary polling personnel, are also covered by the request. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Chief justice appoints two chamber judges to expedite urgent Supreme Court cases

(lm) Chief Justice Syed Refaat Ahmed has, for the first time, appointed two separate chamber judges in the Appellate Division of Bangladesh's Supreme Court to accelerate the handling of urgent matters. The move marks a procedural shift aimed at expediting case processing in urgent legal matters. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Anti-corruption body investigates 15 years of financial irregularities under Awami League rule

(lm) The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) has launched a broad investigation into alleged financial irregularities spanning the 15-year tenure of the Awami League government of ousted ex-Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, focusing on systemic failures in Bangladesh's financial sector. The probe targets former officials of the country's central bank, Bangladesh Bank, —specifically three former governors and four former deputy governors—as well as former heads of the Bangladesh Financial Intelligence Unit. The ACC is examining their roles in loan disbursements, bank approvals, dollar transfers from reserves, and policies that allegedly benefited major industrial groups and loan defaulters.

The commission has requested detailed documentation on policies issued since 2009, including the regularisation of default loan. A key focus lies on several large conglomerates, including Beximco, Keya, Jamuna, Sikder, and AnonTex, which have faced previous scrutiny for large-scale non-performing loans, regulatory lapses, or political connections.

It is also investigating nine banks approved under Awami League rule, including Meghna Bank, NRB Bank, and Padma Bank (formerly The Farmers Bank), over concerns about ownership control and loan structuring policies. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Anti-graft agency sues ex-defense adviser and family over illegal wealth

(lm) Bangladesh's Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), the country's main anti-graft body, has filed cases against former defense and security adviser Tarique Ahmed Siddique, his wife, and their two daughters for allegedly acquiring illegal assets worth over BDT 620 million (USD 5.08 million). Although the family claimed the assets were inherited, the ACC found no legitimate source of income to justify the holdings. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: 16 former ministers and senior officials brought before war crimes tribunal over 2024 uprising

(lm) Sixteen high-profile individuals, including several former ministers, advisers, top bureaucrats, and a retired justice, were presented before Bangladesh's International Crimes Tribunal-1 (ICT-1) on July 20 on charges of crimes against humanity related to last year's mass uprising. The tribunal, originally established to try war crimes committed during the 1971 Liberation War, has been tasked with addressing atrocities linked to more recent political violence.

The accused include former food minister Qamrul Islam, former education minister Dipu Moni, and other former cabinet members such as Anisul Huq, Amir Hossain Amu, Faruk Khan, and Abdur Razzaque. Also brought before the court were former prime ministerial advisers Tawfiq-e-Elahi Chowdhury and Salman F Rahman, former Justice Shamsuddin Chowdhury Manik, and ex-home secretary Jahangir Alam.

According to court sources, a total of 45 individuals—primarily senior figures from the former Awami League-led administration—have been charged in the case. Among them is current Awami League general secretary and former minister Obaidul Quader. Proceedings are ongoing as the tribunal reviews the initial detentions.[The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Supreme Court adjourns hearing on appeal against acquittals in 2004 grenade attack case

(lm)The Supreme Court has postponed to July 24 its hearing on state appeals challenging the High Court's acquittal of several accused in the 2004 grenade attack case. The appeals seek to overturn a December 2024 verdict that cleared all 49 defendants of responsibility for the attack, which targeted a rally of the Awami League—then in opposition and led by now-ousted ex-Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina—and killed over 20 people while injuring many more. The case remains one of the most serious acts of political violence in Bangladesh's history. The case is widely viewed as one of the most serious political violence incidents in the country's history.

Among those acquitted are the Acting Chairman of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the archrival to the Awami League, Tarique Rahman, and former state minister Lutfozzaman Babar, both of whom were previously convicted by a lower court. Tarique is the son of late President Ziaur Rahman and has lived in exile in London since 2008.

Meanwhile, several journalists covering the proceedings were reportedly assaulted inside the court premises, though further details remain unclear. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Council of Advisers approves draft amendment to voters' list ordinance

(mon) On 17 July, Bangladesh's Council of Advisers gave in-principle and final approval to the draft Voters' List (Amendment) Ordinance, 2025, allowing individuals who turn 18 before the election schedule is announced to be included in the voters' list. The decision was made during the Council's 34th meeting at the Chief Adviser's Office in Dhaka. [BSS News] [Financial Express]

Bangladesh: Government to scrap political vetting in public service recruitment

(lm) The interim government is moving to end the practice of vetting public service candidates for political affiliations through intelligence agencies, a longstanding procedure criticized for politicizing the civil administration. The decision follows a recommendation by the Public Administration Reform Commission and was confirmed during a meeting at the Chief Adviser's Office, chaired by Principal Secretary M Siraj Uddin Miah.

While the meeting did not adopt the commission's suggestion to delay police verification until after written and viva exam results, it did approve post-exam background checks for criminal records, with the option of seeking information from the Anti-Corruption Commission before final appointments.

Other reform steps discussed include amending the colonial-era Official Secrets Act of 1923 and reviewing the Right to Information Act of 2009. The Public Security Division was directed to accelerate work on updating the Official Secrets Act, which had previously seen little progress.

Several administrative restructuring proposals were also reviewed. A recommendation to transfer the land registration directorate from the law ministry to the land ministry was rejected for the time being. Meanwhile, a committee comprising top officials from the ministries of public administration, local government, and finance will assess the

implementation feasibility of broader reform proposals.

Further recommendations under consideration include appointing senior assistant secretaries as administrative heads of upazila parishads (sub-district councils), and granting upazila nirbahi officers (sub-district executive officers appointed by the central government) greater authority over law and order, land management, and the operation of mobile courts. A unified national policy for forming school and college management committees is also to be issued by July 25. In addition, ministries were instructed to update their websites within a month and revise all circulars related to public hearings by July 24 to enhance accessibility and accountability. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Police submit charge sheets in 12 cases linked to July Uprising, including three for murder

(lm) To date, police have submitted charge sheets in 12 cases related to the July Uprising, a series of anti-government protests and violent incidents that swept across the country in mid-2024 and led to the ouster of ex-Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

Among them are three murder cases filed in Sherpur district. The remaining nine cases involve a range of offenses and span multiple jurisdictions: one case each in Dhaka and Barishal Metropolitan areas, three in Chapainawabganj, two in Sirajganj, and two currently being investigated by the Police Bureau of Investigation (PBI). [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Ministry forms probe committee into unrest at leading engineering university

(lm) The Ministry of Education has established a three-member inquiry committee to investigate prolonged unrest and academic disruption at Khulna University of Engineering and Technology (KUET), one of Bangladesh's premier public engineering institutions. The unrest, triggered by tensions and an attack on students in February, led to the suspension of classes and a full campus shutdown. The panel is expected to report its findings within two months. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Government signs human rights agreement with UN, draws domestic backlash from Islamists

(mon) Bangladesh has signed a three-year Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) to establish a mission aimed at supporting legal reforms and strengthening institutional accountability, particularly in response to violations reported during the July–August 2024 unrest, which culminated in the ouster of then-Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. The mission will focus on capacity-building for government agencies and civil society through legal training and institutional support.

The agreement has drawn sharp criticism from Hefazat-e-Islam, a conservative Islamist group in Bangladesh known for mobilizing large-scale protests against perceived encroachments on Islamic values. The group accused the government of ceding to foreign influence under the guise of human rights and warned of mass protests unless the MoU is withdrawn. [BSS News] [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: World Bank backs interim reforms, signals continuity in support and investment priorities

(mon) The World Bank has reaffirmed its financial and policy support for Bangladesh's interim administration amid a politically sensitive reform period. During a meeting on July 14, World Bank Vice President for South Asia Johannes Zutt endorsed the government's efforts to address longstanding structural weaknesses in the financial sector and pledged continued engagement.

Zutt acknowledged the challenging transition faced by the interim leadership after last year's July Uprising, a mass protest movement that led to the ouster of the previous Awami League government. He noted that the World Bank disbursed over USD 3 billion in the past fiscal year and intends to maintain a similar level of financial assistance over the next three years, with a focus on inclusive growth, youth participation, and gender equity.

Chief Adviser Professor Muhammad Yunus used the meeting to pitch Bangladesh as a strategic production base for international manufacturing investment, citing its young labor force and maritime access. The interim government is positioning the country as a regional

economic node rather than a peripheral market. Yunus stressed that youth and women, central to last year's protest movement, remain focal points of the administration's development approach. [Daily Sun] [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: Swiss-hosted dialogue spotlights country's economic outlook and investment climate

(mon) On July 17, Ambassador of Switzerland to Bangladesh, Reto Renggli, hosted a meeting in Dhaka to discuss Bangladesh's economic outlook and investment climate. Key members of Bangladesh's business community and representatives of Swiss businesses operating in the country participated in the dialogue.

The discussions focused on Bangladesh's macroeconomic trends, financial sector challenges, and investment opportunities. The emphasis was on the need for a stable macroeconomic framework and a resilient financial sector to boost foreign investment. Structural bottlenecks were also examined, along with proposed reforms to enhance investor confidence, which are crucial for supporting sustainable development and inclusive growth in Bangladesh. [BSS News] [The Business Standard]

Bangladesh: Government outlines modernization plans for country's newest deep-sea facility

(mon) Bangladesh has reaffirmed its commitment to modernizing Payra Port, the country's newest deep-sea facility located in the southern district of Patuakhali. Established to ease congestion at Chittagong and Mongla ports, Payra Port is designed to serve as a strategic maritime gateway, facilitating regional trade and strengthening economic ties with South and Southeast Asia.

Speaking at a seminar in Kuakata on the port's long-term development plan, Shipping Adviser Brigadier General (retired) Dr. M Sakhawat Hussain emphasized the need for innovative and practical reforms in port management. He highlighted Payra's role as a regional economic driver and stressed the importance of coordinated efforts to boost operational efficiency.

Rear Admiral Masud Iqbal, Chairman of the Payra Port Authority, announced that the port's first terminal is expected to become operational by July 2026. He called for cooperation from government agencies and stakeholders to ensure timely implementation. [BSS News]

Bangladesh: High Court questions continued closure of Thakurgaon airport

(lm) The High Court has issued a rule asking why authorities have not resumed operations at Thakurgaon Airport, directing officials from the Civil Aviation Ministry, the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (CAAB), and other relevant bodies to explain their inaction. The order came in response to a public interest petition filed by a Supreme Court lawyer and resident of Thakurgaon, who argued that the airport's prolonged closure has harmed local development, affecting an estimated 4.5 million residents in Thakurgaon and nearby Panchagarh.

Built in 1940 during World War II, Thakurgaon Airport was reportedly closed in 1979 due to low passenger numbers. However, the petitioner contends that this justification is no longer valid, citing increased air travel demand, a growing population, and the emergence of thousands of small industries in the region. The absence of air connectivity, he argues, hinders the establishment of heavy industry and limits broader economic development. [The Daily Star]

Bangladesh: At least 27 dead—mostly children—after air force jet crashes into Dhaka school

(lm) A Bangladesh Air Force training jet crashed into Milestone School and College in northern Dhaka on July 21, killing at least 27 people, including 25 children and the pilot, in the country's deadliest aviation accident in recent memory. Over 170 others were injured, many critically, with hospitals overwhelmed and some victims suffering extensive burns. [Associated Press] [CNN]

The F-7 BGI aircraft, a Chinese-made fighter jet variant, reportedly experienced a mechanical failure shortly after takeoff from Dhaka's Kurmitola airbase. The pilot attempted to steer the jet away from densely populated areas but was unable to prevent impact

with a two-story building on the school campus. [The Daily Star 1]

The tragedy has sparked widespread student protests. On July 22, students from Milestone and neighboring schools blocked roads and presented a six-point list of demands. These include public disclosure of victims' identities, a verified list of the injured, an apology for alleged assaults on teachers by military personnel during rescue efforts, compensation for families of the deceased, removal of outdated aircraft, and reforms to training protocols to prevent future crashes in densely populated areas. [Dhaka Tribune 1]

Tensions escalated when students confronted visiting government officials, including the law adviser, education adviser, and press secretary to the interim leader. Protesters accused authorities of underreporting casualties and criticized the government's response as insufficient. The officials were temporarily confined by students demanding direct accountability. [Dhaka Tribune 2]

In response, the interim government, led by Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus, acknowledged the legitimacy of the students' demands and pledged to implement them. The law adviser announced that the air force would be instructed to avoid flying over urban centers, and that trauma support and compensation were being arranged for victims' families. An information center and control room have also been established at the school to provide updates on casualties and assist with missing persons inquiries. Authorities continue to use DNA testing to identify victims whose bodies were severely burned. [The Daily Star 2] [The Daily Star 3]

Bangladesh: 328 arrested nationwide in army-led joint operations

(lm) Between July 10 and 17, a total of 328 individuals were arrested in joint nationwide operations led by the Bangladesh Army in coordination with other law enforcement agencies. Those detained include criminals, drug dealers, juvenile gang members, illegal arms holders, smugglers, extortionists, and illegal sand lifters.

The operations are part of the army's broader effort to maintain public order amid ongoing national instability. Regular patrols and targeted actions continue, including in industrial zones where the army is helping manage labor unrest and ensure business continuity. [The Daily Star]

Bhutan: Opposition flags weak policy execution, opaque governance, and risks to strategic reform agenda

(lm) Bhutan's main opposition party, the Bhutan Tendrel Party, has intensified its criticism of the government's performance, citing poor policy execution, lack of transparency, and serious risks to the credibility of ongoing reform efforts. The criticism spans multiple fronts, from strategic planning and accountability to fiscal policy and digital infrastructure.

At the core of the opposition's concerns is what it describes as the government's failure to translate aspirational frameworks into actionable plans. The 2025 State of the Nation report was criticized for presenting high-level goals—such as GDP growth and improvements in life expectancy—without addressing underlying structural challenges like rising youth unemployment, rural–urban disparities, the erosion of local governance, and continued outmigration of skilled workers. The opposition argued that two signature initiatives—the "21st Century Economic Roadmap" and the "10X Vision"—suffer from weak institutional coordination, unclear budgets, and limited accountability, putting their effectiveness as long-term reform platforms into question. [Kuensel 1]

The Tendrel Party also revealed that efforts to evaluate the government's first-year performance were frustrated by an absence of official responses. Requests made in February and May for updates on four executive orders and nine policy directives—covering issues such as housing, regional tourism, and economic stimulus—received a reply from only one ministry. The opposition warned that such lack of engagement weakens the role of oversight and erodes public trust in governance. [Kuensel 2]

In a related criticism, the opposition has also faulted the government for repeated delays in implementing the Goods and Services Tax (GST) Act. Passed in 2020, the GST law has already been amended three times but remains unenforced. The delay has been attributed to the failed rollout of the Bhutan Integrated Taxation System (BITS), which was originally awarded to a local firm but later terminated in 2022. A new contract, worth BTN 1 billion (approximately USD 12 million), was awarded to a New Zealand-based firm, with the system now expected to be operational by January 2026.

The opposition warned that further delays could undermine Bhutan's fiscal reputation and the success

of its broader tax reform agenda. While it welcomed parts of the newly passed Income Tax Bill—such as lower corporate taxes and increased household disposable income—it strongly objected to the proposed 10 percent withholding tax on fixed deposit interest and dividends, arguing the gains were negligible compared to the potential economic harm. [Kuensel 3]

Bhutan: Opposition questions education budget equity amid rural–urban divide and central school focus

(lm) The opposition Bhutan Tendrel Party has raised concerns in Parliament over what it describes as inequitable government funding in the education sector, highlighting the disproportionate allocation of resources to central schools. According to the party, BTN 14 billion (USD 168 million) was allocated to just 63 central schools, while 477 non-central schools—serving around 60 percent of the nation's students—received only BTN 5 billion (USD 60 million).

The central school model, launched in 2015 and later discontinued in 2019, has been revived by the current government. While the Ministry of Education and Skills Development defended the program as a means to support low-income students and promote equitable access to quality education, the opposition argued that schools in remote areas continue to suffer from inadequate infrastructure and lack of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) resources.

The Ministry cited a drop in poverty from 28 percent in 2017 to 11.6 percent in 2022, based on the Bhutan Poverty and Equity Assessment 2024, but acknowledged that 55 percent of the population still resides in rural areas, where 87 percent continue to face income-related challenges.

To address regional disparities, the Ministry said BTN 5.5 billion (USD 66 million) has been allocated to non-central schools nationwide and introduced a "Common Minimum Facilities Standard" to ensure all schools meet basic infrastructure and service benchmarks. The opposition, however, maintained that without more balanced funding and transparent implementation, the government's education strategy risks deepening systemic inequalities. [Kuensel]

Bhutan: Private sector pushes for deeper integration into national planning and recovery support

(lm) Bhutan's private sector is intensifying its call for formal inclusion in the country's 13th Five-Year Plan, signaling a potential shift toward a more collaborative development model. The Bhutan Chamber of Commerce and Industry (BCCI) submitted a detailed proposal to the Cabinet in April, which has since entered review by the Office of Cabinet Affairs and Strategic Coordination. The proposal advocates for formal public-private collaboration through models such as outsourcing, privatization, and public-private partnerships. [Kuensel 1]

In parallel, the hospitality sector—among the hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic—is seeking access to the Economic Stimulus Programme (ESP), a government initiative launched in 2020 to support key sectors during Bhutan's pandemic response and recovery. The Hotel and Restaurant Association of Bhutan (HRAB) has urged the government to extend ESP loans to the tourism industry, citing continued underperformance in visitor arrivals and high levels of debt. In 2024, Bhutan recorded only 145,065 tourist arrivals—about 35 percent of 2019 levels. The sector currently holds the second-highest loan exposure in the country, with over BTN 23.9 billion (approximately USD 290 million) in outstanding credit, including BTN 749 million (USD 9 million) in non-performing loans.

HRAB is also calling for streamlined work permit approvals, digital transformation funding, and targeted training programs under the Youth Engagement and Livelihood Programme. It has proposed reforms to the Sustainable Development Fee (SDF) to boost regional tourism, including discounts based on group size and length of stay. To ensure long-term resilience, HRAB has requested the creation of a Sustainability Fund supported by one percent of SDF revenues. [Kuensel 2]

Bhutan: Foreign reserves continue upward trend despite economic liberalization pressures

(lm) Bhutan's foreign exchange reserves reached USD 816.8 million in May 2025, reflecting a 36.8 percent increase compared to the same month last year, according to data released by the Royal Monetary Authority. This marks a significant recovery from the low point of USD 513.9 million in mid-2023 and exceeds the constitutional threshold requiring at least

one year's worth of essential import coverage. Current reserves now cover 21 months of essential imports.

The increase occurred despite the lifting of moratoriums on vehicle imports and housing construction—moves that might typically raise outward payments and reduce reserve levels. After peaking at USD 892.7 million in December 2024, reserves slightly declined over the first quarter of 2025 but remain robust in year-on-year comparison. The Bhutanese ngultrum also appreciated modestly during this period, rising by BTN 1.1 to BTN 85.2 against the U.S. dollar.

The main driver behind this improvement is the rise in convertible currency reserves, Indian rupee holdings, and monetary gold, which together reached USD 774.5 million in May 2025—up from USD 555.8 million a year earlier. Despite minor contributions from special drawing rights and Bhutan's reserve tranche position at the International Monetary Fund, these components have remained stable, further supporting reserve reliability.

The Ministry of Finance projects continued growth in the reserve position. According to its latest Macroeconomic Situation Report, Bhutan's reserves are forecast to reach USD 991.1 million by the end of fiscal year 2024–25 and rise to USD 1.24 billion in 2025–26, potentially covering up to 32 months of essential imports. Projections for 2026–27 suggest reserves could exceed USD 1.5 billion, offering a 39-month import buffer. [Kuensel]

Bhutan: New solar plant launched to reduce winter energy imports and boost renewable capacity

(lm) Bhutan has commissioned its largest grid-connected solar power plant to date, a major development in the country's strategy to diversify its energy sources and reduce winter-season electricity imports. The utility-scale plant, located in Yongtru, spans 44 acres and is equipped with over 26,000 solar panels. Phase one of the project—now operational—delivers 22.38 megawatt-peak (MWp) of capacity and is expected to generate over 25 million kilowatt-hours annually. A second phase, adding 5 MWp with 8,700 additional panels, is scheduled for completion in September.

The project is financed through a combination of an Asian Development Bank (ADB) grant (USD 10 million), a concessional loan (USD 8.26 million), and a

government contribution (USD 0.99 million). Delayed by three months due to equipment issues, the facility will help offset Bhutan's winter import needs. In 2024 alone, the country imported nearly 1 billion kilowatt-hours of electricity at a cost of BTN 3.4 billion (approximately USD 41 million).

Originally designed for 17.38 MWp, the project was expanded after surplus funding became available. Bhutan aims to install 500 MW of solar capacity by 2025 and 1,000 MW by 2030, with its total solar potential estimated at 12 gigawatts. Additional projects exceeding 100 MW are planned in Dagana and Bumthang districts. [Kuensel]

India: Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar resigns citing medical reasons

(lm) Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar resigned from office on July 21 with immediate effect, citing medical reasons and a need to prioritize his health. The resignation, submitted to President Droupadi Murmu, came as a surprise on the first day of the Monsoon Session of Parliament and has triggered the constitutional process to elect his successor. [Daily Mirror] [NDTV]

Under Article 66 of the Constitution, the Vice President is elected by an electoral college consisting of members from both the Lok Sabha (Parliament's lower house) and Rajya Sabha (Parliament's upper house), including nominated members. The vote is conducted by the Election Commission of India through a single transferable vote system by secret ballot. Although Article 66 permits up to six months to fill the vacancy, the Election Commission is expected to conduct the election within 60 days of Dhankhar's resignation, placing the deadline around September 19. In the interim, Deputy Chairman Harivansh Narayan Singh will preside over the Rajya Sabha.

While the resignation has been formally attributed to health concerns, opposition parties—particularly the Imain opposition Indian National Congress (INC) — have cast doubt on the official explanation. INC leader Jairam Ramesh described the resignation as "inexplicable" and suggested there may be undisclosed reasons behind the decision. He noted that Dhankhar had been scheduled to make significant announcements related to the judiciary on July 22 and to chair a meeting of the Business Advisory Committee, raising questions about the timing.

In a striking shift from its usual criticism of Dhankhar's conduct as Rajya Sabha Chair, the INC publicly appealed to him to reconsider his resignation and called on Prime Minister Narendra Modi to intervene. The party had previously supported no-confidence motions against him, accusing him of partisanship. [The Times of India]

India: Judge accused in cash scandal challenges impeachment process in Supreme Court

(lm) Justice Yashwant Varma, currently serving at the Allahabad High Court and formerly a judge of the Delhi High Court, has petitioned the Supreme Court of India to contest the findings of a judicial inquiry panel that recommended his removal after large sums of unexplained cash were discovered at his official residence.

Justice Varma has questioned the authority of the Chief Justice of India to recommend his impeachment to the President and has challenged the panel's conclusions as procedurally flawed and lacking due process. The panel—appointed in March 2025 and comprising senior judges from three high courts—had found substance in the allegations following the March 14 incident, when a fire at his Delhi residence led to the discovery of currency notes.

The case is expected to be heard by the Supreme Court next week. Meanwhile, Parliament is also preparing to introduce a motion for his removal. As per constitutional procedures and the Judges Inquiry Act, Parliament will need to set up a fresh investigative panel before any removal proceedings can advance. [The Indian Express]

India: Opposition alliance shows fragmentation amid pre-session coordination and regional recalibrations

(lm) The Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA bloc), the country's main opposition coalition, held a virtual meeting on July 19 to set its legislative agenda ahead of Parliament's Monsoon Session which began on July 21. The session was marked by a dual dynamic: attempts at national coordination on pressing issues and visible signs of political fragmentation rooted in regional competition and ideological rifts.

The meeting—convened by senior Indian National Congress (INC) leaders including Rahul Gandhi and K.C. Venugopal—brought together key opposition parties such as the Samajwadi Party, Shiv Sena (UBT), Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), Nationalist Congress Party (Sharad Pawar faction), Left parties, Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM), and the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML).

Discussions centered on foreign policy, institutional integrity, national security lapses, and democratic backsliding. Leaders expressed concern over U.S. President Donald Trump's repeated claims of mediating between India and Pakistan and criticized the Modi government's silence. They also decried what they viewed as the misuse of investigative agencies and surveillance tools like Pegasus—an Israeli-developed spyware known for covertly accessing smartphones to extract data and monitor communications—against political opponents, rather than terrorists.

However, unity within the bloc showed signs of strain. The Aam Aadmi Party (AAP)—a regional party notable for governing Punjab, where it secured a commanding majority in 2022—confirmed its departure from the alliance following strategic differences after the 2024 general elections. Meanwhile, the All India Trinamool Congress (TMC)—a dominant party in West Bengal led by Mamata Banerjee—though officially absent due to its annual July 21 rally commemorating the 1993 Kolkata police firing, signaled broader political distancing. Party insiders indicated that TMC seeks to avoid public alignment with the INC and Left, both of whom are its rivals in the upcoming 2026 West Bengal state elections.

This intra-bloc tension was further amplified by regional repositioning. The Left Front—a coalition of communist and left-wing parties currently ruling Kerala—has tempered cooperation with the INC, its main challenger in the state. INC leader Rahul Gandhi's recent attack on the Pinarayi Vijayan-led Left government—equating its methods with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a Hindu nationalist organization that ideologically underpins the ruling BJP—drew criticism from CPI leader D Raja, who urged alliance members to exercise restraint in intra-bloc critiques. [The Indian Express] [NDTV] [Deccan Herald]

India: Supreme Court declines to halt trial in land-for-jobs case against former Bihar chief minister

(lm) India's Supreme Court on July 18 refused to stay trial court proceedings against former Bihar chief minister and Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) leader Lalu Prasad Yadav in a corruption case stemming from his tenure as Union Railways Minister between 2004 and 2009. The RJD is a regional party rooted in Bihar, advocating for social justice and representing marginalized communities. Bihar, located in eastern India, is a densely populated state with a largely rural economy and a political landscape shaped by complex caste dynamics.

The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) alleges that individuals were appointed to Group D posts in the Indian Railways' West Central Zone in exchange for land parcels transferred to Yadav's family or close associates. The Supreme Court granted Yadav exemption from appearing before the trial court but asked the Delhi High Court to expedite the hearing on his petition to quash the FIR. The High Court is scheduled to hear the matter on August 12. [The Indian Express]

India: Supreme Court declines to halt probe against former Rajasthan minister

(lm) India's Supreme Court on July 17 declined to stay ongoing criminal investigations against former Indian National Congress minister Pramod Jain Bhaya, who served as Cabinet Minister for Mines and Petroleum in Rajasthan from 2018 to 2023. While the court instructed authorities not to take any coercive steps against him until the next hearing, it directed Bhaya to fully cooperate in all pending cases.

Bhaya had petitioned for the quashing or clubbing of multiple First Information Reports (FIRs), which he alleged were politically motivated and filed by rivals following his 2023 electoral defeat. His legal counsel argued the FIRs were vague and overlapping. However, Rajasthan's Additional Advocate General contended that each FIR involved distinct facts and charges, including illegal mining, forged land records, and financial misconduct across different jurisdictions, making consolidation legally and practically unfeasible.

The Supreme Court declined to intervene immediately and issued a notice to the Rajasthan government, requesting its response within four weeks. The decision follows the Rajasthan High Court's earlier rejection of Bhaya's plea, which found no basis for clubbing the cases, noting that the allegations stemmed from separate transactions. [The Indian Express]

India: Supreme Court affirms that companies can be considered victims under criminal law

(lm) In a landmark judgment delivered on July 14, India's Supreme Court ruled that corporate entities qualify as "victims" under the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC), thereby granting them the right to appeal criminal acquittals or seek remedies for offenses such as counterfeiting and intellectual property violations. The decision marks a significant departure from the traditionally state-driven model of criminal prosecution in India.

The decision came in a case involving Asian Paints Ltd, one of India's largest paint manufacturers and a leading player in the decorative and industrial coatings sector. The company had appealed the acquittal of a retailer accused of selling counterfeit products bearing the Asian Paints brand. Although the trial court had convicted the accused, a sessions court overturned the verdict, and the Rajasthan High Court's Jaipur Bench later dismissed Asian Paints' appeal under Section 372 of the CrPC as not maintainable.

Reversing the High Court's decision, the Supreme Court emphasized that Section 2(wa) of the CrPC defines a "victim" broadly to include any person—including legal entities—who suffers loss or injury from a crime. The bench, comprising Justices Ahsanuddin Amanullah and Prashant Kumar Mishra, found that excluding companies from this definition would undermine protections against modern corporate harms such as brand erosion and supply chain fraud.

Legal observers see the ruling as a foundational development in India's legal landscape, particularly for industries plagued by counterfeiting, including fast-moving consumer goods, pharmaceuticals, electronics, and fashion. The judgment reduces companies' dependency on public prosecutors and enhances their ability to protect IP and brand integrity through direct legal recourse. [The Indian Express]

India: Eviction aftermath turns violent in Assam, leaving one dead and police injured

(lm) A violent clash on July 18 between displaced residents and security forces in Assam's Goalpara district left one person dead and at least ten police

officers injured. The confrontation followed an earlier eviction drive on July 12, during which authorities bulldozed the homes of approximately 1,080 families to clear 140 hectares of forest land in the Paikan Reserve Forest.

Although the initial eviction had taken place without resistance, many affected families—lacking alternative shelter—remained at the site in makeshift structures. When forest and police personnel returned for patrol duty and attempted to remove these temporary dwellings, tensions escalated. Authorities reported that security forces came under attack, prompting them to use force, including live fire. Three people were hit, one fatally.

This incident is part of a broader series of evictions in Assam. According to the state government, over 50,000 people have been displaced from around 160 square kilometers of land since 2021. The evictions, which have taken place across four districts in the past month alone, have raised concerns about land rights, resettlement policies, and the use of force in implementation. [The Indian Express]

India: Supreme Court affirms equal inheritance rights for tribal women in landmark ruling

(lm) India's Supreme Court has ruled that women from Scheduled Tribes are entitled to equal inheritance rights in ancestral property, marking a significant affirmation of gender equality within indigenous communities. The decision overturned a 2022 ruling by the Chhattisgarh High Court that had denied such rights.

The case involved legal heirs seeking partition of property from their maternal grandfather's estate. The Court found that, in the absence of specific legislation on intestate succession for Scheduled Tribes, the Central Provinces Laws Act of 1875 applies, guided by the principle of "justice, equity and good conscience."

Although the 1875 Act was repealed in 2018, the Court affirmed that rights acquired before the repeal remain valid. The ruling reinforces that exclusion of tribal women from inheritance due to legal gaps perpetuates discrimination and must be rectified through equitable legal reasoning. [The Indian Express]

India: World Bank urges USD 2.4 trillion investment in climate-resilient urban infrastructure by 2050

(lm) India must invest over USD 2.4 trillion in climate-resilient urban infrastructure by 2050 to manage the mounting risks posed by extreme weather events linked to climate change, according to a new World Bank report released on July 22. The report, *Towards Resilient and Prosperous Cities in India*, warns that without large-scale investments in housing, transport, water, and waste systems, urban areas will face escalating losses.

India's urban population is projected to nearly double to 951 million by 2050, compared to 480 million in 2020. Currently, India spends only 0.7 percent of its gross domestic product on urban infrastructure, well below international benchmarks. Urban flooding already causes an estimated USD 4 billion in annual damage—projected to increase to USD 5 billion by 2030 and as high as USD 30 billion by 2070 without remedial measures.

To mitigate this trajectory, the report recommends significant increases in both public and private financing. It highlights the need for stronger coordination among federal, state, and municipal authorities, alongside climate-linked fiscal transfers. The private sector, which currently contributes only 5 percent of urban infrastructure investment, is urged to expand involvement in areas such as green buildings, energy-efficient water supply, sanitation, and solid waste management.

If India experiences moderate rather than conservative urbanization trends, total infrastructure investment needs could reach USD 2.8 trillion by 2050 and USD 13.4 trillion by 2070. [NDTV]

India: Army receives first batch of U.S.-made Apache helicopters amid strategic buildup

(lm) India has taken delivery of the first three AH-64E Apache attack helicopters as part of a military deal worth INR 56.91 billion (USD 683 million) with the United States. The helicopters arrived at Hindon Air Force Station and will be deployed to Jodhpur, where the Indian Army has raised its first Apache squadron. The remaining three units are expected to be delivered by the end of 2025.

This delivery marks a milestone in India's defense modernization efforts and enhances the country's offensive air capabilities at a time of heightened regional tensions. The delivery had been delayed due to global supply chain disruptions and shifting geopolitical conditions. The deal was originally signed during U.S. President Donald Trump's 2020 visit to India, following a separate 2015 agreement under which 22 Apaches were procured for the Air Force. [The Times of India]

Maldives: Chief justice retires amid judicial upheaval as Parliament appoints new member to oversight body

(lm) Maldives is undergoing a significant institutional shift in its judiciary, marked by the retirement of Chief Justice Ahmed Muthasim Adnan and the appointment of a new public representative to the Judicial Service Commission (JSC), amid ongoing allegations of political interference and weakening judicial independence.

Chief Justice Muthasim, who had served intermittently on the Supreme Court for nearly a decade and as chief justice since 2019, formally retired on July 21. His decision followed months of internal turmoil, during which the JSC suspended three Supreme Court justices —Husnu Al-Suood, Azmiralda Zahir, and Mahaz Ali Zahir—while they were reviewing controversial constitutional amendments promoted by the ruling People's National Congress (PNC). The amendments aimed to entrench anti-defection provisions in the constitution. All three judges were subsequently removed, triggering criticism from legal experts, civil society, and international observers regarding procedural fairness and the erosion of judicial checks and balances.

Muthasim remained publicly silent throughout the suspensions and removals, prompting concerns about leadership accountability within the judiciary. His retirement leaves the court under interim leadership, with Justice Abdulla Hameed – one of two justices appointed in June to replace the dismissed judges – appointed as acting chief justice pending a formal nomination. [The Sun 1]

In parallel, on July 14, the Maldivian Parliament appointed Idrees Fauzy as the new public representative to the JSC—a body constitutionally mandated to oversee judicial appointments and discipline. Fauzy's appointment comes amid longstanding demands for structural reform of the JSC, which includes representatives from the executive,

legislative, and judicial branches, as well as the attorney general and the civil service commission president. Critics argue this composition renders the commission susceptible to executive and parliamentary influence. [The Sun 2]

Notably, the JSC had earlier supported legislation to downsize the Supreme Court bench from seven to five members—an effort that had once removed Muthasim in 2014 and was reintroduced in early 2025 before being tabled due to public backlash.

Maldives: Political appointments under scrutiny amid transparency push and budget concerns

(lm) The administration of Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu has formally disclosed that 922 individuals currently hold political appointments—exceeding the previously pledged cap of 700 by over 30 percent. The figure was released following months of public pressure, a binding order by the Information Commissioner in January 2025, and legal resistance by the government, including an appeal to the High Court. The disclosure includes ministers, deputy ministers, political directors, and senior advisors, though the government notes that numbers may fluctuate over a term.

The issue has drawn sustained attention both domestically and abroad due to its implications for fiscal governance, institutional accountability, and executive transparency. President Muizzu's administration had pledged in 2023 to reduce excessive political hiring, and in late 2024, it announced the dismissal of 248 political appointees as a cost-cutting measure. However, the government had until now refused to release specific data, citing administrative discretion—a stance Muizzu has since publicly walked back.

The main opposition, the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), disputes the new figure, arguing it dramatically understates the actual count. Citing budgetary allocations and payroll estimates, former finance minister Ibrahim Ameer asserts that as of late 2024, the real number of political appointees exceeded 2,000. MDP officials contend that appointments at the President's Office and affiliated residences were deliberately excluded from the public figure, pointing to a tripling of personnel expenditures in those units since 2023. [The Sun 1] [The Sun 2]

Maldives: Cancellation of parliamentary sittings draws scrutiny

(lm) The Maldivian Parliament cancelled its sitting on July 15 without public explanation, fueling criticism over a broader pattern of irregular legislative activity. Under standing orders, the People's Majlis is required to convene three times per week, but numerous sessions have been either cancelled or cut short in recent months—often without formal justification.

Some lawmakers expressed frustration over the lack of transparency, stating they were not informed of the reasons behind the latest cancellation and questioning the speaker's discretion in repeatedly suspending scheduled sessions. Previous cancellations were attributed to a lack of scheduled work on the floor, though committee activities were said to be continuing.

The opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) has criticized the trend, warning it undermines legislative oversight and public trust. The issue has attracted wider public scrutiny due to the high compensation of lawmakers, who receive MVR 82,500 (USD 5,362.50) monthly, excluding additional committee allowances. [The Sun]

Maldives: Fraud-hit condominium project fuels political blame

(lm) The fallout from a large-scale real estate fraud in the Maldives has triggered renewed political confrontation and exposed deeper systemic weaknesses in housing governance, financial oversight, and institutional accountability. At the center of the controversy is the stalled K-Park Residences project—a condominium development in Hulhumalé—where over 50 buyers were defrauded, some of whom paid in full for apartments that were never delivered. Investigations have revealed that multiple units were sold to more than one buyer, with one apartment reportedly sold to six individuals.

The matter resurfaced in Parliament on July 21 with a formal resolution submitted by the opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), urging action over years-long delays in justice. Victims, the resolution notes, are locked out of government social housing programs due to their contractual links to K-Park, and continue to face financial and legal uncertainty. Despite repeated appeals, authorities have made no substantial progress in resolving the dispute.

In a parallel development, the ruling People's National Congress (PNC) used the debate to accuse previous administrations of shielding those responsible. The PNC's parliamentary group leader alleged that former leaders—under both ex-presidents Abdulla Yameen and Ibrahim Mohamed Solih—failed to intervene, despite having the opportunity and authority to do so. The lawmaker claimed that these administrations maintained close ties with the project's officials and authorized large settlements to companies involved in fraudulent schemes.

The K-Park case, formally referred to the police in 2023 by its minority shareholder and the state-run Housing Development Corporation (HDC), has since led to criminal charges. Two individuals face over 200 combined counts of fraud, money laundering, document falsification, and misappropriation. Prosecutors allege that forged documents and bank accounts were used to defraud buyers and misrepresent the project's ownership. Raids uncovered luxury assets allegedly acquired through illicit proceeds, including a multimillion-rufiyaa penthouse and branded items. [The Sun 1] [The Sun 2]

Maldives: Opposition mayor accused of unlawfully leasing public land in Malé without council approval

(lm) Malé City Mayor Adam Azim, a senior figure in the opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), is facing accusations of bypassing formal council procedures to lease public land plots in the capital without the required approval. The criticism centers on the mayor's failure to disclose a legally mandated registry of council-owned land and his alleged role in issuing long-term leases without majority consent from the council.

The accusations highlight concerns over transparency and governance in municipal land management. Although the council amended its internal rules in 2023 to require full council votes for land leasing decisions, claims persist that parks, green spaces, and roadside areas have continued to be leased without due process. These actions, carried out under Azim's tenure or initiated earlier, were previously flagged by the Anti-Corruption Commission, the Local Government Authority, and Parliament's Decentralization Committee—but remain unaddressed.

Azim has defended his position, stating that the land list had not been published in 15 years and is being verified for accuracy. He pledged to release the full

registry within his two-year term as mayor. He also claimed the leases were backed by council votes, though this has been publicly denied by at least one council member, who insists there was no formal approval. [The Sun]

Maldives: Civil Court finds opposition activist violated dignity of President's son

(lm) The Maldivian Civil Court has ruled that senior opposition figure Mariyam 'Mandhy' Zubair, affiliated with the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), violated the dignity of one of President Mohamed Muizzu's children through public remarks made at a rally in March. At the event, Mandhy alleged that the government's 2023 decision to ban vaping was motivated by an incident involving the President's son. The First Lady, Sajidha Mohamed, later confirmed the statement referred to their then-16-year-old son and initiated civil proceedings.

The court determined that Mandhy's remarks infringed on the minor's dignity and confirmed the family's right to seek compensation. However, it declined to hold the MDP or its chairperson responsible or to issue a mandated public apology.

The case comes amid a parallel criminal investigation into Mandhy's remarks, which police initially claimed was prompted by the Children's Ombudsperson's Office—an assertion the office publicly denied. Mandhy was also physically attacked days after the rally in what her party called politically motivated retaliation. [The Sun]

Maldives: Family Court begins naming child support defaulters to deter non-payment

(lm) The Family Court of the Maldives has begun publicly identifying individuals who fail to pay court-ordered child support, marking a significant policy shift aimed at strengthening enforcement and accountability. On July 16, the court released the name and photo of a defaulter—its first public disclosure under the new approach.

The initiative follows similar actions by magistrate courts earlier this year and is intended to deter non-compliance by treating unpaid child support as a declared debt. According to court officials, failure to

fulfill child support obligations remains a recurring issue, with a high volume of related cases filed annually. [The Sun]

Maldives: Opposition MPs confront central bank over worsening U.S. dollar shortage

(lm) Opposition lawmakers from the Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) visited the Maldives Monetary Authority (MMA) on July 21 to demand a meeting with Governor Ahmed Munawar after receiving no response to a letter raising concerns about the country's worsening U.S. dollar shortage. The shortage is severely affecting importers and local businesses, forcing many to rely on black market transactions.

The MDP criticized the MMA's enforcement of the Foreign Currency Act and its collection of 90 percent of foreign currency earnings from tourism and other sectors. They argue that this practice, alongside banks ceasing to provide adequate dollar supplies, has led to a parallel market where the dollar now trades at MVR 20—far above the official rate of MVR 15.42. [The Sun]

Maldives: Airport expansion fuels scrutiny over rising public debt and opaque internal restructuring

(lm) The Maldives Airports Company Limited (MACL), the state-owned operator of Velana International Airport (VIA), is preparing to inaugurate a new international terminal on July 26, aligning with the country's Independence Day. The expansion will boost annual passenger capacity to 7.5 million and is presented by the government as a critical investment in national tourism infrastructure. However, the project's financing model and associated governance decisions are drawing increasing scrutiny from both domestic and international observers.

MACL posted a net profit of MVR 1.1 billion (approximately USD 71.5 million) in 2024 but carries a debt burden of MVR 13.4 billion (approximately USD 870 million). This includes recent foreign-currency loans, such as USD 50 million secured in December 2023 and another USD 30 million in June 2024. Despite assurances from MACL's leadership that the company is capable of servicing its debts, critics argue that the airport expansion exemplifies the Maldives' growing

dependence on loan-financed infrastructure and its exposure to external liquidity constraints.

The expansion has become a politically charged issue. Originally initiated under former President Abdulla Yameen, the project followed the controversial cancellation of a concession agreement with Indian infrastructure firm GMR, which would have financed and developed VIA without recourse to public borrowing. The decision to replace the private investment model with state-led construction has since been framed by opposition figures as a strategic misstep. They estimate the opportunity cost and long-term macroeconomic burden of the policy reversal at up to USD 60 billion. [The Sun 1] [The Sun 2]

The new terminal is not the only development raising concerns about governance and transparency. In June 2025, MACL quietly launched an internal Estate Security Department to oversee non-airport facilities such as parking lots, jetties, and taxi queues on Hulhulé Island. This new security arm is separate from airport security, which remains under the Defense Ministry's Aviation Security Command, with support from the military and police.

While MACL claims the new department incurred no startup costs, it admitted to ongoing expenses for patrols, personnel, and training—yet declined to disclose exact figures in response to a Right to Information request. The company also withheld information about the department's leadership, citing personal privacy. [The Sun 3]

Maldives: Government addresses housing crisis with policy reversals and continued development projects

(lm) The Maldivian government is actively addressing its housing crisis through a mix of new allocations and policy adjustments aimed at improving transparency and accountability in housing distribution. A significant focus is on the Gedhoruveriya social housing scheme, which has faced public backlash and corruption concerns, particularly regarding eligibility criteria for the 4,000 flats earmarked under the initiative.

In a major policy shift, the government reversed a controversial rule that disqualified couples from receiving flats under the Gedhoruveriya scheme if both had previously been granted land under the separate Binveriya land allocation scheme. The original rule, which was announced in May 2025, drew criticism due to delays in land reclamation projects in Hulhumalé

Phase II and Giraavarufalhu, which made awarded plots uninhabitable. This move comes after significant public pressure and concerns that many eligible applicants were unfairly excluded.

The Gedhoruveriya scheme, launched under the previous administration, was designed to provide affordable housing, primarily in the Malé region. However, the recipient list, which was first published in November 2023, faced intense scrutiny. Allegations of corruption and resource mismanagement led the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) to intervene, prompting a reevaluation of the list. After further adjustments, the final list of recipients, released in mid-November, saw 53 percent of applicants excluded due to improper point allocation. A total of 1,820 eligible applicants remain, and agreements with these recipients have begun. [The Sun 1] [The Sun 2]

In addition to the Gedhoruveriya housing scheme, the government is allocating MVR 1 billion (approximately USD 65 million) in the 2026 budget for new housing projects as part of broader efforts to address the national housing crisis. This funding is part of a MVR 56.6 billion (approximately USD 3.68 billion) budget that includes provisions for housing loans and development. In a recent tour of Noonu Atoll, President Mohamed Muizzu highlighted plans for new housing projects in Maafaru Island next year, as well as additional infrastructure upgrades like a new terminal at Maafaru's international airport. [The Sun 3]

Maldives: Nearly USD 2 million in unpaid land rent in Thinadhoo, MP-linked firms among defaulters

(lm) Thinadhoo City Council—the local government authority for Thinadhoo Island in Gaafu Dhaalu Atoll—has revealed that nearly MVR 30 million (approx. USD 1.95 million) in land rent and fines remain unpaid as of June 30 for industrial lease plots on the island. Among the 50 defaulters are businesses linked to North Thinadhoo Member of Parliament Saudhulla Hilmy, which collectively owe over MVR 134,000 (approx. USD 8,800). Additionally, Saudhulla is personally named in connection with an outstanding MVR 433,000 (approx. USD 28,200) related to a party venue lease.

Saudhulla disputes the legitimacy of the rent and fines, arguing that the party venue plot has remained unusable since its lease began in August 2023 due to the council's failure to clear existing structures. On that basis, he contends that payment obligations are void, adding that his lawyers advised him that no court

would uphold penalties for an unused plot. He has since relinquished the lease. He also attributes payment delays by his companies to unresolved government bills for public contracts dating back to 2021, citing broader economic mismanagement as the root cause—including misuse of state funds and corruption.

At the same time, the Thinadhoo City Council itself is under investigation by the Anti-Corruption Commission and the Local Government Authority (LGA) over separate allegations of irregularities. Mayor Saud Ali and his deputy were suspended in June, amid claims by the mayor of politically motivated retaliation by MP Saudhulla—claims the lawmaker denies. [The Sun 1] [The Sun 2]

Maldives: Tourist arrivals exceed 1.2 million as 2025 growth trajectory targets record year

(lm) The Maldives has recorded over 1.2 million tourist arrivals as of mid-July 2025, reflecting a 9.6 percent year-on-year increase and setting the pace for a projected record total of 2.3 million visitors by year-end. According to official data released by the Ministry of Tourism, the country welcomed 1,202,262 arrivals by July 18, including 94,132 in July alone, the highest monthly figure in three years.

China remains the largest source market, contributing 13.7 percent of arrivals (165,134 visitors), followed by Russia (11.7 percent), the United Kingdom (9.6 percent), Italy, and Germany. [The Sun]

Maldives: Court halts appointment to senior prisons post amid unresolved misconduct case

(lm) The Maldivian Civil Court has issued an interim order temporarily blocking the appointment of a new Assistant Commissioner of Prisons (ACP) to the Maldives Correctional Service, following a petition by former ACP Mohamed Asif, who is challenging his dismissal.

Asif, who was dismissed on July 17 after an eight-month paid suspension, had been under investigation over the alleged misappropriation of MVR 200,000 (approximately USD 13,000) from the Prison Club—a body under his oversight. He claims he was removed

without due process and intends to seek reinstatement. In his petition, Asif asked the court to prevent the permanent appointment of a successor and to block any administrative steps that might create third-party claims to the position while his legal challenge is pending.

The court granted the interim relief, instructing the Maldives Correctional Service to halt all steps related to the appointment. [The Sun]

Nepal: Oli government weakened as minister resigns and ruling bloc loses upper house majority

(lm) Nepal's governing coalition under Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli faces mounting pressure after losing its majority in the National Assembly and being rocked by a high-profile bribery scandal. The Janata Samajbadi Party-Nepal (JSP-Nepal), a regional party with strong support in the Madhesh region, formally withdrew its backing on July 15. Though not a formal coalition partner and holding no cabinet posts, the party's three upper house seats were essential for the coalition's control in the 59-member chamber.

With JSP-Nepal's exit, the ruling bloc—comprising Oli's Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist), the Nepali Congress, the Loktantrik Samajwadi Party, and one nominated member—now holds only 28 seats, down from 31. The opposition, led by the Maoist Centre, CPN (Unified Socialist), and now joined by JSP-Nepal, commands 30 seats. This shift is expected to stall key legislation, including a contested land reform bill that JSP-Nepal had opposed for failing to include its proposed amendments.

The withdrawal reflects rising discontent with the Oli-led coalition's failure to deliver on reform promises. JSP-Nepal cited unaddressed corruption, rising inflation, and constitutional reform delays, accusing the government of sidelining smaller parties while seeking their numerical support. Tensions escalated after failed efforts to bring JSP-Nepal into the Cabinet —first to secure support for a land-related ordinance, and again when the ordinance was reintroduced as a bill. [The Kathmandu Post 1] [The Kathmandu Post 2]

Simultaneously, the government was hit by a scandal involving Rajkumar Gupta, who resigned as Minister for Federal Affairs and General Administration on July 15 after a leaked audio recording allegedly revealed him negotiating a bribe of NPR 7.8 million (USD 57,000) for a civil servant transfer and political appointment in

Kaski district. Though Gupta denied wrongdoing and claimed the tape was doctored, he was instructed to resign within 24 hours by Prime Minister Oli. His continued cabinet participation had already sparked criticism and added friction within the ruling alliance.

President Ramchandra Paudel appointed CPN-UML lawmaker Bhagwati Neupane as Gupta's replacement later the same day. [The Kathmandu Post 3] [The Kathmandu Post 4]

JSP-Nepal leader Upendra Yadav—long criticized for seeking power over reform—is now repositioning the party as a principled opposition force. Observers suggest the move also reflects a broader strategic recalibration after the party lost control of the Madhesh provincial government to its rival, the Janamat Party.

Though the JSP-Nepal's withdrawal does not trigger a mandatory confidence vote under Nepal's Constitution —since it was not formally part of the executive—the twin developments mark a serious setback for Oli's coalition, complicating governance and exposing deeper fissures within the alliance. [The Kathmandu Post 1] [The Kathmandu Post 2]

Nepal: Internal power struggle escalates in coalition-leading party as leadership limits face rollback

(lm/as) Nepal's ruling political landscape is witnessing a significant power struggle, as the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist) (CPN-UML) of Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli considers scrapping internal leadership limits amid the reemergence of former President Bidya Devi Bhandari as a political contender. Concurrently, senior Nepali Congress figure Shekhar Koirala—widely regarded as the principal challenger to party president Sher Bahadur Deuba—is intensifying pressure on the CPN-UML–Nepali Congress coalition government, citing entrenched corruption and policy stagnation.

At the center of the CPN-UML's internal tensions is a proposal introduced on July 17 by party vice-chair Bishnu Paudel, which seeks to abolish both the 70-year age limit and the two-term cap for top executive positions. These rules—first introduced in 2009 and 2014, respectively—would currently disqualify the 74-year-old Oli from seeking another term as party chair at the upcoming general convention. Although the age cap was suspended in 2023, formal removal requires

ratification at the National Statute Convention scheduled for September 5–7.

Paudel's proposal would benefit Oli but disadvantage Bhandari, who at age 64 recently rejoined the CPN-UML and is widely perceived as a potential leadership challenger. Her return to active politics was announced in late June at a memorial for her late husband and party ideologue Madan Bhandari. Since then, Bhandari's comeback has divided the CPN-UML into opposing factions, particularly as she has made clear she is eyeing a leadership role, potentially the party chair. [The Kathmandu Post 1] [The Kathmandu Post 2]

On July 21, Oli and Bhandari held a 90-minute private meeting at CPN-UML headquarters—their first such meeting at party premises rather than the prime minister's residence—amid open disputes about whether Bhandari's party membership had been formally renewed. While Bhandari insists the issue is settled, Oli had previously denied her reentry was official, further fueling speculation about internal efforts to block her return. The meeting took place on the eve of the party's Central Committee meeting, and its outcome is expected to influence future deliberations, particularly regarding the proposed rule changes. [The Kathmandu Post 3]

The proposal to amend leadership limits also includes broader structural reforms, such as reducing the number of top CPN-UML officeholders from 19 to 11 and eliminating the position of senior vice-chair—moves seen by some as attempts to consolidate power around Oli.

Meanwhile, internal dissent is also surfacing from the coalition's other main pillar, the Nepali Congress. Senior leader Shekhar Koirala—an influential figure in the party and scion of the Koirala dynasty that produced three former prime ministers—has launched a series of meetings with opposition leaders, including Maoist Centre chair Pushpa Kamal Dahal and Bhandari herself. Although Koirala denies planning an alternative alliance, his anti-corruption rhetoric and cross-party outreach signal mounting frustration with the current Nepali Congress-CPN-UML coalition government, formed a year ago through a power-sharing deal between Oli and Congress President Sher Bahadur Deuba.

Koirala has positioned himself as an advocate for good governance and accountability, criticizing both coalition leaders while stopping short of calling for their ouster. During his meetings, Dahal reportedly encouraged Koirala to seek the prime ministership, while Bhandari expressed moral support for Koirala's

anti-corruption push—even as he suggested former heads of state should refrain from reentering partisan politics.

Nonetheless, the possibility of a realignment remains constrained by Deuba's grip on the Nepali Congress and Oli's control of the CPN-UML. Smaller coalition partners such as Janata Samajbadi Party-Nepal have already exited the government, and others may follow, but institutional barriers and internal party rules make a formal power shift difficult. [The Kathmandu Post 4]

Nepal: Leftist opposition factions merge to counter political fragmentation

(lm) Nepal's fragmented leftist opposition has moved toward partial consolidation with the merger of two splinter groups formerly part of the country's main communist bloc. One group, led by veteran leftist politician Bamdev Gautam, has formally joined the CPN (Unified Socialist), a breakaway faction from the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist) (CPN-UML) formed in 2021 by former prime ministers Madhav Kumar Nepal and Jhalanath Khanal.

The merger was announced on July 19 at a public event in Kathmandu and framed as an effort to unify Nepal's leftist forces against political fragmentation. Gautam, who previously served as home minister and deputy prime minister, launched his own campaign after becoming disillusioned with the CPN-UML's leadership under KP Sharma Oli. His platform aimed to bring all communist factions under a single umbrella but failed to achieve a broader reunification.

With this merger, Gautam's faction is now absorbed into the CPN (Unified Socialist), which holds 10 seats in the House of Representatives and nine in the National Assembly. The party promotes leftist and socialist policies and emerged from intra-party disputes within the CPN-UML in 2021. Gautam has been appointed as the party's third most senior figure. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Rupandehi-3 by-election scheduled for November 3

(lm) Nepal's Election Commission has scheduled the by-election for the federal seat in Rupandehi-3 on November 3, following the April death of Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP) lawmaker Deepak Bohara.

Bohara had narrowly defeated a senior Nepali Congress figure in the 2022 general election. Candidate nominations will close on October 7, and the final list will be confirmed by October 10. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Civil service bill sparks dispute over cooling-off clause amid tampering allegations

(lm) Nepal's proposed Federal Civil Service Bill has triggered political contention over a "cooling-off" clause that would prevent civil servants from accepting constitutional or government appointments for two years after resigning or retiring. The ruling Communist Party of Nepal (CPN) (Unified Marxist–Leninist) (CPN-UML), the third-largest party in Parliament's upper house, the National Assembly, has formally submitted amendments seeking to remove the clause altogether, arguing that such restrictions are currently unnecessary.

The provision—outlined in Section 82(4)—has already faced controversy after a contradictory sub-section, 82(5), was allegedly inserted without committee approval, allowing reappointments within the two-year period. Lawmakers from the State Affairs and Good Governance Committee say the inclusion of this clause undermines prior cross-party consensus and are investigating the tampering. A seven-member parliamentary committee is currently probing how the change was introduced and by whom.

Amendments to the bill vary across party lines: while the CPN-UML seeks to eliminate the cooling-off period, the main opposition CPN (Maoist Centre), which controls 18 seats in the 59-member upper house, proposes increasing it to three years and deleting the disputed sub-section. The Nepali Congress, the single-largest party in the ruling coalition and second-largest party in the upper house, supports revisions to remove the allegedly manipulated provision but not the core two-year clause. Over 130 amendments have been submitted by 46 lawmakers, and the bill is expected to undergo further scrutiny by the Legislation Management Committee after the investigation concludes. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: School Education Bill stalls amid ministerial inaction, teachers threaten renewed protest

(lm) Nepal's long-awaited School Education Bill, central to implementing the country's federal constitutional framework in the education sector, has stalled in Parliament due to the continued absence and inaction of Education Minister Raghuji Pant. The Education, Health and Information Technology Committee of the House of Representatives has postponed three scheduled meetings at the request of the education ministry and ruling party leaders. No progress has been made since the most recent deferral on July 6, prompting the committee to shift its focus to the Media Council Bill instead.

The delay has sparked frustration among education stakeholders, especially the Nepal Teachers' Federation, which has warned it will resume protests if the bill is not endorsed by the end of the week. In a public statement, the federation accused the government of ignoring past agreements and undermining the dignity and rights of teaching professionals. The statement highlighted unresolved demands including the permanency and promotion of temporary teachers, teacher transfers, trade union rights, and better management of school staff and early childhood educators.

The bill, under negotiation for months, incorporates over 1,700 amendments. A subcommittee led by CPN-UML lawmaker Chhabilal Bishwakarma had found consensus on most issues, including provisions for periodic promotion based on years of service. However, disagreements remain over a proposed scoring threshold for promotion, which the federation has called discriminatory.

Despite an earlier written commitment by parliamentary party leaders to pass the bill by June 29 —leading the federation to call off a month-long protest—government follow-through has been lacking. The federation now accuses the administration of systematically dismantling provisions agreed upon during negotiations, warning of a deteriorating atmosphere in the education sector if the bill remains in limbo.

As the bill is key to realizing Nepal's constitutionally mandated decentralization of education, the continued delays risk weakening public trust in reform processes and heightening unrest among educators nationwide. Federation leaders have said they will wait until Friday before announcing further protest actions. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Ex-home minister-led signature campaign raises concerns over judicial pressure

(lm) Nepal's Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP), led by Rabi Lamichhane, a former TV presenter turned politician who rose rapidly since founding the party in 2022, is facing criticism over its ongoing signature drive demanding his release from judicial custody. Lamichhane is currently detained over allegations of embezzling funds from cooperatives while heading the defunct Galaxy 4K television channel.

The campaign, launched on June 21, the RSP's third anniversary, features a 20-page public appeal by Lamichhane who claims the detention is part of a politically motivated effort to weaken his party, which currently holds 21 seats in parliament. The Supreme Court upheld his remand in May, citing sufficient grounds for further investigation.

RSP officials say they are collecting around 100,000 signatures and NPR 200,000 (USD 1,500) in donations daily, with door-to-door collection beginning this week. The campaign is planned to run through the Dashain–Tihar festival season.

The appeal has drawn support from public figures including a former prime minister and a retired Supreme Court justice. However, legal experts warn that mobilizing national support during ongoing trials risks politicizing sub judice cases and exerting undue influence on judicial proceedings. Observers caution that the campaign could undermine public trust in the legal system and reduce the party to what one analyst calls "Rabi's Club," tied too closely to Lamichhane's personal fortunes. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Major cooperative fraud and unresolved loan-sharking cases expose systemic enforcement failures

(lm) Two major financial integrity issues unfolding in Nepal—one in the formal cooperative sector and the other in informal money lending—highlight enduring systemic failures in enforcement, oversight, and access to justice.

In Lamjung district, over NPR 65 million (approximately USD 476,000) was embezzled from the Sunalo Bhavishya Savings and Credit Cooperative. An internal probe revealed that former board members orchestrated fraudulent loans, including illegal

disbursements to Indian nationals and loans secured with substandard collateral. Many loans were granted to fictitious borrowers or issued under false pretenses, often benefiting the officials themselves. Despite the completion of the investigation in October 2024 and a police case registration in July 2025, only a small fraction of the funds has been recovered. The scandal has endangered the savings of more than 1,300 depositors, exposing the vulnerability of Nepal's cooperative sector to elite capture and cross-border exploitation. [The Kathmandu Post 1]

Meanwhile, in Dhanusha district in Nepal's Madhesh Province, victims of predatory lending—locally known as *meter byaj*—continue to await justice. Although over 16,700 complaints have been filed against usurious moneylenders since 2023, more than 15,000 cases remain unresolved. Despite the 2023 legal reforms that criminalized unlicensed money lending, progress has been hampered by understaffing, judicial delays, and lack of political will. Interim court injunctions often stall enforcement, and many loan sharks reportedly maintain political protection. Victims, many of whom are small farmers or laborers, report further trauma and socioeconomic ruin, with some considering suicide due to prolonged delays in legal redress. The special commission formed in 2023 to address the crisis has yet to deliver tangible relief. [The Kathmandu Post 2]

Nepal: Former Madhesh provincial head arrested on sexual misconduct charges

(lm) Rajesh Jha, the former head of Nepal's Madhesh Province, has been arrested on allegations of sexual misconduct. Kathmandu Police confirmed his detention on July 20, with the Kathmandu District Court granting a five-day remand to allow further investigation. Jha, previously active in the media sector, served as provincial head from February 2021 before being removed by the succeeding government. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Five law colleges defy Supreme Court order amid regulatory dispute

(lm) Five law colleges affiliated with *Rajarshi Janak University* (RJU)—a relatively new public university in Nepal established in 2017—have conducted a full semester of teaching in violation of a Supreme Court order, prompting concerns over the legal validity of their students' education. RJU has rapidly expanded by

affiliating private institutions across various disciplines, including law, despite criticism over quality control.

The Supreme Court had issued an interim order in September 2024 prohibiting RJU-affiliated law colleges from admitting students or commencing instruction, following a petition by students from Kathmandu University School of Law. The petition argued that RJU had bypassed regulatory standards set by the Nepal Bar Council and the Legal Education Regulation Act, including minimum requirements for faculty, infrastructure, and library resources.

Despite the order, five of the six law colleges that received temporary recognition from the Bar Council began classes in December and completed the first semester by May 2025, instructing students under an accelerated schedule. Around 200 students are now at risk of having their academic progress invalidated if the Court ultimately rules against the institutions.

The Nepal Bar Council has publicly reiterated that it did not authorize student admissions or teaching and will defer entirely to the Supreme Court's final ruling. A contempt of court petition was filed by the original plaintiffs, with a hearing scheduled for August 11. The core concern is that continuing to operate outside the regulatory framework will dilute legal standards and compromise access to justice by allowing underprepared graduates into the profession. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Authorities investigate suspected trafficking scheme linked to official UN conference trip to Spain

(lm) Nepalese authorities have opened a high-level investigation into suspected human trafficking involving individuals who allegedly traveled to Spain under the guise of attending a United Nations development conference.

The investigation centers on a June 28–July 4 visit to Seville, where Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli led an official 21-member delegation to the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development. While all official delegates have returned, immigration authorities have confirmed that at least 82 additional individuals received visas for the event, and many are now believed to have overstayed or crossed into other European countries such as Portugal. Another 55 individuals were intercepted at Kathmandu's airport before departure.

According to Nepal's Ministry of Home Affairs, forged documents and unofficial channels may have been used by a trafficking network charging substantial sums to facilitate irregular migration under diplomatic cover. In response, the Central Investigation Bureau (CIB) and the Bureau of Human Trafficking and Transportation Control have launched a joint investigation. A special committee is tasked with identifying who authorized the unauthorized travelers and through which entities the visas were obtained.

The case has sparked parliamentary scrutiny, with opposition lawmakers demanding accountability and transparency. [The Kathmandu Post 1] [The Kathmandu Post 2]

Nepal: Stalled human rights reforms and political interference threaten credibility ahead of UN review

(as) Nepal faces mounting international scrutiny over its stalled human rights reforms and politicized transitional justice process, just months before its scheduled Universal Periodic Review (UPR) by the United Nations Human Rights Council in January 2026. The UPR is a peer-review mechanism that evaluates the human rights performance of all UN member states, based on commitments made in previous cycles.

Two shadow reports submitted this month—one by Nepal's National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), the other by a coalition of 47 victims' groups and 26 civil society organizations—warn that Nepal's government is failing to meet key international standards despite earlier pledges. These concerns directly affect the credibility of Nepal's institutions and the viability of its post-conflict justice commitments under the 2006 peace process.

The NHRC retained its top-tier international accreditation ("A" status) in 2024 on the basis of a pledged legislative reform to strengthen its autonomy and compliance with the Paris Principles—UN standards that require institutional independence, pluralism, and transparency. Yet no such law has been finalized. Government officials confirm that two separate bills on the commission's structure and staffing remain stalled in inter-ministerial review, with no timeline for parliamentary submission. Since securing its status, the commission itself has stopped actively pushing for the reform.

Simultaneously, Nepal's transitional justice process remains paralyzed. Although Parliament amended the Truth and Reconciliation Act in 2023, victims' groups argue the changes fall short of international benchmarks. In particular, the May 2025 appointments to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and the Commission on the Investigation of Enforced Disappeared Persons (CIEDP) were made through closed-door political negotiations, ignoring calls for a transparent, merit-based selection process. Over 67,000 complaints have been lodged across both bodies, but no cases have been resolved to date.

The coalition of victims and rights organizations calls for urgent reforms to restore trust in the process. These include criminalizing war crimes and crimes against humanity, removing provisions that allow disguised amnesties, clarifying vague legal definitions, and guaranteeing inclusive participation by historically marginalized groups such as Dalits, Madhesis, Janajatis, persons with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ communities. [The Kathmandu Post 1] [The Kathmandu Post 2] [The Kathmandu Post 3]

Nepal: Ongoing deaths, resistance expose limitations of legal reform on menstruation banishment tradition

(as) The July 11 death of a 32-year-old woman from a snakebite while confined in a menstrual isolation shed in Kanchanpur district has reignited international concern over the persistence of Chhaupadi, a practice officially criminalized in Nepal in 2017. The tradition, which forces menstruating women and postpartum mothers to live separately—often in dangerous, unsanitary sheds—remains deeply rooted in parts of western Nepal, particularly Sudurpaschim and Karnali provinces.

Despite the law imposing penalties of up to three months in jail or fines on those enforcing Chhaupadi, implementation has been weak. Even elected local officials—who are legally and politically responsible for upholding women's rights—have continued to observe the practice themselves, citing social pressure, religious fear, and risk of communal backlash. Law enforcement and local government efforts have been largely symbolic, with shed demolitions often followed by quiet reconstruction.

The incident prompted a short-term administrative response, with municipalities in the region issuing demolition orders and threats of fines. However, rights groups and local officials admit that enforcement

remains insufficient without broader behavioral change. In many cases, the same communities that destroy sheds rebuild them, and women return to isolation out of fear of supernatural retribution or social exclusion. [The Kathmandu Post] [The Himalayan Times] [Khabarhub] [Rising Nepal Daily] [ActionAid]

Nepal: Rights of elderly remain unmet despite legal protections, watchdog warns

(lm) Nearly two decades after the enactment of Nepal's Senior Citizens Act (2006), a new report by the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) has revealed widespread neglect and exclusion of elderly citizens, especially those from marginalized communities. The report finds that despite legal guarantees—such as monthly allowances, healthcare access, legal safeguards, and property rights—many elderly Nepalis remain functionally invisible to the state due to bureaucratic barriers and institutional inaction.

A significant number of seniors still lack basic documents like citizenship certificates, senior citizen identity cards, or health insurance, excluding them from state benefits. The NHRC underscores that this legal invisibility violates constitutional protections and Nepal's international obligations. It recommends streamlining the process for acquiring identity documentation, particularly for those in rural and disadvantaged areas.

The report highlights systemic failures in enforcement. Elderly individuals continue to face physical and emotional abuse, inadequate access to healthcare, and exclusion from public services. While Section 4 of the Act promotes family-based care, enforcement against negligent relatives remains weak. In addition, many elderly are left to raise grandchildren alone due to out-migration of younger generations, increasing psychological and economic stress.

Access to the NPR 4,000 (USD 29.20) monthly allowance is frequently obstructed by inaccessible banking procedures, mistreatment, and physical limitations. Transport and healthcare concessions guaranteed by law are often ignored by service providers, while government allocations—such as the NPR 1 million (USD 7,300) budget for free medicines in Madhesh Province—remain inadequate.

Inheritance-related abuse and coercion over property are also widespread, with legal protections rarely applied. Seniors in prisons face especially severe conditions: nearly 1,000 elderly inmates remain behind

bars, with 43 percent convicted of rape, yet few benefit from exemption provisions for the aged or disabled due to a lack of care facilities.

The report also criticizes institutional dysfunction, noting that the Central Senior Citizens Committee—tasked with coordinating national care policy—remains inactive, with key positions unfilled and no directives issued. District and provincial-level committees have yet to be established. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Authorities block encrypted messaging app over fraud and laundering concerns

(lm) Nepal has blocked access to the encrypted messaging platform Telegram, citing its widespread misuse in online fraud and money laundering schemes. On July 18, the Nepal Telecommunications Authority (NTA) ordered all internet service providers to immediately restrict access, describing the app's role in facilitating illicit activity as a growing national concern.

Telegram is a cloud-based messaging service launched in 2013, known for its end-to-end encryption, anonymity features, and support for large group chats and broadcast channels.

The decision follows Nepal's earlier ban of TikTok in 2023, which was later lifted after the company agreed to comply with domestic regulations. Similar enforcement issues are expected, as many users bypass such restrictions using virtual private networks (VPNs). Observers argue that long-term solutions require stronger regulatory frameworks rather than outright bans. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Cybercrime remains rampant with over 18,000 cases in past fiscal year

(lm) Nepal recorded 18,926 cybercrime cases in fiscal year 2024–25, averaging 52 cases per day, according to data from the Cyber Bureau of Nepal Police. Although slightly lower than last year's total, authorities attribute this apparent decline to underreporting, data lag, and the decentralization of case registration to district offices since a 2023 directive allowed local police to handle cyber-related complaints.

Cyber-enabled financial fraud has surged, accounting for 40.82 percent of all cybercrimes—7,723 cases, nearly double the previous year's figure. Most incidents occurred via Facebook, TikTok, WhatsApp, Telegram, and Instagram. While men were more frequently targeted in financial scams, women remained disproportionately affected by digital abuse such as harassment, sextortion, impersonation, and threats of violence. Offences targeting minors have also increased, with over 770 reported cases involving underage victims.

Cyber-dependent crimes—including data breaches, malware attacks, and server intrusions—are rising in complexity and frequency. However, Nepal faces major obstacles in investigating such offences due to a lack of digital forensics infrastructure, limited international cooperation, and insufficient legal tools. Nepal's current legal framework, the Electronic Transaction Act (ETA) of 2008, is outdated and lacks clear definitions or comprehensive coverage of modern cybercrimes, undermining both categorization and prosecution. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: Government affirms legal safeguards in planned police weapons procurement amid scrutiny

(lm) Nepal's government has clarified that its planned procurement of arms for the Nepal Police and Armed Police Force will fully comply with legal and fiscal protocols, following concerns from lawmakers and civil society over transparency and the potential reuse of outdated tenders.

Addressing the National Assembly's Federalism Enablement and National Concerns Committee on July 18, Home Minister Ramesh Lekhak emphasized that no tenders issued in prior years will be revived. Instead, procurement will proceed under the current fiscal year's allocation and public procurement laws. This includes only essential items, prioritizing border security and crisis preparedness in response to rising cross-border criminal activity.

Inspector Generals of both security forces reaffirmed that all arms and equipment—primarily non-lethal tools such as tear gas and barricade systems—will be sourced transparently under parliamentary oversight. The government has earmarked NPR 5 billion (USD 36.5 million) for police infrastructure, of which the procurement forms a part. [The Kathmandu Post 1] [The Kathmandu Post 2]

Nepal: Indian pilgrim killed in temple dispute amid broader concerns over cross-border group safety

(lm) A 25-year-old Indian national was killed in Sindhuli district, Nepal, following a violent altercation within a group of Indian pilgrims at a Hindu temple site on July 21. The victim was reportedly hacked to death with a sharp weapon. Authorities suspect that the perpetrators are also Indian nationals, and a manhunt is underway.

The incident occurred at a prominent Shiva temple visited by Indian pilgrims in Dudhauli Municipality and highlights risks linked to unregulated transboundary religious movements. A second, unrelated body of a man aged around 50 to 55 was also found near the site, though identification is still pending. [The Kathmandu Post]

Nepal: 93 dead and 22 missing in three months of disaster events

(lm) At least 93 people have been killed and 22 remain missing across Nepal due to natural disasters recorded between mid-April and mid-July, according to the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Authority (NDRRMA). During this period, over 2,000 disaster-related incidents—including floods, landslides, lightning strikes, fires, and animal attacks—were reported, affecting more than 4,000 families nationwide.

The figures reflect the first quarter of Nepal's official calendar year 2082, with authorities warning that more extreme weather events are likely as the monsoon intensifies. Nepal remains among the countries most vulnerable to climate-related disasters, with increasingly frequent and unpredictable events driven by global climate change. [The Kathmandu Post]

Pakistan: Main opposition party launches 90-day protest

(lm) The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), the opposition party led by jailed former prime minister Imran Khan, has launched a 90-day nationwide protest campaign demanding Khan's release and rejecting the legitimacy of the 2024 general elections. The campaign, set to

culminate on August 5—marking two years since Khan's imprisonment—has faced internal coordination challenges, with conflicting statements from regional leaders raising questions over planning and unity. While PTI's central leadership denies any major divisions, regional chapters acknowledge communication gaps caused by restricted access to Khan in prison. Each province is expected to conduct its own protest activities to build momentum. [Arab News 1]

The protest movement coincides with escalating tensions in the northwestern province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where the PTI-led provincial government faced backlash after the assembly adjourned on July 20 without administering the oath to 25 lawmakers elected on reserved seats for women and minorities. These seats, previously allocated to PTI, were reassigned to rival parties following a Supreme Court ruling that stripped the party of its formal status, disqualifying it from claiming reserved quotas. Although PTI-affiliated independents had won the most general seats in the province, the disqualification allowed ruling parties such as the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and its allies to gain ground. PTI lawmakers disrupted the session by raising quorum issues, prompting postponement. The Peshawar High Court has since authorized the governor to carry out the oath-taking "at the earliest." [Arab News 2]

Meanwhile, the federal government has restructured the Frontier Constabulary into a nationwide Federal Constabulary just weeks before the planned protest campaign. Officials describe it as an administrative upgrade to enhance internal security, but opposition leaders have condemned the move as a political maneuver to suppress dissent. PTI figures claim the timing reveals intent to intimidate critics, especially given the party's history of facing state crackdowns since Khan's arrest and the disputed election. Analysts note that while the Frontier Constabulary was already under federal control, its transformation into a fully national force raises legal questions under the 18th Amendment, which assigns policing responsibilities to the provinces. [Arab News 3]

Pakistan: Former prime minister's ex-wife launches new political party for marginalized groups

(lm) Reham Khan, ex-wife of jailed former prime minister Imran Khan, has announced the formation of a new political party, the Pakistan Republic Party,

which she described as a national mission to restore hope and dignity to ordinary Pakistanis. Speaking at the Karachi Press Club, Reham said the party will focus on legal and structural reforms that uplift women, farmers, and other marginalized communities, emphasizing horizontal leadership and lived experience.

A journalist by profession, Reham came into the political spotlight during her brief marriage to Imran Khan in 2015. Her involvement in internal affairs of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) led to controversy and her eventual distancing from party matters.

The party's formation comes amid rising political tensions, as PTI has launched a 90-day protest campaign demanding Imran Khan's release. Reham's announcement also follows a similar move by Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto Jr., grandson of the former prime minister, who earlier this month revealed plans to form a party centered on farmers' rights. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Audit uncovers USD 21 million in financial irregularities at cricket board

(lm) An official audit has uncovered over PKR 6 billion (USD 21 million) in financial irregularities and governance lapses at the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) over the past two years, raising concerns about accountability and internal controls within the organization. The findings are part of the Auditor General of Pakistan's report for the 2023–24 financial year.

The largest discrepancy involves PKR 5.3 billion (USD 18.6 million) in unpaid sponsorships that the PCB failed to recover. Auditors also questioned PKR 63.39 million (USD 220,000) spent on meals for police deployed to protect foreign teams—costs they argue should have been covered by the government, not the board.

Further issues flagged include the improper hiring of unqualified regional coaches and the unauthorized appointment of a media director. The report also challenged compensation and perks received by current PCB chairman Mohsin Naqvi—who also serves as a government minister—noting that some payments overlapped with his state-funded benefits.

The PCB has yet to issue an official response to the audit, while the auditors have rejected the board's justifications regarding expenditures and hiring practices. Naqvi is the third chairman to head the PCB

in the past four years, amid ongoing concerns over governance continuity and transparency. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Senate votes to abolish death penalty for two crimes amid push for justice reform

(lm) Pakistan's Senate has passed a bill eliminating the death penalty for two offenses—publicly stripping women and harboring hijackers—replacing it with life imprisonment. The amendment to Sections 354-A and 402-C of the Penal Code still requires approval by the National Assembly and presidential assent.

The reform is part of Pakistan's broader effort to align its criminal justice system with international human rights standards, particularly under the European Union's Generalized Scheme of Preferences Plus (GSP+), a trade agreement that grants preferential access to the EU market for countries implementing core human rights, labor, and environmental conventions.

However, some lawmakers expressed concern that in a system with low conviction rates, removing the death penalty might weaken deterrence. Proponents responded that life imprisonment remains a severe penalty and highlighted how capital punishment laws have historically been misused, especially under the military regime of General Zia-ul-Haq—a period from 1977 to 1988 marked by authoritarian rule and the Islamization of Pakistan's legal system, including the broad and coercive use of the death penalty.

Pakistan currently maintains capital punishment for at least 31 crimes. While no executions have occurred since 2020, over 6,100 inmates remain on death row. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Court orders probe into surge of online blasphemy cases targeting youth

(lm) The Islamabad High Court has ordered the government to form a commission within 30 days to investigate a sharp rise in online blasphemy cases, many involving young men allegedly entrapped through platforms like WhatsApp. The decision follows growing pressure from hundreds of families and rights groups alarmed by what they describe as a pattern of wrongful arrests since 2022.

The commission, mandated to submit its findings within four months, will examine allegations that private law firms—particularly the Legal Commission on Blasphemy Pakistan (LCBP)—have been orchestrating prosecutions by using volunteers to monitor online activity. A leaked 2024 Punjab police report indicated that a suspicious group may be deliberately luring youth into blasphemy-related offenses, potentially for financial gain.

Blasphemy charges in Pakistan carry the death penalty and often provoke mob violence, social ostracism, and lasting stigma—even if the accused are later acquitted. According to a government-run human rights commission, 767 individuals, mostly young men, are currently jailed awaiting trial on blasphemy charges.

While no executions have been carried out to date, courts have handed down death sentences in several recent cases. [Arab News]

Pakistan: National outrage over 'honor killing' in Balochistan

(lm) Pakistani authorities have launched a state-led prosecution following the execution-style killing of a man and a woman in Balochistan province, an incident that reignited national and international outrage over so-called “honor killings.” The murders occurred in early June near Quetta, but only gained widespread attention after a video of the shooting circulated online on July 20, showing the victims being executed by armed men in a remote desert area—allegedly on the orders of a tribal council.

Twelve individuals have been arrested so far, including a tribal leader accused of authorizing the killings. Police have also detained nine others for attempting to conceal the crime, while the main suspect—believed to have carried out the shooting—remains at large. The local deputy superintendent of police was suspended for failing to report the incident. Authorities confirmed the killings were linked to an alleged extramarital relationship between the two victims, neither of whom was married to the other.

The provincial government has proceeded with the case without family complaints, after both victims' families declined to register charges. A judicial magistrate ordered the exhumation of one of the bodies as part of ongoing forensic investigations. Officials described the case as emblematic of the challenges posed by informal tribal justice mechanisms, such as jirgas, which continue to operate

in parts of rural Pakistan despite lacking legal authority.

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif condemned the incident and instructed provincial authorities to ensure full accountability, emphasizing that “no one is above the law.” The Pakistan Ulema Council, a prominent clerical body, also denounced the killings as “un-Islamic” and called for terrorism charges against those responsible.

So-called honor killings remain a persistent form of gender-based violence in Pakistan, particularly in tribal and rural regions. According to civil society data, over 200 people have been killed in such incidents in Balochistan alone over the past five years. Human rights advocates warn that impunity, local customs, and weak enforcement of legal protections continue to enable extrajudicial violence, undermining constitutional guarantees and international human rights commitments. [Arab News 1] [Arab News 2] [Arab News 3]

Pakistan: Government plans steep solar tariff cut amid grid strain and fiscal pressure

(lm/za) Pakistan is moving to drastically reduce the buyback rate for solar electricity sold under its net-metering scheme—from PKR 27 to PKR 10 per kilowatt hour (USD 0.095)—as part of a broader effort to curb fiscal losses and stabilize the national grid. The proposal, which could save an estimated PKR 4.3 trillion (USD 15.1 billion) over the next decade, responds to a surge in decentralized solar adoption that has outpaced infrastructure and regulatory adaptation.

Driven by prolonged power outages and rising tariffs, Pakistan has seen one of the world’s fastest-growing solar markets. In 2024 alone, the country imported an estimated 17–19 gigawatts of solar capacity, primarily from China. Solar power now accounts for approximately 10 to 14 percent of national electricity supply, overtaking other sources in terms of new capacity. This uptake, while easing immediate energy insecurity for wealthier households and businesses, has increasingly undermined grid sustainability. High net-metering tariffs incentivized off-grid migration and suppressed grid-based consumption by about 4 percent, while shifting the financial burden of grid upkeep to non-solar users.

From a regulatory standpoint, authorities aim to align distributed solar tariffs with those of large-scale grid-

connected plants, which currently receive PKR 9–11 (USD 0.032–0.039) per unit. The proposed changes include introducing an 8,500-megawatt quota for net-metered systems and potentially imposing a 10 percent import duty on solar panels. Private distributors like K-Electric have signaled readiness to adopt the lower tariff, indicating some traction for the reform agenda.

However, the move comes with trade-offs. Experts caution that abrupt subsidy withdrawal could stall solar uptake among middle- and lower-income consumers and reinforce energy inequality. Pakistan's challenge lies in rebalancing short-term fiscal consolidation with long-term energy transformation. Policymakers are now under pressure to pair tariff reform with investments in grid modernization and flexible demand infrastructure—such as electric vehicles and data centers—that could absorb excess solar generation while preserving overall system equity and functionality. [Arab News] [The Economic Times] [Dawn]

Pakistan: Economic reform momentum grows amid digitalization push, trade tensions, and investor optimism

(lm) Pakistan's economic stabilization under the ongoing USD 7 billion International Monetary Fund (IMF) program is gathering pace, driven by policy reforms, strong external inflows, and improving market sentiment. The country recorded its first full-year current account surplus in 14 years, amounting to USD 2.1 billion in FY2024–25. This reversal was supported by a 27 percent rise in remittances (USD 38 billion), a 7.4 percent increase in textile exports, and moderate growth in foreign direct investment (FDI), up by 5 percent.

At the same time, investor confidence in Pakistan's capital markets has surged. The Pakistan Stock Exchange's KSE-100 index, the country's benchmark equity indicator, surpassed 140,000 points in July 2025, with market capitalization crossing USD 60 billion—ranking among the top-performing markets globally. The rally has been fueled by strong institutional inflows, particularly into fertilizer and financial stocks, and expectations of credit rating upgrades. [Arab News 1]

However, reform efforts continue to encounter domestic resistance. In Karachi—Pakistan's largest city and commercial hub—business associations launched a strike against the Finance Act 2025–26, citing

expanded enforcement powers for the Federal Board of Revenue (FBR), mandatory digital invoicing, and cash transaction restrictions as overly punitive. While the Karachi Chamber of Commerce led the protest, the Federation of Pakistan Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FPCCI) opted for continued dialogue, revealing fractures within the business community. [Arab News 2]

In response, the government has accelerated efforts to modernize fiscal governance. The FBR launched a new digital tax return system for salaried individuals, featuring simplified forms in both English and Urdu. The system is set to expand to other taxpayer categories by the end of July, in line with a broader strategy to improve compliance and widen Pakistan's historically narrow tax base. With a record revenue target of PKR 14.13 trillion (USD 47.4 billion) for FY2025–26, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has emphasized the importance of public awareness, third-party data integration, and artificial intelligence tools to enhance audit capacity and trust in the system. [Arab News 3]

Despite having a population exceeding 240 million, Pakistan continues to maintain one of the lowest tax-to-GDP ratios in the region. While the IMF has praised recent macroeconomic gains, it has underscored that structural reforms in tax equity and private sector competitiveness remain vital for long-term resilience.

These fiscal developments are occurring alongside sectoral pressures and opportunities. Pakistan's technology exports reached a record USD 3.8 billion in FY2025, led by software and IT-enabled services. However, stakeholders such as the Pakistan Software Houses Association (P@SHA) are calling for predictable tax regimes, 10-year stability assurances, and frictionless remittance processing to maintain growth. Without these structural guarantees, the industry warns, Pakistan risks falling behind in a highly competitive global digital economy. [Arab News 4]

Pakistan: Prime minister orders easy loan scheme and modernization package for small farmers

(za) Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has directed authorities to finalize a comprehensive plan by the end of July to provide affordable loans and modern agricultural equipment to smallholder farmers, particularly those owning less than 12 acres (approximately 4.8 hectares) of land.

The initiative is part of a broader push to support Pakistan's agricultural sector, which contributes around 19 percent to gross domestic product (GDP) and employs over 37 percent of the workforce. The government aims to increase rural incomes, reduce reliance on informal lenders, and tackle long-standing challenges such as low productivity, outdated tools, water scarcity, and climate-related vulnerabilities.

The prime minister also emphasized that the financing strategy must prioritize modernization, including artificial intelligence–based technologies, small-scale machinery, quality seeds, and improved water management. Reforms will target state institutions like the Zarai Taraqiati Bank, boost agricultural training programs, and activate research centers to promote value-added production and agri-exports.

This initiative forms part of the government's broader agricultural reform agenda under the Uraan Pakistan economic plan. It builds on earlier measures such as the Kissan Package and tax exemptions for farm inputs. If implemented effectively, the program could strengthen Pakistan's rural economy, enhance food security, and improve resilience against climate and market shocks. [Arab News] [DAWN]

Pakistan: No bids received in sugar import tender amid timing concerns

(lm) Pakistan's international tender to import 50,000 metric tons of sugar closed without receiving any bids, according to initial assessments by European traders. The tender, issued by the state-run Trading Corporation of Pakistan (TCP), specified shipment between August 1–15 and required arrival by August 30—deadlines traders deemed too short to attract realistic offers.

The tender was part of a broader plan approved on July 8 to import 500,000 metric tons of sugar in response to rising domestic prices, which have surged since January. The government had hoped the imports would stabilize market supply and curb inflationary pressure in the retail sector. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Government explores Asian Development Bank funding for flagship CPEC rail project

(lm) Pakistan is exploring potential financial support from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) for the long-delayed Main Line-1 (ML-1) railway project, a central component of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). ADB's fact-finding mission recently inspected the 480-kilometer Karachi–Rohri stretch of the rail line to assess project readiness.

CPEC, a multibillion-dollar infrastructure initiative under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), aims to enhance regional connectivity through roads, energy projects, and railways. At the heart of this effort is the ML-1 project—a USD 6.7 billion upgrade of the 1,687-kilometer Karachi–Peshawar railway corridor, which carries the majority of Pakistan's rail cargo and passenger traffic.

Pakistan regards ML-1 as a strategic linchpin in its broader economic diplomacy agenda, particularly in strengthening transport links between its southern ports and landlocked Central Asian markets. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Karachi port charges cut by 50 percent in push for climate-resilient maritime trade

(lm) Pakistan has halved port charges at Karachi Port in a bid to lower trade logistics costs and advance climate-resilient, low-emission shipping practices. The reform, announced on July 19 by the federal minister for maritime affairs, includes reduced fees for vessel services, cargo handling, and storage, while scrapping a previously planned annual five percent fee increase.

The move is part of a broader push to modernize Pakistan's maritime infrastructure and align it with international environmental standards. Authorities say the reduced charges will improve port turnaround times, cut vessel idle time and fuel use, and benefit exporters—especially in the dry bulk sector—by streamlining supply chains.

Karachi Port, one of Pakistan's busiest deep-water ports, handles a major share of national import-export traffic. The government is also aiming to cut container dwell time by 70 percent through the use of artificial intelligence and drone-based monitoring, positioning the port as a regional leader in climate-conscious logistics. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Government unveils USD 10.5 million aquaculture park to boost seafood exports and blue economy

(lm) Pakistan has announced plans to establish a PKR 3 billion (USD 10.5 million) aquaculture park in Karachi, as part of its broader strategy to expand the country's blue economy and strengthen seafood export capacity. Karachi is Pakistan's largest city and a key commercial and port hub on the Arabian Sea.

The park, to be built on 120 acres under a public-private partnership, aims to promote sustainable aquaculture and value-added seafood production. The initiative follows a 13.4 percent increase in fish and fish preparation exports, which reached USD 465.4 million in the fiscal year ending June 2025.

Maritime Affairs Minister Junaid Anwar Chaudhry emphasized Pakistan's coastal aquaculture potential and confirmed that a similar model would be implemented in Balochistan. The Qur'angi Fish Harbor Authority has been tasked with submitting a feasibility report within ten days.

The project complements ongoing efforts to modernize port infrastructure, digitalize logistics, and promote green maritime practices. It is aligned with Pakistan's Maritime Chamber of Commerce and Industry (MCCI), which aims to unite stakeholders around low-carbon development and sustainable growth.

The initiative also reflects global "blue economy" goals —defined by the World Bank as the sustainable use of ocean resources for economic development, job creation, and environmental preservation. [Arab News]

Pakistan: Monsoon death toll reaches 221 as fresh floods and landslides compound national emergency

(lm/za) As of July 22, Pakistan's monsoon death toll has risen to 221 since late June, as heavy rains continue to trigger deadly flooding, landslides, and infrastructure damage nationwide. Children account for nearly half of the fatalities, according to data from the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA). With further downpours forecast through July 25, authorities have issued renewed warnings, particularly for landslide-prone areas including Murree, Galliyat, Azad Kashmir, and Gilgit-Baltistan (GB).

Although the monsoon is vital for Pakistan's agriculture and water supply, its increasingly erratic and destructive pattern reflects broader shifts in regional climate dynamics. The current crisis has revived concerns following the 2022 floods that killed over 1,700 people and displaced more than 8 million. [Arab News 1] [Arab News 2]

Pakistan: Militancy intensifies as drone warfare and cross-regional insurgencies converge

(lm) Pakistan continues to witness a surge in militant activity across its northwestern and southwestern provinces, marked by coordinated ambushes, targeted killings, and evolving tactics such as drone-based attacks.

In the volatile province of Balochistan, a senior army officer was killed on July 19 in Quetta after a magnetic improvised explosive device (IED) detonated under his private vehicle. The blast also injured three civilians, including a child. The Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), a banned separatist group, claimed responsibility, describing the strike as part of a deliberate campaign against state officials. [Arab News]

Simultaneously, Pakistan's military and police forces carried out major operations in the northwestern province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). On the same day as the Quetta bombing, nine militants were killed in Hangu district during a two-hour firefight following an intelligence-led raid. Three senior officers were wounded but survived. Just days later, a separate clash in the Orakzai district left eight paramilitary Frontier Corps (FC) personnel and four militants dead, with eleven other soldiers injured. [Arab News]

The operational environment has grown more complex due to the tactical adaptation of militant groups. In recent weeks, at least eight drone attacks have been recorded in the KP districts of Bannu and surrounding areas. Militants have used commercially available quadcopters to drop improvised explosive devices and mortar shells on police and military targets. These drones, packed with shrapnel, have already caused civilian and police casualties. Officials suspect the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) is behind the innovation, though the group denies operational use while acknowledging efforts to acquire the technology. [Arab News]

Meanwhile, Pakistan's army reported killing thirteen "Indian-sponsored militants" in coordinated

engagements in KP's Malakand and Balochistan's Kalat districts between July 16 and 20. According to military sources, the operations led to the capture of weapons, explosives, and eight additional suspects. Islamabad accuses India of backing both Islamist militants and Baloch separatists—claims that New Delhi firmly denies. [Arab News]

The rising tempo of violence has also affected civilians. In South Waziristan, seven police officers were abducted in two separate incidents. Public protests have erupted in affected regions, with residents expressing concern that military operations against militants may once again lead to mass displacement, reminiscent of the 2014 counterinsurgency campaign that uprooted hundreds of thousands.

Pakistan: Five killed, seven injured in clash between two ethnic Pashtun groups in Balochistan

(lm) A deadly tribal clash between the Achakzai and Kakar tribes—both ethnic Pashtun groups—erupted in southwestern Pakistan's Killa Abdullah district on July 21, leaving five people dead and seven injured. The Achakzai are a Pashtun tribe traditionally residing in border regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan, while the Kakar are another major Pashtun tribe with a significant presence in northern Balochistan.

The confrontation began in the Tot Adda area and lasted for several hours before a ceasefire was brokered by tribal elders, supported by the paramilitary Levies force and Frontier Corps (FC) Balochistan. According to local officials, the violence stemmed from a long-running feud dating back to a motorbike theft in March 2025. The two groups had been pursuing each other for weeks prior to the armed clash.

Such tribal disputes are common in Balochistan, a province marked by powerful tribal hierarchies, low socio-economic indicators, and chronic underdevelopment. While ethnic Baloch insurgent groups continue to challenge the state elsewhere in the province, this incident was rooted in intra-Pashtun tensions rather than separatist activity. [Arab News]

Seychelles: Revenue commission reports USD 650 million collection for 2024

(lm) The Seychelles Revenue Commission (SRC) announced it collected SCR 8.8 billion (USD 651.2 million) in total revenue for the year 2024, marking an increase from SCR 7.79 billion (USD 576.5 million) in 2023. The figures were detailed in the SRC's annual report, which was formally presented to the Minister for Finance, National Planning, and Trade, Vice-President Ahmed Afif. The report notes 1,802 registered taxpayers during the reporting year. [Seychelles Nation]

Sri Lanka: Former minister predicts opposition rift

(lm) Former State Minister of Tourism Diana Gamage has sparked political controversy by predicting internal unrest within the main opposition party, the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB). Drawing on her past experience with the United National Party (UNP), Gamage warned that the SJB could face leadership challenges similar to those that led to the UNP's split in 2020. She claimed that growing dissatisfaction with SJB leader Sajith Premadasa mirrors the discontent once directed at former UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe—criticized for resisting leadership change and poor electoral performance—which ultimately prompted Premadasa and his allies to form the SJB. [Daily Mirror 1]

The SJB has rejected these claims. Party representative Mujibur Rahman denied any internal discussion about a leadership change and accused unnamed actors—allegedly with government backing—of attempting to destabilize the party. He also welcomed new alliances with experienced political figures, including former minister Dayasiri Jayasekera, who joined the SJB earlier this year. Jayasekera is a veteran politician and former general secretary of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), a historically influential center-left party and former ruling party. [Daily Mirror 2]

Meanwhile, Gamage's own legal troubles continue. Her trial on charges of violating Sri Lanka's Immigration and Emigration Act has been postponed to August 21. The former state minister faces seven counts, including allegedly providing false information to obtain a Sri Lankan passport and remaining in the country without a valid visa. The Colombo High Court accepted her legal counsel's scheduling conflict, although the Attorney General's Department noted that the trial has already been delayed multiple times. [Daily Mirror 3]

Sri Lanka: Parliamentary committee finds police chief guilty of misconduct

(lm) A parliamentary inquiry has found Sri Lanka's suspended Inspector-General of Police (IGP) Deshabandu Tennakoon guilty of gross misconduct, marking an unprecedented move against a serving police chief. Appointed in late 2023 despite a Supreme Court finding of torture in 2011, Tennakoon was formally suspended in July 2024. Since then, he has faced over 20 charges, including authorizing an illegal operation in Weligama in December 2023 that resulted in a fatal shooting and accusations of leading a criminal network.

The three-member committee—chaired by Supreme Court Justice P.P. Surasena—was convened under the Removal of Officers (Procedure) Act (No. 5 of 2002) following a resolution passed on April 8, 2025. Its unanimous verdict was announced by Speaker Jagath Wickramaratne on July 22, triggering the next phase: Parliament must debate a motion of removal, which, if passed by a majority, will compel the President to dismiss Tennakoon.

This marks the first time the inquiry framework has been used to unseat either the IGP or Attorney General in Sri Lankan history, reflecting deepening concerns about politicization and abuse within the police force. Following his suspension, Tennakoon reportedly went into hiding after a Matara court issued an arrest warrant in March 2025 linked to the Weligama incident. He later challenged his indictment in the Court of Appeal. Meanwhile, senior deputy Priyantha Weerasooriya has been serving as Acting IGP since September 2024. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Opposition threatens legal action over controversial appointment of special commissioners to local bodies

(lm) Sri Lanka's opposition has warned of legal action against the government's move to appoint special commissioners to local government bodies that are currently deadlocked or deemed dysfunctional. The Ministry of Local Government and Provincial Councils has directed that where councils fail to elect a chairperson and deputy chairperson—often due to intentional absences of members—provincial governors will be advised to appoint special commissioners to manage local administration.

Minister Chandana Abayarathna stated that commissioners of local bodies must report on council functionality within three months. He emphasized that members obstructing proceedings through non-attendance may face suspension, and that legal advice has been sought from the Attorney General.

The opposition, led by the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), alleges that many boycotts stem not from obstructionism but from political pressure and manipulated procedures. They specifically cite cases like Seethawaka and Anamaduwa, where the ruling party is accused of influencing local commissioners to conduct secret ballots to manipulate outcomes.

While acknowledging that the law allows special commissioners to be appointed if a council fails to elect leaders after two attempts, opposition leaders argue that these provisions are now being misused to sideline opposition-led councils. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: President nominates Justice Preethi Padman Surasena as next Chief Justice

(lm) President Anura Kumara Dissanayake has nominated Supreme Court Justice Preethi Padman Surasena to serve as the next Chief Justice of Sri Lanka, following the upcoming retirement of incumbent Jayantha Jayasuriya on July 27. The nomination has been submitted to the Constitutional Council, which is expected to deliberate on the appointment on July 23. Justice Surasena is one of the most senior members of the Supreme Court and a former Judicial Service Commission member, with a track record of presiding over major legal cases. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Bail granted and legal challenge filed in second carrom board procurement case

(lm) The Colombo High Court has granted bail to former Sports Minister Mahindananda Aluthgamage, retired Major General Nanda Mallawaarachchi, and former Lanka Sathosa Chairman Nalin Fernando in a second case linked to the controversial 2014 procurement of carrom and checker boards. The project, initiated by the Sports Ministry, aimed to promote recreational activities nationwide but later came under scrutiny for alleged irregularities, including inflated costs and misuse of public funds.

Bail was set at LKR 100,000 (approximately USD 340) each, with two sureties of LKR 2.5 million (about USD 8,550) per accused. Aluthgamage and Fernando had already been sentenced to 20 years of rigorous imprisonment in a related bribery case brought by the Bribery Commission, based on the same procurement incident. Notably, Fernando chaired Lanka Sathosa—a state-owned retail chain involved in distributing subsidized consumer goods—at the time of the transaction.

Defense counsel for the accused have filed preliminary objections challenging the maintainability of the new charges, with a hearing scheduled for September 4. [Daily Mirror 1]

In a parallel move, Mallawaarachchi, who was then Sports Ministry Secretary, has filed a writ petition with the Court of Appeal. He argues that the new indictment is inconsistent and unfair, given his role as a key prosecution witness in the previous case and his full cooperation with investigators. He contends that both the Bribery Commission and the Attorney General, though independent, represent the state and should act in a coordinated and legally consistent manner. His petition will be heard on July 28. [Daily Mirror 2]

Sri Lanka: President urges digitalization, public transport investment in 2026 budget planning

(lm) President Anura Kumara Dissanayake has instructed officials to prioritize digital transformation, the improvement of public transportation, and the integration of rural communities into the broader economic system in the preparation of Sri Lanka's 2026 national budget. The directives were issued during a planning meeting with the Ministry of Finance at the Presidential Secretariat.

The President stressed that the upcoming budget should go beyond routine financial allocations and aim to generate tangible outcomes that support structural progress. He emphasized the need for mechanisms that ensure development initiatives deliver real benefits to citizens, particularly in under-served areas.

Ministry officials confirmed that the budget circular has already been issued, with government institutions given until July 31 to submit proposals within defined expenditure ceilings. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Survey finds decline in dynastic politics, rising demand for qualified leadership

(lm) A European Union–funded survey has found that dynastic politics—once a defining feature of Sri Lanka's political landscape—is rapidly losing traction among voters. Conducted under the "Active Citizens for Elections and Democracy" project, the study reflects a broader shift toward policy-based, competence-driven political preferences in the country.

The survey was coordinated by the National Peace Council (NPC), a Sri Lankan civil society organization that promotes nonviolent conflict resolution and democratic reform, along with partner groups. It found that 86 percent of respondents favored candidates with strong educational backgrounds, while nearly 93 percent cited economic crisis resolution as their top electoral concern. Anti-corruption efforts (83.3 percent) and competency (85.6 percent) also ranked high among voter priorities.

A defining influence appears to have been the 2022 Aragalaya protest movement—a mass, youth-driven campaign that called for political accountability during Sri Lanka's economic collapse. A majority of respondents (53 percent) viewed it as having positively shaped the country's political consciousness.

Traditional vote-buying and patronage-based tactics are being rejected, with nearly half of voters disapproving of such strategies. While 83 percent of respondents considered themselves politically literate, only 17 percent of women reported high political interest compared to 37 percent of men, highlighting gender gaps in political engagement. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Opposition politician urges action over alleged unauthorized Customs release

(lm) Udaya Gammanpila, leader of the opposition party Pivithuru Hela Urumaya, a party known for its nationalist and anti-corruption stance, appeared before Sri Lanka's Commission to Investigate Allegations of Bribery or Corruption (CIABOC) on July 17 to submit a reminder letter concerning a complaint he had previously filed. The complaint involves the alleged unauthorized release of 323 shipping containers by Sri Lanka Customs without proper inspection procedures. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Over 2,100 corruption complaints filed in 2025 as public sector scrutiny intensifies

(lm) Sri Lanka's Commission to Investigate Allegations of Bribery or Corruption (CIABOC) has received more than 2,100 complaints between January and July 2025, reflecting mounting public concern over corruption in the state sector. In response, the Commission has launched dozens of raids and arrested 31 public officials, including school principals, police officers, and Department of Motor Traffic (DMT) employees.

Recent arrests include a former Assistant Commissioner of the DMT—now serving at the Ministry of Lands—along with two other officials accused of illegally registering a vehicle. Earlier in May, CIABOC apprehended a Deputy Commissioner and two other DMT staff, seizing over LKR 4.1 million (approximately USD 13,900) in unexplained cash. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Bribery commission indicts former minister and four family members

(lm) Sri Lanka's Commission to Investigate Allegations of Bribery or Corruption (CIABOC) has filed indictments against former Minister of Mass Media, Health, and Environment Keheliya Rambukwella and four of his family members over the alleged illegal acquisition of assets valued at LKR 97 million (approximately USD 330,000).

The charges were formally submitted to the Colombo High Court on July 17. While details of the bail order were not fully disclosed in initial reports, the accused were released on cash bail pending further proceedings. The indictment adds to mounting legal pressure on Rambukwella, who has faced scrutiny in multiple corruption-related investigations. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Former deputy minister remanded until August 1 in misuse of public resources case

(lm) Former Deputy Minister of Economic Development and Special Projects, Samarakoon Mudiyanselage Chandrasena, has been further remanded until August

1 by the Colombo Magistrate's Court. The case concerns allegations of misusing state resources in the run-up to the 2015 presidential election.

According to the Commission to Investigate Allegations of Bribery or Corruption (CIABOC), Chandrasena is accused of having instructed officials from the Anuradhapura District Secretariat in 2014 to distribute seed paddy—worth LKR 25 million (approximately USD 85,000)—to his political allies instead of low-income farmers. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: History, aesthetics, and vocational studies made mandatory under new education reforms

(lm) Sri Lankan Prime Minister and Education Minister Harini Amarasuriya has clarified that the subjects of History, Aesthetics, and Vocational Studies have been made compulsory under the country's new education reform package, refuting recent claims that History and Aesthetics were being removed from the curriculum.[Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Trial in 2006 assassination attempt on former army commander postponed to August 4

(lm) The Colombo High Court has postponed the trial of three individuals accused of attempting to assassinate former Army Commander Sarath Fonseka in a 2006 suicide bombing at Army Headquarters. The adjournment was granted after a key prosecution witness failed to appear in court.

The case, which concerns one of the most high-profile attacks during the final years of Sri Lanka's civil war, will resume on August 4. The Attorney General's Department, represented by the Deputy Solicitor General, requested the postponement to continue the presentation of evidence.

Fonseka, who later entered politics and served as a cabinet minister, was critically injured in the attack, which was widely attributed to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a separatist group that waged a decades-long armed campaign for an independent Tamil state before being militarily defeated in 2009. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Court rejects anticipatory bail request by former minister over alleged public loss

(lm) A Colombo magistrate has rejected an anticipatory bail application filed by former minister Rajitha Senaratne, who sought protection from potential arrest by the Bribery Commission. The commission intends to detain him over a case involving an alleged LKR 26.2 million (approximately USD 89,000) loss to the government.

The case concerns the awarding of a sand excavation contract at Kirinda Fisheries Harbour to a Korean firm. Authorities allege that the deal caused financial harm to the state and that the former minister bears responsibility.

Senaratne served as Minister of Health and later Minister of Fisheries under the administration of President Maithripala Sirisena (2015–2019). [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Chemmani mass grave excavations to resume on July 21

(lm) Excavations at the Chemmani mass grave site in Jaffna, northern Sri Lanka, will resume on July 21. The ongoing investigation, now in its second phase, has already uncovered skeletal remains of 65 individuals, along with personal items such as bags, footwear, bangles, and clothing.

The mass grave was initially discovered on February 16 during excavation work for a crematorium project commissioned by the Nallur Pradeshiya Sabha, a local authority in northern Sri Lanka. The case is closely watched due to its links to alleged extrajudicial killings during the final years of Sri Lanka's civil war. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Government to lift fuel tax after repaying debt of state oil distributor

(lm) Sri Lanka's Minister of Power and Energy announced that the government plans to remove the LKR 50 tax on fuel once the full debt of the state-owned Ceylon Petroleum Corporation (CPC) is repaid. The tax was introduced by the previous administration as part of a strategy to service the CPC's LKR 884 billion (approximately USD 3.01 billion) debt, which had been

absorbed by the Treasury. According to the minister, half of the debt has already been settled, and the tax will be reconsidered once the remainder is cleared. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Growth outlook improves as IMF backing continues, but tariff and inflation risks loom

(lm) President Anura Kumara Dissanayake has reaffirmed Sri Lanka's commitment to ongoing structural reforms under the International Monetary Fund (IMF) program, expressing confidence in continued support from the Fund during talks with IMF representatives on the Extended Credit Facility (ECF). He noted that the country had regained a measure of macroeconomic stability and pledged to build on this through inclusive growth, policy consistency, and global economic integration. The President also highlighted the need to ease the burden on citizens in the 2026 Budget and attract investment through tariff and regulatory reforms. [Daily Mirror 1]

Bloomberg Economics projects Sri Lanka's GDP will surpass its pre-pandemic 2018 peak by 2026, driven by a sustained recovery trajectory. Growth is forecast at 5 percent in 2024, moderating to 3.5 percent in 2025 and 2.9 percent in 2026. Key domestic factors include the impact of cumulative 825 basis-point rate cuts by the Central Bank of Sri Lanka (CBSL), improved investor sentiment following debt restructuring, and a strong rebound in tourism, with arrivals in the first half of 2025 up 16 percent year-on-year. Inflation is projected to average 0.2 percent this year but rise to 5.6 percent in 2026.

However, major risks remain. Chief among them is the looming increase in U.S. reciprocal tariffs on Sri Lankan exports from 10 percent to 30 percent, scheduled for August 1, 2025. The apparel sector, in particular, could suffer a 36 percent decline in exports to the U.S., risking 0.6 percent of GDP over three years and raising unemployment concerns. Uncertainty over these tariffs has already been factored into baseline forecasts. [Daily Mirror 2]

On monetary policy, First Capital Research (FCR) estimates a 60 percent probability that the CBSL will cut rates further at its July 23 meeting, likely by 25 basis points, to stimulate demand. However, with inflation set to rise and global volatility persisting, analysts warn that further easing could hamper private credit momentum. FCR expects the Statutory Reserve Ratio to remain unchanged and notes that although

private credit grew in May, year-to-date expansion remains subdued at 2 percent. Meanwhile, foreign reserves declined from USD 6.3 billion in May to USD 6.1 billion in June, with additional outflows expected in the coming quarter. [Daily Mirror 3]

Sri Lanka: Medicine shortages, procurement challenges, and policy concerns

(lm) Sri Lanka is experiencing a deepening public health crisis due to severe shortages of essential medicines and the introduction of new procurement guidelines. The shortages, particularly of critical treatments such as insulin, chemotherapy drugs (Filgrastim and Cisplatin), psychiatric medications (Imipramine, Chlorpromazine), and common hospital supplies like IV paracetamol and fentanyl, are affecting both public and private healthcare sectors. These shortages have persisted for several months, leaving patients unable to access lifesaving therapies, with significant impacts on public health outcomes.

Key drivers of the crisis include supply chain disruptions, inefficiencies in the Medical Supplies Division, and foreign currency shortages, which have hindered timely procurement. While the Deputy Health Minister denied widespread shortages, health sector professionals have pointed to systemic issues that need urgent attention, including delays in the procurement process and regulatory inefficiencies.

In response, the Ministry of Health has issued new procurement guidelines allowing hospitals to source high-value medical items from third-party providers to address shortages. However, medical professionals have raised concerns about the practical and ethical challenges these guidelines present. Key issues include the lack of real-time data on stock levels, vague definitions in the circular (such as “best interest” of patients), and the administrative burden on clinical staff, who are required to document and verify unavailability of medications before directing patients to external sources.

Furthermore, the guidelines fail to address laboratory medicine shortages and do not clarify the regulatory framework for procuring items through non-government channels, raising concerns about product quality and patient safety. Specialists have proposed more practical solutions, such as setting a monetary threshold for required formal declarations and aligning procurement practices with National Medicines Regulatory Authority standards to ensure both

compliance and patient protection. [Daily Mirror 1] [Daily Mirror 2]

Sri Lanka: Socialist party warns of covert privatization of Eastern Terminal

(lm) The Front Line Socialist Party (FLSP) has accused the Sri Lankan government of initiating a gradual privatization process of the Eastern Container Terminal at the Colombo Port, following a cabinet decision to establish a new limited liability company—Colombo Eastern Container Terminal Ltd—to manage operations.

At a press conference on July 15, FLSP Education Secretary Pubudu Jayagoda alleged that the move is a strategic first step toward eventual private and possibly foreign ownership, warning that the company's shares could be floated on the Colombo Stock Exchange. He cited the potential involvement of foreign actors such as India's Adani Group, which has previously expressed interest in Sri Lankan port projects.

Jayagoda questioned why a new company was necessary if the Sri Lanka Ports Authority (SLPA) is to maintain full operational control, arguing that the structure suggests a deeper privatization agenda. He further claimed that the initiative continues policies introduced under former President Ranil Wickremesinghe, with the current administration accused of executing them more effectively.

The FLSP also expressed concern about broader privatization efforts, asserting that the government plans to sell off 14 of Sri Lanka's 18 economic centers. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Intelligence chief dismissed over 2019 Easter attack failures

(lm) The National Police Commission (NPC) has dismissed former Senior Deputy Inspector General (SDIG) Nilantha Jayawardena following a disciplinary inquiry into his role in failing to prevent the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings. The SDIG is one of the highest-ranking positions in Sri Lanka's police force, directly beneath the Inspector General of Police (IGP). Jayawardena had headed the State Intelligence Service (SIS), responsible for gathering national security intelligence.

The dismissal comes after a tribunal found him guilty on all charges related to his negligence. He had been on compulsory leave since July 2024. In a parallel case, the Supreme Court had also ordered him, alongside former President Maithripala Sirisena and other top officials, to pay personal compensation for violating the fundamental rights of victims.

The Easter Sunday attacks were a series of coordinated suicide bombings that struck churches and hotels on April 21, 2019, killing more than 250 people and injuring hundreds. Carried out by Islamist extremists linked to the National Thowheed Jamaat, the attacks marked one of the deadliest episodes of violence in post-civil war Sri Lanka. Jayawardena's failure to act on prior intelligence warnings was widely seen as a critical lapse in national security. [Daily Mirror 1]

Amid the fallout, opposition MP Dayasiri Jayasekera—who previously served as Minister of Sports from 2015 to 2018 and is a veteran member of Parliament—came to Jayawardena's defense. Jayasekera argued that the former intelligence chief had indeed shared advance warnings with senior defense authorities months before the 2019 Easter attacks. He claimed that the Police Commission's decision to dismiss Jayawardena was unjust and failed to acknowledge his prior efforts. [Daily Mirror 2]

Sri Lanka: Police face systemic crisis over sexual abuse, bribery, and misconduct

Sri Lanka's police force is facing growing scrutiny amid a wave of misconduct cases involving sexual abuse, corruption, and abuse of authority across multiple regions. The Acting Inspector General of Police (IGP) has ordered disciplinary and legal action against officers found guilty, following a string of high-profile cases that have undermined public trust in law enforcement institutions.

In the most recent case, three Sub-Inspectors from the Matara Division were suspended after allegedly attempting to use spa services without payment and then engaging in threatening behavior toward staff. Investigations found them guilty of misconduct and abuse of power.

Other recent incidents include sexual harassment cases involving officers from Medirigiriya, Mallavi, and Tangalle. These involve both abuse of power within the police hierarchy—such as superiors harassing junior female officers—and predatory behavior toward civilians, including schoolgirls. Several cases have led to

arrests, bail proceedings, and public backlash, particularly where video evidence surfaced.

Parallel to these abuses, Sri Lanka's Commission to Investigate Allegations of Bribery or Corruption (CIABOC) has arrested multiple officers in 2025, ranging from constables to chief inspectors. One of the latest cases involved two officers from the Crime Division caught accepting LKR 180,000 (approximately USD 612) in bribes from a three-wheeler driver.

The National Police Commission (NPC) has urged the IGP to enforce accountability measures but noted that disciplinary procedures remain within police jurisdiction. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka: Over 4,500 arrested in sweeping nationwide anti-drug operations

(lm) Sri Lankan authorities have arrested a total of 4,524 individuals in two major anti-narcotics crackdowns conducted between July 11 and July 20. The operations, carried out under the directive of the Acting Inspector General of Police, targeted drug trafficking and related offenses across the island.

The first phase, a week-long campaign beginning July 11, led to 3,283 arrests through 3,286 coordinated raids. Police seized approximately 1.73 kilograms of heroin, 2.38 kilograms of methamphetamine (ice), 19.6 grams of hashish, 5,923 cannabis plants, 2,464 narcotic tablets, and 784 illicit cigarettes. Of those detained, 1,147 individuals were linked to heroin and 1,129 to methamphetamine offenses.

The second operation, conducted on July 20 as a one-day island-wide sweep, resulted in the arrest of 1,241 individuals. Authorities confiscated an additional 254 grams of ice, 112 grams of heroin, and 3.7 kilograms of cannabis. Five firearms—including one of foreign origin—were also seized.

Eighteen individuals wanted for serious crimes were detained, and 321 warrants were executed. [Daily Mirror 1] [Daily Mirror 2]

Constitutional Law and –Politics, Human Rights

and National Security in Southeast Asia

Brunei: Government amends Land Code

(ga) Brunei will implement the Land Code (Amendment) Order 2025 (LCAO 2025) on August 1, introducing new regulations to clarify land ownership rights for citizens, non-citizens, and stateless permanent residents. Under amendment, stateless permanent residents may now own a single lot of freehold land for personal residential use through purchase, transfer, or acquisition.

The amendment also restricts non-Brunei citizens to land interests only through charges, leases, or sub-leases, subject to conditions and official approval and mandates that non-citizens currently holding freehold land via Power of Attorney, Trust Deeds, or similar instruments must declare their interests within 12 months of the order's enactment. Approved holdings will convert to leaseholds based on ministerial guidelines, or risk nullification if not declared in time.

Inheritance provisions permit non-citizens to inherit freehold land, provided it is sold to a Brunei citizen within ten years of the landowner's death, or it will be converted into leasehold status. Non-citizen heirs of leasehold land will only be entitled to the remaining lease period.

Former Brunei citizens and permanent residents who lose their status are required to sell their freehold land within ten years. Failure to do so will result in automatic conversion to leasehold. [Borneo Bulletin]

Brunei: 35 arrested in anti-drug operation targeting major syndicate

(ga) Brunei's Narcotics Control Bureau (BKN) arrested 35 individuals during an anti-drug operation carried out from June 29 to July 14, in Brunei-Muara and Belait districts. Those detained include 25 local citizens, nine permanent residents, and one foreign national, aged between 17 and 59.

Investigations identified a 27-year-old local man as the alleged ringleader, with minors and an entire family reportedly involved in trafficking operations. [Borneo Bulletin]

Cambodia: Controversial amendments to citizenship law enter into force

(dql) Less than a month after its proposal, Cambodia's amendment to Article 33 of the Constitution has come into effect following royal promulgation by King Norodom Sihamoni on July 15. The revised article grants legal grounds for revoking citizenship from Cambodians deemed to have betrayed the nation.

Unanimously passed by the National Assembly and approved by the Senate (see AiR No. 28, July/2025, 3), the amendment allows the state to determine the acquisition and loss of nationality—including revocation—by law. The government aims to use the amendment to counter threats such as treason or harmful collaboration with foreign actors.

Justice Minister Koeut Rith defended the measure as a way to strengthen national unity and protect against foreign interference. He stressed that the amendment revives earlier legal traditions dating back to the 1920s and 1960s.

However, critics have voiced concerns over potential misuse, warning that the law may primarily target opposition figures to silent political dissent. Opposition Senator Kong Monika urged transparency and stressed the need to safeguard constitutional freedoms, cautioning that laws restricting these rights would undermine democracy.

The Justice Ministry is currently drafting related amendments to the nationality law, though specific details remain pending. [Khmer Times]

The development is seen as marking a politically significant shift, signaling increased state power over citizenship in the name of national security and driven by the ongoing border dispute with Thailand. Cambodian opposition figures have been accused of collaborating with foreign powers, including receiving

support from abroad while criticizing the government's handling of border issues. [South China Morning Post] [Constitution Net]

Cambodia: Land activists acquitted in high-profile incitement case

(dql) The Preah Sihanouk Appeal Court has overturned the convictions of 11 land activists who were previously found guilty of incitement and given six-month suspended sentences in 2023.

The charges stemmed from a June 2023 protest, during which the activists led around 100 villagers from Koh Kong to Phnom Penh to petition Justice Minister Koeut Rith to drop charges against fellow land rights defenders. The protest was part of a long-running land dispute with companies linked to a tycoon in Sre Ambel district. Protesters accused government officials of involvement in land grabs and forced evictions. [Khmer Times] [Kiripost]

The decision marks a rare reversal in Cambodia's judiciary, often criticized for suppressing land rights activism.

Cambodia: Families renew demands for closure of suspended hide factory amid ongoing pollution concerns

(gm) Nearly 100 families in Preah Sihanouk's Prey Nop district have renewed calls for the permanent closure of Kubon (Cambodia) Biotechnology Co., Ltd., citing continued environmental and health damage caused by the company's hide-processing operations. This week's renewed petition follows recent visits by a joint working group of the Ministry of Environment and local officials to affected villages in Teuk La'ak commune. [Phnom Penh Post]

While the Ministry ordered the suspension of the factory's activities on June 26, following violations of the Environment and Natural Resources Code and wastewater discharge regulations, villagers say operations have resumed and untreated liquid waste continues to pollute the Prek Pha'av and Prek Kampong Smach waterways. The contamination has devastated fish and crab farming, once a key local livelihood, and is blamed for a rise in respiratory and skin conditions. [Business & Human Rights Resource Centre]

The Ministry of Environment confirmed that nearly 100 out of 500 local households remain directly affected and reiterated that the factory will face legal action if it fails to restore the damaged environment or comply with regulatory orders.

This week's complaints comes amid the ministry's broader crackdown on industrial pollution. Since January, 30 companies have faced enforcement action for environmental damage, including the Kubon facility and Cambodian Noble Taste Food Co. Ltd., which were among the first ordered to suspend operations. At least 20 firms have been fined or directed to halt production, while 50 others have agreed to install automated monitoring systems for real-time wastewater tracking. [Khmer Times]

Kubon had previously been warned for discharging waste into natural waterways. If it fails to implement corrective measures, the Ministry has stated it will proceed with permanent closure in accordance with environmental law.

Cambodia: Thousands detained in online scam raids

(gm) Authorities have arrested 2,767 suspects since late June, including more than 1,000 in high-profile raids between July 15–17, according to official statements. The crackdown, which has swept across at least five provinces, follows a directive by Prime Minister Hun Manet instructing law enforcement, immigration, and military authorities to take coordinated action against online scam networks or face removal from their posts.

Most of the operations targeted known scam compounds and led to mass detentions of foreign nationals. On July 16 alone, nearly 750 suspects were arrested in Phnom Penh, Banteay Meanchey, Kratie, and Kampong Speu. Detainees included nationals from Vietnam, Indonesia, China, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Taiwan, and several other countries. Police also seized mobile phones, computers, and other devices linked to digital fraud. [Phnom Penh Post 1] [Phnom Penh Post 2]

Since the pandemic, Cambodia has emerged as a hotspot for cyber-scam networks, often controlled by organized crime groups, that traffic workers into coercive digital labor. Many victims are lured with false job promises and then forced to participate in global investment and romance scams under threat of violence. According to UN estimates, more than

100,000 people may be trapped in these operations across Cambodia alone. In response to criticism from international NGOs and UN agencies, the Cambodian government has intensified its crackdown this month. Officials stated that the campaign is part of a broader effort to reclaim the country's reputation and uphold public security. The campaign has resulted in thousands of deportations and dozens of ongoing prosecutions. [Al Jazeera]

China has expressed full support for the campaign. On July 17, Chinese Ambassador Wang Wenbin met with Chhay Sinarith, head of the national Ad Hoc Commission to Combat Online Scams, pledging further cooperation in dismantling cross-border cybercrime operations. On July 20, Sinarith met Yin Guohai, deputy director-general of China's Ministry of Public Security, who pledged to assist in the swift repatriation of Chinese nationals arrested in Cambodia. [Phnom Penh Post 3] [Phnom Penh Post 4]

The Cambodian government has reiterated that the crackdown will continue and expand. Authorities have begun reviewing local casino operations, commercial gambling licenses, and alleged links between private security companies and criminal syndicates.

Cambodia: Over 121 million square meters of landmines cleared in first half of year

(dql) According to the Cambodian Mine Action and Victim Assistance Authority (CMAA), over 121 million square meters of land were cleared of landmines and explosive remnants of war (ERW) in the first half of 2025, with more than 26,500 explosive items—5,439 anti-personnel mines, 114 anti-tank mines, and 21,010 unexploded ordnances (UXOs)—neutralized by seven major demining operators.

Since the early 1990s, Cambodia has cleared more than 3.4 billion square meters of contaminated land and destroyed over 4.46 million explosive items—including 1.2 million anti-personnel mines, 26,681 anti-tank mines, and more than 3.2 million ERWs. Most of the cleared land is now being used for human security and socio-economic development.

Despite its violent legacy, mine-related casualties continue to decline. In the first half of this year, 24 people were injured or killed—a 31 percent decrease compared to the same period in 2024. [Khmer Times]

Indonesia: Decision to mark National Culture Day on Prabowo's birthday sparks concerns over growing personality cult

(ms) Indonesia's Culture Minister Fadli Zon is facing backlash after designating October 17 as National Culture Day—a date that coincides with President Prabowo Subianto's birthday. The decision, announced on July 15, has drawn criticism from lawmakers, historians, and cultural figures who accuse the government of politicising national symbols to elevate the president's personal image.

Zon defended the move by pointing to the date's historical significance, noting that on October 17, 1951, Indonesia's founding president Soekarno formalised the national emblem *Garuda Pancasila* and the national motto *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity). But critics, including House Speaker Puan Maharani, said the rationale appeared selective and questioned whether it was meant to flatter the head of state. "Culture belongs to all people, across generations and eras," Maharani stated, calling for a thorough review by parliament. [Antara]

The controversy comes amid growing concerns over the personalisation of power under Prabowo. Just days before the Culture Day announcement, the president's cat, Bobby Kertanegara, appeared at a state-affiliated "Cat Lovers Social Day" on July 12, escorted by uniformed police officers down a blue carpet. The spectacle, hosted in collaboration with the national police and the Polri Animal Hospital, quickly went viral, raising questions over the use of public resources for what appeared to be personal pageantry.

"This isn't just about a cat," said Made Supriatma, a researcher at the ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute. "It's about how state institutions are mobilised to project power and symbolism around a leader." [Tempo]

Prabowo's growing cult of personality is not merely a matter of style. According to political scientist Andreas Ufen, the president has gradually shaped a leadership narrative that blends electoral populism with authoritarian nostalgia. In his study *Prabowo Subianto: Between Electoral Populism and Authoritarian Nostalgia*, Ufen traces how Prabowo's political appeal draws from militarist imagery, paternalist leadership, and an idealised vision of order harking back to the Suharto era.

"Prabowo's discourse is not aimed at strengthening institutions but at weakening them in favour of strong, personalised rule," Ufen writes. His use of emotional rhetoric, disdain for pluralism, and symbolic gestures—

including his projection as a caring animal lover and defender of national pride—create an image of a leader who stands above bureaucracy and embodies the will of the people.

Bobby the cat, once a stray outside Prabowo's home on Kertanegara Street, has since become a fixture at official events, including meetings with Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and Microsoft founder Bill Gates. Such images are not simply soft politics, Ufen argues, but carefully curated tools that reinforce a charismatic, fatherly persona.

These developments come at a time when Indonesian democracy faces more subtle pressures. Unlike earlier authoritarian eras marked by censorship and repression, today's personality cult relies on the co-optation of democratic institutions—media framing, symbolic pageantry, and a loyal inner circle—to normalise one-man rule.

As Ufen notes, "Democracy is not undone all at once, but slowly hollowed out." In this light, events like a National Culture Day declared on the president's birthday or a police-escorted cat appearance are not trivial—they are signals of a shifting political culture where spectacle may be supplanting substance. [GIGA]

Indonesia: Former trade minister jailed 4.5 years over sugar import corruption

(ms) Former Indonesian trade minister Thomas Trikasih Lembong was sentenced on Friday, 18 July, to 4.5 years in prison and fined 750 million rupiah (USD 45,871) for his role in a corruption case involving sugar import permits. The Jakarta Corruption Court found Lembong guilty of authorizing imports in violation of procurement laws, causing state losses estimated at nearly 600 billion rupiah (USD 36.8 million).

The case centers on permits issued between 2015 and 2016, when Lembong approved raw sugar imports through state-owned PT Perdagangan Indonesia in collaboration with private refineries. At the time, Indonesia was producing more sugar than it consumed —2.49 million metric tons versus 2.12 million—making additional imports unnecessary. Judges said Lembong bypassed required inter-agency consultations and favored commercial interests over public welfare. While he was not found to have personally enriched himself, the court ruled his actions violated regulations, justifying a custodial sentence.

Lembong, once a close ally of then-president Joko "Jokowi" Widodo, later became one of the administration's most vocal critics. After being removed from cabinet, he increasingly distanced himself from the ruling coalition, citing concerns over democratic backsliding and Jokowi's endorsement of former general Prabowo Subianto. However, some observers suggest his opposition may also have been driven by personal disappointment and political ambition, particularly after being sidelined from key policymaking roles. In the 2024 presidential election, he served as campaign manager for opposition candidate Anies Baswedan, who lost in a landslide to Jokowi-backed Prabowo. Lembong was arrested just days after Prabowo's inauguration on 26 October 2024, fueling allegations of politically motivated prosecution —though the Attorney General's Office has denied any political interference. Analysts remain divided, with some viewing the case as a legitimate corruption probe and others seeing it as part of Indonesia's wider pattern of elite rivalries intersecting with legal action.

After the verdict, Lembong said he would consider an appeal, accusing the court of ignoring his legal defense. The courtroom was packed with supporters, and jeers erupted as Judge Purwanto S. Abdullah read the decision. Judges acknowledged Lembong's cooperation and the absence of personal gain as reasons for reducing the sentence from the seven years requested by prosecutors.

The case highlights long-standing issues in Indonesia's sugar trade, a sector often entangled in regulatory loopholes and rent-seeking. Import licensing, a highly politicized process, has been the subject of multiple corruption cases in recent years. Analysts say the Lembong verdict underscores the need for greater transparency in commodity governance, while also raising questions about the neutrality of law enforcement during political transitions.

As Southeast Asia's largest economy continues to tackle institutional corruption, the challenge remains balancing accountability with due process. Whether this conviction signals a broader reform agenda or political score-settling is likely to shape public perception of President Prabowo's early tenure. [Channel News Asia] [The Jakarta Post] [The Strait Times]

Indonesia: Public pressure mounts on President Prabowo to end deputy ministers' dual roles

(ms) Public calls are intensifying for Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto to dismiss over two dozen deputy ministers from their concurrent positions as commissioners in state-owned enterprises (SOEs), following a reaffirmation by the Constitutional Court that such dual roles are incompatible with the law and principles of good governance.

Out of Prabowo's record-breaking 56 deputy ministers —the largest cabinet since the Reformasi Era—at least 30 are currently holding commissioner posts at major SOEs. The most recent example is Second Deputy Higher Education, Science and Technology Minister Stella Christie, appointed earlier this month as commissioner of Pertamina Hulu Energi, a key subsidiary of state oil giant Pertamina.

Critics warn the practice risks blurring the lines between regulation and business oversight, weakening government performance and accountability. Legal experts cite violations of the 2008 State Ministry Law, which prohibits ministers—and by extension, deputy ministers—from holding dual roles. The Constitutional Court had already addressed the matter in a 2020 ruling, and in its latest decision, reaffirmed that dual appointments for deputy ministers are unconstitutional. However, the petition challenging the current appointments was dismissed on procedural grounds following the petitioner's death in June.

Despite this legal clarity, the government has taken no corrective action. Presidential Communications Office chief Hasan Nasbi has defended the status quo, arguing that the Constitutional Court's binding ruling applies only to ministers and not explicitly to deputies —a claim disputed by legal experts. Some speculate that the dual roles are being used to reinforce loyalty within the administration through increased financial incentives, rather than merit-based performance.

The controversy comes as broader concerns grow over governance in the early months of Prabowo's presidency. Unlike his predecessor Joko Widodo, who frequently reshuffled ministers to maintain discipline, Prabowo has so far avoided cabinet shakeups. Critics say this leniency, combined with the expansion of political appointments, could entrench patronage and weaken institutional integrity.

Editorials and civil society groups have noted troubling parallels with past administrations where commissioner posts were used to reward political allies, contributing to mismanagement within key SOEs, particularly in the infrastructure and energy sectors. Analysts warn that if Prabowo does not act decisively, he risks reinforcing extractive political

institutions—favoring elite loyalty over public service. [Asia News Network] [The Jakarta Post]

Indonesia: Former Education Minister and tech leaders questioned in Chromebook procurement corruption probe

(ms) The Attorney General's Office (AGO) has questioned former Education Minister Nadiem Makarim and several former technology executives as part of an ongoing corruption investigation into the Ministry of Education's Chromebook procurement program, valued at Rp 9.98 trillion (USD 616 million).

The project, carried out between 2020 and 2022, aimed to distribute 1.2 million Chrome OS-based laptops to schools in remote and underdeveloped regions. However, investigators allege irregularities in the procurement process, including the replacement of an initial technical review that deemed Chromebooks ineffective due to poor internet infrastructure in targeted areas.

On 14 July, former Tokopedia President Melissa Siska Juminto was questioned in her capacity as the former owner of PT Gojek Indonesia. Former GoTo CEO Andre Soelistyo was also questioned regarding his 2020 role as director of PT Aplikasi Karya Anak Bangsa, a Gojek-affiliated company. FHK, a senior manager at PT Datascript, was also called as a witness. Earlier, the AGO searched GoTo's office and seized documents and electronic devices.

Separately, Nadiem Makarim, who co-founded Gojek before becoming education minister, was questioned for the second time on 16 July. Investigators are focusing on his directive issued during a 6 May 2020 virtual meeting to proceed with Chromebook procurement—despite earlier studies recommending otherwise.

Particularly under scrutiny is Nadiem's meeting with Google representatives in February and April 2020. According to the AGO, Google offered a 30 percent co-investment if the ministry committed to purchasing Chromebooks from 2020 to 2022. This offer, conveyed through Nadiem's special staff Jurist Tan, raises concerns about potential undue influence from a private company over a public procurement process—especially given the subsequent shift in technical recommendations to favor Chromebooks.

Tan is among four suspects named in the case, alongside two former directors at the ministry and a

consultant. The AGO estimates that the state suffered a loss of 1.98 trillion rupiah (USD 122 million). While Nadiem has not been named a suspect, investigators are examining his oversight role and decision-making in the project. [Antara] [Jakarta Global 1] [Jakarta Global 2] [TechinAsia]

Indonesia: President and Vice President attend party congress as former president's son secures top role

(ms) Kaesang Pangarep, the youngest son of former president Joko "Jokowi" Widodo, has been re-elected as chairman of the Indonesian Solidarity Party (PSI) during its national congress in Surakarta, Central Java, on July 19–20. The event has drawn national attention not only for Kaesang's victory but also because he was only formally allowed to join the party late last year—days before being named chair for the first time.

Founded in 2014, PSI is a small political party originally aimed at mobilizing young, urban voters and has long branded itself as reformist and anti-corruption. Despite strong social media outreach and high-profile candidates, the party failed to win any seats in the 2024 national legislature.

Kaesang's re-election marks a strategic effort by PSI to boost its visibility and national profile ahead of the 2029 elections. He won over 62 percent of the vote in an internal contest that also introduced a new party logo and emphasized internal reform. His first term as chairman lasted only a few months, and critics questioned his sudden rise, particularly since he had no prior experience in party politics.

The congress, held in Jokowi's hometown of Solo, was attended by major political figures, including President Prabowo Subianto and Vice President Gibran Rakabuming Raka—Kaesang's older brother—despite neither being members of PSI. Their presence was seen as highly symbolic and politically significant. Prabowo leads the powerful Gerindra Party, which heads the current ruling coalition, while Gibran is affiliated with Golkar, one of Indonesia's oldest and most influential parties. Their joint appearance at the congress was widely interpreted as a signal of political endorsement for PSI's transformation and a show of unity behind the Widodo family's growing role in shaping Indonesia's post-Jokowi political future.

Observers see PSI's direction as part of a broader strategy to preserve Jokowi's political capital even after leaving office. Political analyst Iwan Setiawan described

PSI as effectively built to accommodate the former president's interests, noting it is unsurprising that his son now leads the party and that Jokowi could still play a major role behind the scenes.

Though Jokowi has denied interest in formal leadership roles, speculation remains strong that he could serve as a senior adviser or figurehead within PSI as it positions itself as a vehicle for his political legacy. [Antara] [The Jakarta Post] [Voice of Indonesia]

Indonesia: New visa allows foreigners to pursue non-formal education

(ms) Indonesia has launched a new visa scheme allowing foreign nationals to pursue non-formal education, including language courses and vocational training. Effective July 15, the E30 limited stay visa (VITAS) permits a stay of one or two years.

Acting Director General of Immigration Yuldi Yusman said applications must be submitted online require a guarantor—either an individual or the non-formal institution.

The visa fee is IDR 6 million (approx. USD 368) for one year and IDR 8.5 million (approx. USD 521) for two years.

Indonesia also expanded stay options for formal education visas. The E30A (elementary and secondary) and E30B (higher education) visas now allow up to four-year stays. The four-year visa costs IDR 12 million (approx. USD 737).

Yusman said the policy aims to boost Indonesia's appeal as an international education destination. [Jakarta Global]

Indonesia: Foreigners face deportation, 10-year ban for investment fraud

(ms) Foreign nationals involved in fraudulent investment activities in Indonesia may face deportation and a re-entry ban of up to 10 years, according to the Directorate General of Immigration.

Speaking in Jakarta on 15 July, Jakarta Immigration Office head Pamuji Raharja said sanctions apply under the Immigration Law and include criminal penalties, deportation, and long-term entry restrictions.

“Some foreigners claim to invest but have no actual business presence in Indonesia,” Raharja said.

Authorities are stepping up enforcement through the ongoing *Wira Waspada Operation*, targeting immigration violations. The operation is supported by the Foreign National Monitoring Team (Timpora), which oversees foreign activities in local regions.

From 14 to 16 May, immigration officials in Greater Jakarta detained 170 foreign nationals from 27 countries. Violations included lack of valid documents, false information, fictitious sponsors, and overstaying.

The multi-agency effort aims to strengthen oversight and maintain public security in areas with high foreign activity. [Antara]

Indonesia: Government sends researchers to support economic growth in West Sulawesi resettlement areas

(ms) The Indonesian government will send 105 researchers to West Sulawesi in August to identify promising sectors for local economic development. The initiative, announced by Transmigration Minister Muhammad Iftitah Sulaiman Suryanagara on July 18, involves 21 research teams composed of university students and professors. Their work will focus on assessing areas such as tourism, agriculture, healthcare, and small-scale manufacturing to guide future investment and job creation.

The effort is part of the government’s Patriot Transmigration Program, which reimagines Indonesia’s long-standing strategy of relocating people from overcrowded regions like Java to underdeveloped provinces. These relocation zones, known as *transmigration areas*, were originally designed to ease population pressure and improve land use. Today, the focus has shifted toward helping these rural communities build sustainable economies through targeted support and planning.

One example is the potential development of Marano village into a tourism hub, leveraging its natural landscape. Other locations may focus on processing local agricultural products, such as cocoa. To this end, the government is also working to attract investors for a chocolate factory in West Sulawesi, aiming to boost the region’s cocoa value chain and reduce reliance on raw exports.

The research teams will help map regional strengths and design economic plans tailored to local conditions. Minister Suryanagara emphasized that relocating families is no longer enough—success now depends on developing viable livelihoods and long-term community support systems. [Antara 1] [Antara 2]

Still, the development push comes at a tense time. Protests in May over sand mining in the region revealed widespread concerns about environmental degradation, permit irregularities, and the lack of community consultation. As Jakarta moves ahead with its rural transformation agenda, balancing investment with local participation will be crucial to its success. [Mongabay]

Indonesia: 2025 rice aid begins for 18 million low-income families

(ms) Indonesia has launched its 2025 rice assistance program for 18.27 million low-income families, according to the National Food Agency (Bapanas).

The program began on 14 July, with state logistics agency Perum Bulog distributing 20-kilogram rice packages per family, covering aid for June and July. The initiative aims to support food security and economic resilience for vulnerable households.

Distribution is being carried out in coordination with local governments and is expected to be completed within one month.

The program uses beneficiary data from the National Socio-Economic Single Data (DTSEN), targeting households in the first to seventh income deciles, in line with Presidential Instruction No. 4 of 2025.

Adi emphasized that the initiative continues the social welfare priorities of President Prabowo Subianto and Vice President Gibran Rakabuming Raka. [Anatara]

Indonesia: Central bank cuts rates again to support growth amid weak demand

(ms) Bank Indonesia (BI) cut its benchmark interest rate by 25 basis points to 5.25 percent on 16 July, marking its third rate cut this year as the central bank moves to stimulate growth in the face of slowing domestic demand and global uncertainty. The overnight deposit and lending facility rates were also lowered to 4.50 percent and 6.00 percent, respectively.

BI Governor Perry Warjiyo said the decision reflects low inflation expectations, a stable rupiah, and the need to boost lending and economic activity.

The move follows the 15 July announcement of a revised trade agreement between Indonesia and the United States, under which tariffs on Indonesian goods will be set at 19 percent – down from the previously threatened 32 percent – while US exports to Indonesia will face no tariffs. The central bank welcomed the deal, describing it as positive for the broader economic outlook and likely to improve export prospects and business sentiment. *(More details on the US tariff agreement can be found in the international section.)*

While the rupiah has remained relatively stable in July after facing pressure earlier in the year, economists anticipate further monetary easing ahead. With Mandiri Sekuritas, one of the leading Indonesian Investment Banks forecasting another 25-basis-point cut this year, followed by up to 50 basis points in early 2026.

Bank Indonesia maintained its 2025 GDP growth forecast at 4.6 to 5.4 percent, but persistent weakness in household spending continues to cloud the outlook. Analysts expect BI to proceed cautiously with additional rate cuts to support recovery without destabilizing markets. [ICIS] [Reuters] [The Jakarta Post]

Indonesia: Government to reclaim unused certified land after two years

(ms) The Indonesian government will begin reclaiming certified land that remains unused for more than two consecutive years, aiming to boost land productivity and advance its agrarian reform agenda. The policy was confirmed by Agrarian and Spatial Planning Minister and National Land Agency (BPN) head Nusron Wahid on 14 July.

Under the policy, certified land that shows no signs of economic or development activity within two years will be subject to staged warnings. The process begins with a formal notice, followed by three successive warning letters over a period of nearly 20 months. If, after 587 days from the first warning, the land remains idle, it will be declared abandoned (*tanah telantar*) and redistributed under Indonesia's land reform program.

"This applies to all types of certified land—whether it is Right to Cultivate (HGU), Right to Build (HGB), or Right

of Use," Nusron stated. "If it's not used productively, it can be reclaimed by the state."

The government estimates that of Indonesia's 55.9 million hectares of certified land, around 1.4 million hectares have already been categorized as abandoned. Officials argue that such underutilization contributes to inequality, with nearly half of certified land reportedly controlled by just 60 families.

The policy is supported by Government Regulation No. 20 of 2021, which allows the state to seize land rights if the land is intentionally neglected. Land managed by indigenous communities or classified as state land bank assets is exempt. Uncertified land or land with traditional claims such as *girik* or *verponding* is also excluded from the new measures. [The Jakarta Post]

Indonesia: 80,000 new village cooperatives certified to strengthen local economy

(ms) Indonesia has officially certified more than 80,000 Merah Putih Cooperatives, surpassing the government's target ahead of the program's launch by President Prabowo Subianto on July 21. The initiative, a flagship part of Prabowo's *Asta Cita* agenda, aims to build an inclusive, community-driven economic structure across the country.

The Ministry of Law and Human Rights began processing cooperative registrations in early May through the Directorate General of General Legal Administration (AHU). By July 18, a total of 80,068 Village and Urban Merah Putih Cooperatives (KDMP/KKMP) had been granted legal status — exceeding the initial goal of 80,000 set under Presidential Instruction No. 9/2025.

To streamline the legal process, AHU introduced administrative incentives, including the use of collective power of attorney for village and subdistrict officials. This was especially helpful in remote and under-connected regions like Papua, where geographical and security challenges can delay documentation. Online systems and digital submissions further accelerated the effort.

Each Merah Putih Cooperative is designed to function as a central business entity at the village or urban ward level. It typically focuses on one or more sectors — such as agriculture, fisheries, food distribution, or small-scale manufacturing — depending on local economic potential. The cooperatives serve as legally recognized institutions through which residents can

access collective savings and loans, market their products, or purchase goods and services at better prices by bypassing intermediaries. By pooling resources and sharing ownership, members gain stronger bargaining power and a structured way to grow local economies sustainably.

The Merah Putih Cooperative program is designed to revive and modernize Indonesia's cooperative model by establishing one cooperative in every village and urban subdistrict. Each cooperative is expected to serve as a hub for local trade, production, and distribution — especially in the agricultural and food sectors. The program aims to boost rural entrepreneurship, reduce reliance on middlemen, and increase community income by ensuring that profits circulate locally.

Cooperatives registered under the program receive legal support, branding, and digital tools to manage operations more efficiently. The government sees them as a foundation for food security and equitable economic growth, empowering local communities to participate in national development.

Beyond legal certification, the Ministry has launched a fraud-prevention ecosystem by deploying trained village heads as paralegals. These local legal advocates raise awareness of rights and responsibilities and help guard against misuse of cooperative funds. [Jakarta Global] [Kompas]

Indonesia: BNN investigates drug network involving Russian and Ukrainian nationals in Bali

(ms) Indonesia's National Narcotics Agency (BNN) is investigating a transnational drug trafficking network in Bali involving Russian and Ukrainian nationals. The group is suspected of using advanced digital tools to facilitate operations and evade law enforcement.

Speaking at a public lecture at Udayana University on July 15, BNN Chief Police Commissioner General Marthinus Hukom said the syndicate is organized and technologically sophisticated. According to the agency, the network uses blockchain systems and cryptocurrencies to conduct transactions anonymously.

Communications between members and buyers are reportedly carried out through encrypted messaging on social media platforms, particularly Instagram. Once a transaction is confirmed, buyers receive GPS

coordinates for product pick-up, with the entire process often completed in less than two minutes.

The BNN also noted that drug demand in Bali may be contributing to the presence of international trafficking networks. However, specific motives behind the individuals' cooperation have not been disclosed.

As part of its response, the BNN is initiating cooperation with international counterparts. Hukom confirmed that discussions are underway with Russian authorities to support efforts to identify and dismantle the network.

The agency has not disclosed the number of individuals involved or whether any arrests have been made as investigations are ongoing. [Antara] [Radio Republik Indonesia]

Laos: Southeast Asia's largest wind farm to begin full operation by late August

Laos's first and Southeast Asia's largest onshore wind farm—the Monsoon Wind Power Project—is set to begin full commercial operations by late August or early September, according to Sekong Province Deputy Governor Khanti Seelavongsa. The announcement was made during a provincial council meeting on 15 July.

Located in the mountainous southern region of Laos near the Vietnam border, the 600-megawatt project currently operates at 300 MW capacity. Valued at approximately USD 950 million, it spans over 70,800 hectares and comprises 133 turbines, each generating 4.51 MW. Positioned between 1,100 and 1,700 meters above sea level, it is the ASEAN region's first cross-border wind energy initiative.

Electricity from the project will be exported to Vietnam via a 500-kilovolt transmission line. The project is supported by a 25-year power purchase agreement (PPA) with Vietnam Electricity (EVN), highlighting growing regional energy integration.

Traditionally dependent on hydropower, Laos is diversifying its energy mix to improve supply resilience, especially during dry seasons. The Monsoon Wind Project complements existing hydropower plants and positions Laos as a key player in regional clean energy exports.

The project originated from a 2011 agreement with the International Energy Agency. Following feasibility studies, it received Vietnamese government approval

in 2019. Construction began in early 2023, and all turbines were installed by May 2025. The project is partly owned by ACEN Renewables International.

The wind farm marks a milestone in Laos's renewable energy ambitions and its efforts to attract more green investment amid a global push for low-carbon development. [The Laotian Times]

Laos: Government to renegotiate hydropower contracts amid electricity price backlash

(ms) The Lao government plans to renegotiate power purchase agreements with hydropower companies in response to growing public concern over rising electricity prices. The decision follows the introduction of a new tiered pricing system by Electricité du Laos (EDL) in February, which has led to significant increases in household electricity bills.

Households using just 25 kilowatt-hours per month have seen costs double from LAK 8,900 (approximately USD 0.42) in January to about LAK 17,800 (USD 0.84) by July. High-consumption households using 1,600 kilowatt-hours now face bills of nearly LAK 2.5 million (USD 118), with projections exceeding LAK 3.5 million (USD 165) by 2029 if rates remain unchanged.

EDL cites infrastructure expansion into remote areas and growing debt as reasons for the price hikes. Government officials say talks with hydropower developers will resume in late 2025 to seek more affordable electricity rates. [The Laotian Times]

Laos: Government claims progress on poverty as key provinces declared 'poverty-free'

(ms) Laos says it is making steady progress in reducing poverty, with several districts across the country officially declared "poverty-free" — a milestone the government says brings the country closer to graduating from its Least Developed Country (LDC) status by 2026.

At a ceremony on 15 July, authorities announced that a district in Oudomxay province in northern Laos had met national benchmarks for poverty eradication. These include improvements in infrastructure, access

to clean water and education, healthcare services, and sustained economic development.

According to officials, 79 out of 94 villages in the district have been lifted above the poverty line, with 44 classified as “developed.” The district reportedly now has 15 schools, 19 medical centers, and near-universal access to clean groundwater.

Other districts and cities across Laos have received similar designations this year, including areas in Luang Prabang, Vientiane Capital, and the southern province of Champasack. In Luang Prabang City — one of the country’s key tourism and cultural hubs — officials reported in March that over 98 percent of the population had risen above the poverty line, citing increased employment, permanent housing, school attendance, and access to electricity and clean water.

Champasack Province, home to the economic center Pakse, also saw six of its districts declared poverty-free in May. Evaluations were based on a national nine-point standard covering education, health services, infrastructure, and environmental management.

Government figures state that 31,232 families were lifted out of poverty in 2024, reaching nearly 90 percent of that year’s national target. Officials say this momentum supports the country’s ambition to graduate from LDC status.

However, independent experts remain cautious. The Asian Development Bank notes that while Laos has improved infrastructure and reduced poverty rates in urban and tourism-driven areas, significant disparities remain in rural and remote regions. The World Bank also warns that inflation, youth unemployment, and rising debt levels continue to challenge sustainable poverty reduction.

Laos’s official poverty definition may also differ from global standards, making comparisons difficult. Some areas deemed “poverty-free” may still face chronic underemployment, food insecurity, and limited access to healthcare.

As 2026 approaches, international observers will watch closely to see whether Laos’s poverty reduction is both broad-based and lasting. [The Laotian Times]

Malaysia: Rulers of Conference reviews national security, judiciary, and vape ban proposal

(tl) The 269th Conference of Rulers meeting, chaired by the Sultan of Selangor, convened on 16 July to deliberate on key national matters. Briefings were presented by top security and defense officials, covering current national security and defence updates.

The Conference also discussed judicial appointments, including those to the Federal Court, Court of Appeal, and High Courts, as well as the Chief Judges of Sabah and Sarawak High Courts, President of the Court of Appeal, and the Chief Justice of Malaysia.

A major topic was the proposed nationwide complete ban on vape and electronic cigarettes' sale and usage, which was presented alongside legal opinions from the National Council for Islamic Religious Affairs' recent meetings. Other issues included the registration of marriages involving refugees and asylum seekers, as well as a Cabinet proposal to establish a unified policy for handling confiscated and forfeited assets.

The meeting was attended by rulers, governors, and state leaders from across Malaysia, with King Sultan Ibrahim presiding over the pre-council session. [Malay Mail]

The Conference of Rulers is a unique constitutional body in Malaysia comprising the nine hereditary Malay rulers (Sultans) of the Malay states, along with the Governors (Yang di-Pertua Negeri) of the four non-monarchical states (Penang, Malacca, Sabah, and Sarawak). While without legislative power, the Conference of Rulers plays a critical constitutional and symbolic role, especially in protecting the monarchy, Islam, and the special status of the Malays and Bumiputera—ethnic groups that are granted special privileges and rights under the Malaysian Constitution. The Conference's consent power over specific constitutional amendments gives it a unique form of limited veto power.

Malaysia: Freedom of Information Act to be tabled by this year

(tl) Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim confirmed that the Malaysian government will table the Freedom of Information Act in Parliament by the end of 2025 to enhance public access to government information and promote transparency.

The law will allow individuals to submit an application in order to request information from government agencies, or departments with exceptions for personal

data and national security concerns. A review body comprising retired judges and experts will be formed to handle grants or denied access to a document.

In addition, amendments to the Whistleblower Protection Act 2010 are underway to remove restrictive provisions and create an independent committee to ensure better protection for whistleblowers and combat misconduct in administrations. [Malay Mail]

In addition, Malaysia plans to introduce a new bill on e-commerce in the first parliamentary session of 2026 to strengthen the country's outdated legal framework. Domestic Trade Minister Armizan Mohd Ali said the current Electronic Commerce Act lacks regulatory power, solely relying on temporary measures like the Consumer Protection Act and its related regulations.

The new legislation, under review since April 2024 and expected to be finalized by August, aims to provide a more comprehensive system that balances consumer protection and rights with sector growth.

Armizan also noted concerns over unregulated foreign e-commerce platforms and unequal taxation, pushing for a possible government-to-government (G2G) mechanism with countries like China and Turkiye to regulate cross-border and direct selling. The proposed bill will also address automated algorithms that may exploit users and the increasing fees imposed by platforms on sellers. Authorities are considering a policy to ensure platforms consult relevant agencies before charging such fees. So far, the review has included several discussions and engagement with over 300 stakeholders, more sessions to be held in Sabah and Sarawak. [Bernama]

Malaysia: Prime Minister Anwar holds People's Justice Party meetings amid internal criticism

(ga) Prime Minister and People's Justice Party (Parti Keadilan Rakyat, PKR) President Anwar Ibrahim held a closed-door meeting with nearly 1,000 Negeri Sembilan PKR members on July 20 as part of his nationwide party strengthening tour. Joined by key party leaders and several ministers and deputy ministers, the event aimed to reinforce party unity and reconnect grassroots leadership following internal elections.

Anwar also met separately with all Negeri Sembilan PKR division heads, regardless of their electoral outcomes, emphasizing reconciliation and

collaboration. PKR Secretary General Fuziah Salleh described the initiative as a move to mend internal rifts and foster cohesion.

Fuziah also addressed recent speculation over potential disciplinary action against nine PKR MPs for their public criticism of judicial appointments. She clarified that Anwar had dismissed the notion of suspensions, asserting that the MPs were exercising their right to raise public concerns and that such actions did not merit disciplinary measures. [Bernama]

Malaysia: AI action plan 2026-2030 to be launched

(tl) Malaysia will unveil its AI Technology Action Plan 2026–2030 later this year, aimed at reinforcing the ethical and responsible use of artificial intelligence across sectors. Digital Minister Gobind Singh Deo announced that the plan builds upon the existing National AI Governance and Ethics Guidelines (AIGE) and will serve as a continuation of the AI Roadmap 2021–2025.

The new strategy will promote stronger collaboration between government, academia, industry, and civil society while also encouraging AI adoption, talent development, and knowledge-sharing. Gobind highlighted the urgency of developing a governance framework to ensure AI safety and accountability, which is expected by mid-2026.

He also emphasized the dual role of AI as both an opportunity and a challenge, underlining the need to prepare the nation with robust infrastructure, security measures, and skilled professionals to become a fully "AI-ready" nation in the digital age. [Malay Mail]

Malaysia: Airport surveillance to be strengthened after 141 illegal entry attempts detected

(ga) The Malaysian Border Control and Protection Agency (AKPS) has enhanced security measures at international transit zones, particularly Kuala Lumpur International Airport Terminal 2, following the detection of 141 foreign nationals attempting illegal entry.

Between July 13 and 14, individuals from India (94), Indonesia (41), Sri Lanka (3), and Pakistan (3) were

found misusing transit facilities by booking connecting flights to third countries without intent to travel onward. Tactics included exiting transit areas under false pretenses, such as health issues or lost baggage, and misusing Special Passes to overstay.

The AKPS responded by intensifying surveillance, deploying closed-circuit television, conducting document checks, travel history reviews, and interviews. All identified individuals have been issued Denial of Entry Notices (NPM) and are being processed for deportation. [Bernama]

Myanmar: Military regime reportedly attempted to negotiate with Aung San Suu Kyi

(nj) The military regime has reportedly attempted to negotiate a peace deal with imprisoned resistance leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been jailed since the military overthrew her government in 2021. According to U Aung Myo Kyaw, secretary of the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, no agreement was reached.

He said that Aung San Suu Kyi and former President U Win Myint remain committed to the resistance movement despite their imprisonment. He also warned that accepting offers from the junta could create disorder among resistance groups and emphasized that their rejection of such offers reflects their continued support for the Spring Revolution, a civil society movement calling for regime change. [Image Myanmar]

This is not the first time the military regime has attempted to engage in peace negotiations with Aung San Suu Kyi. In 2023, Lieutenant Generals Yar Pyae and Khin Zaw Oo reportedly met with the imprisoned National League for Democracy leaders to discuss a peace agreement. However, the talks were unsuccessful. [Radio Free Asia]

The renewed attempts at peace negotiations may be aimed at de-escalating tensions ahead of the regime's plans for a nationwide election in December. Due to the protracted conflict and significant territorial loss, the election faces serious security challenges and opposition.

Myanmar: Violence targets pro-junta political party

(nj) In Yangon, residents of North Okkalapa Township reported the arrest of two young men accused of attacking the pro-junta Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) office. The suspects allegedly fired two grenades at the building using an M79 grenade launcher. The number of casualties has not yet been confirmed. A group calling itself the Yangon Army claimed responsibility for the attack and vowed to carry out further strikes against any targets associated with the military's planned election, scheduled for December 2025.

On the same day, in southern Shan State, Sai Nawng Sai, the USDP chairperson in Mawkmai, was shot and killed at his residence. The perpetrators remain at large, and it is unclear whether the killing is connected to the incident in Yangon. Sai Nawng Sai served as a member of Myanmar's House of Representatives (Pyithu Hluttaw) from 2010 to 2020 and had held the position of USDP chair in Mawkmai since 2010. According to local residents, he was responsible for recruiting pro-junta militias in the area following the 2021 military coup. A USDP member stated that he had been expected to run as the party's candidate in the upcoming December elections. [DVB]

Myanmar: Junta advances on strategic town of Nawnghkio

(nf) Myanmar's military junta is tightening its grip on Nawnghkio, a Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA)-held town in northern Shan State, advancing into its outskirts after months of fierce combat. Strategically located along the Mandalay–Muse trade route to China, Nawnghkio serves as a key junction linking southern and northern Shan.

On July 17, the junta declared it had recaptured Nawnghkio after nearly 11 months of heavy fighting. The town, just 40 kilometers from the prestigious military officer training academy in Pyin Oo Lwin, had fallen last summer to the TNLA and allied pro-democracy People's Defence Forces as part of a series of successful insurgent offensives.

According to state media outlet Global New Light of Myanmar, the military engaged in 566 armed clashes to retake Nawnghkio, employing both ground forces and air support. The paper published rare front-page images of troops celebrating the reported victory,

while also acknowledging operational losses. [Channel News Asia]

The TNLA has not confirmed Nawnghkio's fall but admitted that mounting military pressure had forced them to relocate their civil administration to safer areas, making governance increasingly difficult. If the junta's claim proves accurate, the loss of Nawnghkio would represent a significant setback for anti-regime forces that had made steady territorial gains in northern Shan since late 2023.

If confirmed, the fall of Nawnghkio would mark the Brotherhood Alliance's second major loss since the launch of Operation 1027 in October 2023. The alliance —comprising the TNLA, Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), and Arakan Army (AA)—had previously captured most of northern Shan, including the regional hub of Lashio. However, Lashio was retaken by the junta in April 2024, reportedly under Chinese pressure on the MNDAA.

The TNLA is facing a dual threat: relentless regime artillery and air strikes, and diplomatic pressure from China to withdraw from towns seized during earlier offensives. Online images appear to show junta troops within Nawnghkio, although TNLA fighters reportedly maintain defensive positions.

The junta has intensified military operations ahead of China-sponsored peace talks scheduled for August, aiming to regain strategic territory. On July 14, the Gote Twin Bridge—connecting Nawnghkio with Kyaukme—was blown up, further complicating logistics and mobility for resistance forces. [The Irrawaddy]

Myanmar: Junta airstrikes kill eight civilians

(nj) From July 13–14, the junta launched an air campaign against civilian targets and infrastructure in resistance-held towns in Mandalay Region, Shan State, and Karen State.

In two towns controlled by the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), Mogoke in Mandalay Region and Kyaukme in northern Shan State, junta air strikes injured seven, including two children and one woman on July 13. The following day, in Myo ward in Hsipaw, northern Shan State, which is also controlled by the TNLA, junta fighter jets dropped four 250-pound bombs. Two residents were killed, five were injured, and five houses were destroyed, according to the TNLA.

In Mawchi town, which is controlled by the Karenni Nationalities Defense Force (KNDF), five women and one man were killed on July 14, according to the Karenni State Interim Executive Council (IEC), the provisional resistance government.

Also on July 14, junta jets bombed a refugee clinic and school in Demoso Township, Karenni State, which hosts internally displaced persons. According to the IEC, no ground fighting had been reported in the area.

That same day, in Hpawttaw Village in Thabeikkyin Township, Mandalay Region and Dopin Village in Kawlin Township, Sagaing Region, ten people were injured, including a woman and child.

The death toll from junta air strikes is mounting as it continues to target towns controlled by resistance groups. According to the civilian-led National Unity Government's Ministry of Human Rights, in June 2025, the military launched 162 airstrikes, killing 90 and injuring 296 others. [The Irrawaddy]

Myanmar: Junta accused of torching villages to clear area ahead of Min Aung Hlaing visit of heritage site

(dql) More than 20,000 residents from around 30 villages in Myanmar's Nyaung-U Township in the central Mandalay Region were displaced last week after regime forces carried out arson attacks, reportedly to secure the area ahead of junta chief Min Aung Hlaing's planned visit to the nearby Bagan UNESCO Heritage Site.

Around 150 junta troops have been torching villages along the Bagan-Chauk road since July 8, forcing villagers to flee, with many now sheltering in forests or with relatives. Local resistance sources claim the attacks were aimed at instilling fear and clearing the area in advance of the high-profile visit.

The Bagan site, one of the few tourist destinations still accessible since the 2021 coup, lies only 16km away from the affected villages. [The Irrawaddy]

Myanmar: Karen resistance continues to besiege Hpasawng regime outpost

(nj) The Karen Nationalities Defense Force (KNDF) continues its offensive to take key territory along the

Myanmar–Thailand border. According to KNDF Deputy Commander Maui Pho Thaike, junta troops from Light Infantry Battalion (LIB) 135 are trapped in their outpost and rely on airdrops for supplies.

The KNDF began its offensive against LIB 135 on June 25 and captured LIB 134 on June 24. According to Maui Pho Thaike, once the outpost falls, the KNDF would completely control the stretch of land from the Myanmar–Thailand border to the edge of Bawlakhe Township, just 70 miles south of Loikaw, the Karenni State capital. The regime still maintains control over Hpasawng and Bawlakhe, but the resistance is gaining territory and now controls six towns in Karenni State.

The junta has responded by increasing its air campaign. KNDF troops claimed to have shot down a Myanmar Air Force jet on July 1 while it was carrying out airstrikes on Hpasawng. In Mawchi, in the Bawlakhe Township, ten civilians were reportedly killed by air strikes just in the first two weeks of July. According to one resident of Mawchi, the town has been deserted due to the regime's airstrikes following the KNDF takeover in January 2024. [DVB 1] [DVB 2]

Myanmar: Chin State residents who fled to India return to Rikhawdar

(nj) After fleeing across the Indian border into Mizoram, nearly all 4,000 residents of Rikhawdar in Falam Township have returned home. Tensions between the Chin National Army (CNA) and the Chin National Defense Force (CNDF) erupted on July 2, leading to a battle for the border town.

Rikhawdar had been governed by the Chin Defense Force (CDF)–Hualngoram since November 13, 2023, which has close ties to the CNA. The CNDF began setting up checkpoints in Hualngoram, causing tensions to rise between the resistance factions. Fighting broke out between the rival groups on July 2, resulting in the CNDF seizing control of the town. The CNA retaliated by launching a surprise attack on CNDF headquarters, Camp Rihli.

On July 11, the CNDF handed Rikhawdar back to the CDF–Hualngoram. According to a local official, education, healthcare, and administrative services have resumed, and reconstruction is ongoing. [DVB]

Philippines: Senate President reaffirms Vice President's impeachment trial as constitutional debate continues

(dnb) Senate President Francis "Chiz" Escudero has confirmed that the Senate will proceed with the impeachment trial of Vice President Sara Duterte, dismissing recent protests and political pressure as attempts to derail the process. Escudero's remarks follow a student-led demonstration at the Senate calling for his removal as presiding judge, amid ongoing tensions between the Duterte and Marcos camps and rising scrutiny from the Supreme Court.

The impeachment charges—initiated during the 19th Congress—center on alleged corruption and Duterte's supposed threats to assassinate President Marcos, his wife, and Speaker Martin Romualdez. While the House of Representatives has defended the legitimacy of the proceedings, stating that it complied fully with the Constitution by advancing the fourth complaint (endorsed by more than one-third of House members) and archiving the earlier three, critics continue to question both procedural steps and political motivations. The Supreme Court is currently reviewing two petitions on the matter, including one filed by Duterte herself.

Escudero acknowledged that the trial is caught in a broader institutional struggle, and emphasized that the Senate's actions must be guided by law, not political agitation. He noted that while the 19th Congress had referred the impeachment articles back to the House for constitutional clarification—causing a delay widely criticized by legal and political analysts—the incoming 20th Congress, set to convene on July 28, will not be bound by previous decisions. Instead, it must re-establish jurisdiction over the case after organizing its leadership and committees. [GMA-News] [The Inquirer 1] [The Inquirer 2] [Manila Bulletin]

Philippines: Senator allies of Former President Duterte vouch for his interim release citing health concerns

(dnb) Three Senators, who are supporters of former President Duterte has vouched for the interim release in the form of house arrest. The Senators cited health concerns for the 80-year-old former President, after the ICC rejected a previous application based on the same concerns.

The three Senators also cited as “Duterte Boys” are Ronald dela Rosa, Bong Go, and Robinhood Padilla, introduced an official resolution that would see the government pushing for the interim release of the former President citing health concerns. Even though the ICC medical assessment came back with results that Duterte’s health is completely fine and merits no interim release based on health issues, yet the Senator allies of the former President claim that his health has been deteriorating during detention. Vice President Sara Duterte, who is set to face an impeachment trial, also vouched for his father’s interim release citing health deterioration due to appetite loss, diseases, and diabetes. Before that, on July 10, former Vice-Presidential candidate, now Senator Alan Peter Cayetano also filed a resolution that would push the government to vouch for the interim release of Duterte but based on the fact that he is innocent until proven guilty, under which presumption the former President shall be granted an interim release.

On July 21, Vice President Sara Duterte reiterated calls for freeing his father from the ICC, while also accusing the court of meddling with the trial by dismissing witnesses against her father citing mental problems. The Vice President also held a “Free Duterte Now” speech at The Hague on July 19, whereby she labeled the ICC as illegitimate and accused President Marcos as being a drug addict. The Vice President seeks to undermine the current Marcos administration and the ICC’s procedures continuously. [The Manila Times]

The former President, Rodrigo Duterte is currently detained at Scheveningen Prison in the Hague and is set to face trial on charges of crimes against humanity during his bloody war on drugs that allegedly saw the extrajudicial killing of many. Rodrigo Duterte’s legal defense team has tried on several accounts to remove certain judges based on impartiality, vouched for his interim release to an agreed third country, both efforts failed upon rejection by the ICC. [GMA-News] [Philstar] [The Manila Times 1] [The Manila Times 2]

In the meantime, the defense team of Rodrigo Duterte has asked for an “urgent status conference” as the trial is set to begin on September 23. This request aims to enquire to court to study the feasibility of the current timeline for the confirmation of charges hearing in September. If the confirmation of charges hearing takes place on September 23, then judges have 60 days to decide whether the motion will proceed to trial. Duterte’s defense team cited ongoing delays such as the monthlong wait for requested essential items as well as additional documents which were provided to the defense only on July 7 along with many other requests which remain to be addressed. According to

the ICC's own practice manual, these status conferences serve to provide clarifications about the conduct of the proceedings, which has the potential to greatly influence the timeline of the Former President's trial. [The Manila Times 3]

Philippines: Human remains found as search for missing cockfighting enthusiasts widens

(dnb/ms) The Philippine government's investigation into the disappearance of over 30 cockfighting enthusiasts, or *sabungeros*, has entered a new phase as forensic tests confirmed that human remains have been recovered from Taal Lake, the alleged dumping ground for the victims.

On July 14, whistleblower Julie "Dondon" Patidongan, himself a suspect in the case, accused 18 police officers of abducting and killing *sabungeros* between 2021 and 2022. He alleged that the bodies were disposed of in the volcanic lake south of Manila, under the orders of gambling tycoon Charlie "Atong" Ang. A large-scale underwater search, involving the Philippine Coast Guard, began on July 10. Authorities have since recovered bone samples from sacks submerged in the lake; six have been confirmed as human.

Justice Secretary Jesus Crispin Remulla announced that the lake search is expected to last at least six more months. Meanwhile, the number of police officers formally summoned has increased, and pressure is mounting on law enforcement to deliver answers. Former President Rodrigo Duterte, whose former police appointees have been implicated, dismissed the claims as "preposterous." The Department of Justice is also examining properties that may have been used as holding sites for the victims prior to disposal. [ABS-CBN 1] [ABS-CBN 2] [Inquirer] [Philstar] [Rappler]

Philippines: Palace denies First Lady's links to death of businessman Paolo Tantoco

(dnb) Malacanang Palace has debunked a police report circulating that linked First Lady Marie Louise "Liza" Araneta-Marcos to the death of businessman Paolo Tantoco.

Paolo Tantoco was a Filipino-American businessman and a senior executive at Rustan's Group of Companies

and Pacific Links Golf Development, who was reported as dead on March 8, 2025. His death was subsequently reported as an accident and linked to cocaine consumption, still the case remained open and under further investigation.

The Presidential Palace stated, regarding the recently circulated police report linking the First Lady to the case, that the document is forgery and not in line with the standards of the Beverly Hills Police Department. Moreover, the newly circulated report has also been checked by the Philippine Consulate in Los Angeles with the Beverly Hills Police Department, which also confirmed traces of alteration on the document and with that rendering the involvement of the First Lady meritless.

The Presidential Palace have also stated that it has not received any arrest warrant from the International Criminal Court regarding the co-accused of former President Duterte, which includes Senator Dela Rosa, who served as the Philippine National Police Chief and allegedly acted as the architect of Rodrigo Duterte's war on drugs. The Palace also stated the should the ICC issue an arrest warrant for the co-accused they could be arrested in the Philippines.

The two cases intersect as Senator Bato stated at a press conference that the airing of the possibility of arresting him based on an ICC warrant in the Philippines is mere strategy by the Palace to divert attention away from the potential involvement of the First Lady in the Tantoco case. Senator Bato echoed the Duterte's political rhetoric claiming the ICC having no jurisdiction over the Philippines, which has been debunked already as a false political catch. Senator Bato stated that he will not participate President Marcos's State of the Nation Address, that is coming up on July 28, which contributes to and highlights the deepening political vestiges between the Marcos and Duterte families and their camps. [Manila Bulletin 1] [Manila Bulletin 2] [Manila Standard] [The Manila Times 1] [The Manila Times 2]

Philippines: Presidential Communications Office undergoes leadership reshuffle

(ms) The Presidential Communications Office (PCO) has undergone a significant internal transition following the appointment of Dave Gomez as secretary on July 15. As part of the process, Gomez requested the courtesy resignations of all political appointees within the department and its attached agencies.

The directive, formalized in a memorandum dated July 14, covered more than 40 officials, including undersecretaries, assistant secretaries, directors, and agency heads. Appointees were asked to submit their resignations by July 18 but are expected to remain in their posts unless advised otherwise.

Gomez described the move as standard practice during a transition and said it would allow him to conduct a performance audit and assess personnel alignment with the PCO's core mandate: communicating the policies and programs of the Office of the President.

Claire Castro, who had served as undersecretary since February and was a regular figure in Palace briefings, confirmed that she had submitted her resignation. Other appointees have done the same, though decisions on their status are pending.

The reshuffle comes amid a broader pattern of leadership changes across the Marcos administration, particularly in communication and policy-related agencies. The PCO has now seen five secretaries in less than three years, reflecting a notably high turnover rate that may affect the consistency of public messaging efforts.

Gomez's appointment also comes at a time when message discipline and media strategy have become increasingly important for the administration, following recent political tensions and criticism over disinformation. His stated priorities include improving internal coordination, advancing digital transformation, and maintaining press engagement.

While the current changes have been framed as administrative, the scale and timing of the resignations suggest a strategic effort to recalibrate the agency's direction heading into the second half of the president's term. The results of the performance audit are expected to clarify future adjustments. [Inquirer] [PhilStar] [The Manila Times]

Philippines: Department of Justice appeals court decision acquitting former Justice Secretary

(ms) State prosecutors have filed a motion for reconsideration to reverse the recent acquittal of former senator and Justice Secretary Leila de Lima in her second drug-related case. On July 14, the Department of Justice (DOJ) urged the Muntinlupa City Regional Trial Court to declare de Lima and her co-

accused Ronnie Dayan guilty of conspiracy to commit drug trading, arguing that the court's revised ruling lacked sufficient analysis and legal grounding.

This development follows an April 30 decision by the Court of Appeals (CA), which voided de Lima's earlier acquittal from January 2024. The appellate court ruled that the trial court had failed to "clearly and distinctly" present the factual and legal basis for its verdict. It emphasized the need for a more rigorous explanation —particularly in light of conflicting testimonies—and returned the case to the lower court with instructions to address these deficiencies. In response, the Muntinlupa court issued a new ruling on June 27 reaffirming the acquittal, citing reasonable doubt largely based on the recantation of former Bureau of Corrections chief Rafael Ragos, a key prosecution witness.

De Lima was detained in 2017 on three counts of drug-related charges that stemmed from her time as justice secretary and her alleged links to drug operations inside the national penitentiary. She has always denied the allegations, framing them as political retaliation for her outspoken criticism of then-President Rodrigo Duterte's war on drugs. Over time, two of the cases were dismissed, and in 2023 she was granted bail in the third, effectively ending her nearly seven-year detention.

Her legal team condemned the DOJ's latest motion, claiming it borders on persecution and undermines the finality of acquittals. They are considering legal action against the prosecutors involved for what they allege is prosecutorial misconduct. Rights groups have also raised alarm, arguing that the relentless pursuit of the case illustrates broader concerns about weaponized justice and the erosion of institutional safeguards for political dissenters. [ABS-CBN] [Inquirer] [Rappler] [The Manila Times]

Philippines: Population growth slows as fertility drops below replacement level

(ms) The Philippines' population has reached 112.7 million, but the pace of growth is slowing significantly, marking a demographic shift that could reshape future economic and social planning. According to the 2024 Census of Population (POPCEN), officially released by President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., the country's annual population growth rate (PGR) declined to 0.80 percent between 2020 and 2024 — nearly half the 1.63 percent recorded from 2015 to 2020.

This slowdown is driven by several factors: declining fertility, elevated pandemic-related mortality, and reduced migration. The Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) attributes the trend in part to a long-term decrease in birth rates. From a total fertility rate (TFR) of over six children per woman in the 1970s, the rate has dropped to just 1.9 in 2022 — below the replacement level of 2.1. This is a historic low for the country and follows consistent investment in family planning and women's education over the past decades.

Mortality has also contributed to the trend. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, death rates spiked across the country, affecting overall population growth. Meanwhile, international migration — traditionally a driver of demographic expansion — was heavily restricted during the pandemic and remains subdued amid global economic uncertainty.

Out of the country's 18 administrative regions, 16 registered a decline in growth rates. The Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) was the only region to record a higher PGR, reaching 3.43 percent. In contrast, the Bicol Region posted a slight population decrease, with a negative growth rate of -0.07 percent.

The regions with the largest populations remain CALABARZON (16.9 million), the National Capital Region (14 million), and Central Luzon (13 million), which together account for nearly 40 percent of the country's total population. [Philippines News Agency] [PhilStar] [Philippine Statistics Authority]

Philippines: Government projects growth despite tariff pressure and persistent inflation concerns

(dnb/ms) Finance Secretary Ralph Recto has projected that the Philippine economy will continue to grow in the second half of 2025, citing steady household and government spending as key drivers. The economy expanded by 5.4 percent in the first quarter, and officials say they expect this momentum to continue despite increasing global trade uncertainties.

While the administration maintains a positive outlook, recent developments have added pressure. A new round of tariffs imposed by the United States, under President Donald Trump's trade policies, has raised concerns about the resilience of Philippine exports and overall trade performance. The full impact of the tariffs on specific industries remains to be seen, but officials

acknowledge they may complicate the country's external economic environment.

Among the measures identified to support economic resilience is the proposed Blue Economy Bill, which the government says will promote sustainable use of marine resources and strengthen protection for fisherfolk and coastal communities. The bill is expected to be a priority item in President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s upcoming State of the Nation Address.

However, inflation remains a major concern among the public. After briefly dipping to a six-year low of 1.3 percent, the rate rose slightly to 1.4 percent. Although still relatively low, the uptick has been enough to stir anxiety among consumers already facing elevated food and fuel prices.

Vice President Sara Duterte criticized the administration's handling of trade preparations, suggesting that it failed to anticipate the impact of Trump's tariff policy. Meanwhile, economic officials have said discussions are ongoing regarding potential bilateral trade agreements or other mitigation strategies. [GMA-News] [Inquirer 1] [Inquirer 2]

Philippines: Coal power declines as LNG use expands in energy transition

(ms) The Philippines is poised to see its first annual drop in coal-fired electricity generation in 17 years, reflecting a broader shift in the country's energy strategy. This change is being driven by a significant rise in the use of liquefied natural gas (LNG), along with new investments in gas infrastructure and falling global gas prices.

While coal remains the dominant energy source, accounting for just over half of the country's power mix, its share has steadily declined in 2025. LNG, in contrast, has seen a sharp increase in use, supported by expanded gas-fired power capacity and a growing number of import terminals. Industry analysts expect this trend to continue, especially as older coal plants undergo maintenance and no new coal projects are approved under the country's current moratorium. [Reuters]

Singapore: USD 850 million allocated to three firms in first phase of stock market support program

(ms) Singapore has allocated SD 1.1 billion (USD 856 million) to three asset managers in the first phase of its SD 5 billion (USD 3.9 billion) Equity Market Development Program, the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS) announced on July 21. The selected firms—Avanda Investment Management, Fullerton Fund Management, and JP Morgan Asset Management—will begin investing immediately, with further appointments expected by the fourth quarter.

The program, first unveiled in February, aims to revitalize Singapore's stock market by improving liquidity, increasing investor participation, and drawing institutional capital—particularly into under-researched small- and mid-cap equities. MAS has received interest from over 100 global, regional, and local firms and will continue reviewing proposals in stages to accelerate deployment.

Alongside the fund allocations, MAS will inject an additional SD 50 million to enhance equity research under the GEMS scheme. New grants will support coverage of smaller and newly listed companies, digital dissemination, and analysis of private firms with a strong local presence.

The initiative is part of a broader push to restore Singapore's capital market competitiveness following years of sluggish trading activity and a thin pipeline of new listings. Complementary measures include new tax incentives for fund managers and listing companies, as well as potential legal reforms to strengthen investor recourse mechanisms.

National Development Minister and MAS deputy chairman Chee Hong Tat said the program aims not only to support equity markets but also to grow Singapore's asset management and research ecosystem over the long term. [Channel News Asia] [South China Morning Post]

Singapore: Three High Court judges appointed, one reappointed to Court of Appeal

(ms) Singapore has appointed three new High Court judges and reappointed a senior appellate judge, reinforcing the city-state's commitment to a strong, future-ready judiciary amid growing legal complexity in both domestic and international arenas.

The Prime Minister's Office confirmed on July 16 that Judicial Commissioners Alex Wong, Christopher Tan, and Kristy Tan will officially become High Court judges

on August 1. Meanwhile, Justice Steven Chong, a highly regarded authority in commercial and maritime law, will be reappointed to the Court of Appeal from September 23, following the end of his current term.

These appointments bring the Supreme Court's total to 36 judges and 24 international judges, underlining Singapore's drive to maintain legal excellence as it navigates new challenges in areas like AI, financial crime, and international arbitration.

More than symbolic, the move reflects Singapore's strategy to future-proof its judiciary as the nation positions itself as a leading legal services hub in Asia. The blend of public service and private sector expertise among the appointees also underscores the state's emphasis on versatility, depth of knowledge, and integrity in upholding the rule of law in an increasingly complex global legal environment. [AsiaOne] [Singapore Law Watch] [The Strait Times]

Singapore: Reclassification of etomidate amid rising abuse through e-vaporizers

(nl) Singapore is planning the move to list etomidate as a Class C controlled substance under the Misuse of Drugs Act (MDA), in response to growing abuse of the sedative agent through e-vaporizers. The reclassification will subject the substance to stricter regulatory oversight and harsher penalties.

Currently regulated under the Poisons Act, etomidate is commonly used in clinical settings to induce sedation. However, it has increasingly been found in vaping products known as "Kpods". Authorities report that a third of recently seized vaporizers contained etomidate, prompting the legislative shift.

Under the MDA, possession or use of a Class C drug carries a maximum sentence of 10 years' imprisonment and a fine of SGD 20,000 (USD 15,600). Trafficking offences may draw additional penalties, including caning. These measures significantly exceed those under the Poisons Act, where maximum penalties are capped at two years' jail and a SGD 10,000 (USD 7,800) fine.

Health Minister Ong Ye Kung has cautioned against the serious health risks associated with etomidate abuse, noting that several deaths have been linked to its use. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Health and the Health Sciences Authority (HSA) observed that in 2024, violations crossed the 3,000 mark, and by mid-2025,

the figure had already climbed past 2,500. [The Straits Times 1] [The Straits Times 2]

Singapore: Non-oil exports jump 13 percent in June, but tariff risks cloud outlook

(ms) Singapore's non-oil domestic exports (NODX) rose 13 percent year-on-year in June 2025, rebounding sharply from a 3.9 percent decline in May and outperforming analysts' expectations of 5 percent growth. The increase was driven by strong shipments of both electronics and non-electronics, including personal computers, integrated circuits, and non-monetary gold.

Electronics exports grew 8 percent, led by a 53.8 percent jump in PC shipments and a 17.5 percent rise in integrated circuits. Non-electronics exports expanded 14.5 percent, with non-monetary gold surging 211.9 percent and specialized machinery up 31.4 percent. Exports to markets such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, and South Korea increased, while shipments to the United States, Japan, and Indonesia declined.

Enterprise Singapore noted a 5.2 percent rise in NODX over the first half of 2025 but warned that the outlook remains uncertain due to potential US tariffs. The strong June figures are widely attributed to front-loading of orders ahead of anticipated tariff hikes by the US. [Reuters] [The Strait Times]

Singapore: USD 150 million aviation workforce fund as sector prepares for future shifts

(nl) Singapore is setting aside SGD 200 million (USD 156 million) to shore up the aviation sector's talent pipeline, as part of broader efforts to future-proof its role as a global air hub.

The OneAviation Manpower Fund, which will be established by the Civil Aviation Authority of Singapore (CAAS), will support initiatives aimed at attracting, training, and retaining aviation professionals. The scheme will be developed in partnership with unions, aviation firms, and education providers to meet sector-specific workforce needs. The fund is part of a larger SGD 1 billion (USD 780,000) commitment announced earlier this year to strengthen the air hub over the next five years.

Alongside the funding, CAAS and Workforce Singapore released the aviation sector's first jobs transformation report — a comprehensive study mapping out emerging trends in the said sector. The report draws input from over 200 companies and offers targeted recommendations for workforce development. [Channel NewsAsia] [Civil Aviation Authority of Singapore]

Singapore: Vouchers rolls out to Singapore citizens aged 21 to 59

(nl) From July 22, Singaporeans aged between 21 and 59 will be able to claim their SG60 vouchers, part of a nationwide initiative to mark the country's 60th year of independence.

Eligible citizens can redeem SGD 600 (USD 468) worth of digital vouchers through the nation's official portal. These can be used at over 23,000 hawkers and heartland merchants, as well as at major supermarket chains across some 400 outlets.

The SG60 scheme, first introduced in Budget 2025 by Prime Minister Lawrence Wong, is estimated to cost the state SGD 2.02 billion (USD 1.58 billion). According to the government, the initiative is intended to recognize Singaporeans' contributions to the country's development.

Older citizens began receiving their higher-tier vouchers earlier this month, with more than 915,000 seniors — roughly 83 percent of those aged 60 and above — having already claimed their SGD 800 (USD 624) allotment.

The vouchers follow the same framework as CDC vouchers, with half allocated for supermarket use and the other half for spending at small businesses and hawker stalls. [The Straits TImes] [Ministry of Finance, Singapore]

Thailand: Legal and political threats mount against ruling Pheu Thai-led government

(lm/msz) Thailand's ruling Pheu Thai-led coalition is grappling with escalating legal and political threats, triggered by the suspension of Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra and intensified by the growing visibility—and legal vulnerability—of her father and

former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, the coalition's de facto power center. The resulting power vacuum and public scrutiny have exposed the government to challenges on multiple fronts, from constitutional litigation to parliamentary instability.

The latest crisis was set in motion when the Constitutional Court suspended Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra pending review of a leaked phone call with Cambodian strongman and incumbent Senate President Hun Sen. The Court is examining whether the conversation breached national security provisions. Should the Court rule against Paetongtarn, Pheu Thai intends to nominate its final remaining prime ministerial candidate, Chaikasem Nitisiri, a senior party figure and former justice minister. His nomination is expected to receive coalition backing, especially if he moderates Pheu Thai's position on reforming Section 112 of the Criminal Code, Thailand's royal defamation law.

In this context, Thaksin Shinawatra—widely regarded as the party's de facto leader—has stepped more visibly into the political spotlight. The renewed public role is widely seen as an attempt to stabilize the party following its declining popularity—especially in northeastern strongholds—and the recent departure of coalition partner Bhumjaithai, until its exit the second-largest party in the coalition. In a calculated bid to reassure conservative forces, Thaksin emphasized the party's rejection of any changes to Section 112 of the Criminal Code (lese majeste law), while signaling openness to future collaboration with Bhumjaithai, despite past rifts. [Bangkok Post 1]

However, Thaksin's increasing public presence has triggered renewed legal scrutiny. Critics have pointed to two separate incidents as possible violations of Section 29 of the Organic Act on Political Parties, which prohibits external actors from directing party affairs. The first concerns a July 2025 policy meeting at the prime minister's official residence, where Thaksin was seen participating in a discussion on U.S. trade tariffs. The second relates to an alleged gathering at his residence in August 2024, shortly after the Constitutional Court removed former Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin, Paetongtarn's predecessor. Coalition leaders reportedly convened at Thaksin's house to discuss succession plans. Both events are now the subject of petitions submitted to the Election Commission, which is assessing whether Thaksin's role amounted to unlawful political interference. If a violation of Section 29 is confirmed, Pheu Thai and several of its coalition allies could face party dissolution. [Bangkok Post 2] [Bangkok Post 3]

Against this backdrop, it was particularly notable that Thaksin was expected to attend a high-profile coalition dinner on July 22, alongside his daughter, who now serves as Culture Minister. Government whip Wisut Chainaroon described the dinner as a gesture of unity rather than an assertion of control, while acting Prime Minister Phumtham Wechayachai framed it as routine coalition coordination. Still, the optics of Thaksin's attendance—amid ongoing investigations into his political influence—underscore the growing tension around his role. [Bangkok Post 4]

Still, Thaksin's legal vulnerabilities extend beyond questions of party interference. Having returned to Thailand in 2023 after 15 years in self-imposed exile, he was sentenced to eight years in prison for corruption, later reduced to one year by royal pardon. He never spent a night in prison, instead serving six months in a VIP hospital ward. That stay is now under investigation: medical testimony has suggested he was stable enough to be returned to a correctional facility shortly after admission. Further hearings on the matter are scheduled for July 25. [Bangkok Post 5]

Simultaneously, Thaksin is awaiting a verdict in a royal defamation case stemming from a 2015 interview with South Korean media. The closed-door trial took place on July 17, and a ruling is expected on August 22. A conviction under Section 112 of the Criminal Code could carry a sentence of up to 15 years in prison. [Bangkok Post 6]

Beyond these personal legal risks, the government is also facing a major constitutional challenge. A complaint has been filed under Section 144 of the 2017 Constitution against the Cabinet's decision to reallocate THB 35 billion (USD 960 million) in state enterprise investment funds to finance its digital wallet scheme. Section 144 bars certain changes to budgetary allocations by lawmakers or cabinet ministers. The National Anti-Corruption Commission is currently reviewing the complaint. Should the Constitutional Court find the reallocation unconstitutional, it could lead to the disqualification of over 500 government officials and legislators—including cabinet members—potentially triggering the collapse of the Pheu Thai-led government. [Bangkok Post 7]

Parliamentary instability adds to the uncertainty. The coalition holds a razor-thin majority of about ten seats. On July 17, a House session collapsed after the opposition called for a quorum check, exposing the government's internal coordination problems. Chief government whip Wisut Chainaroon urged MPs and ministers to remain present, warning that repeated

absences could derail legislative proceedings. [Bangkok Post 8]

Thailand: 229 targeted in Senate vote-rigging investigation, ex-coalition party under scrutiny

(acs/lm) Thailand's Department of Special Investigation (DSI) and the Election Commission (EC) are moving forward with a sweeping investigation into alleged vote-rigging during the 2024 Senate elections, with 229 individuals now facing potential charges. The suspects include 138 sitting senators and 91 others, among them executive members and affiliates of the Bhumjaithai Party (BJT), a key political force that until recently was part of the government coalition.

Investigators allege that the accused participated in schemes designed to manipulate the internal voting process that determines Senate appointments. Specifically, some individuals are believed to have registered as candidates not with the intent to win, but to support preselected individuals—actions said to violate Section 113 of the Constitution, which mandates senatorial independence from political party influence.

The DSI indicated that roughly ten suspects were initially identified based on evidence of collusion and potential money laundering, but the scope of the investigation expanded significantly after joint review with the EC. The investigative panel found grounds to assert that many Senate winners were elected through dishonest means. One focus of concern was the "blue bloc" of senators linked to Bhumjaithai, particularly in the northeastern province of Buri Ram, where 14 senators—the highest number from any province—were elected. Buri Ram is the home base of Newin Chidchob, a political powerbroker with close ties to Bhumjaithai, though he holds no formal party position.

The EC has already dismissed a separate complaint filed in Amnat Charoen province regarding 206 Senate candidates, citing a lack of evidence. However, the broader national case continues to develop. Should the EC validate the findings, it could lead to constitutional consequences, including a petition to dissolve Bhumjaithai.

Bhumjaithai leader Anutin Charnvirakul has denied any party involvement in election manipulation. Meanwhile, the EC is preparing to review the case file and assign further procedural analysis to a deputy secretary-general, due to a potential conflict of interest

involving current EC secretary-general Sawaeng Boonmee, who oversaw the 2024 poll. [Bangkok Post 1] [Bangkok Post 2]

Amid this backdrop, acting Prime Minister and Interior Minister Phumtham Wechayachai has dismissed concerns over his own involvement, after the Constitutional Court requested that he and Justice Minister Tawee Sodsong submit witness lists within 15 days. The court is reviewing a petition from 92 senators alleging that the two ministers – both political heavyweights within the Pheu Thai Party – interfered in the vote-rigging probe by recommending that the DSI investigate—a role some claim is reserved exclusively for the EC. Phumtham said he merely chaired a DSI board meeting during which opinions were divided, and that he called for a one-week pause to assess the matter. He maintains that he acted within his responsibilities and is prepared to cooperate with the legal process. [Bangkok Post 3]

Thailand: Interior Ministry becomes proxy battlefield in escalating Pheu Thai–Bhumjaithai conflict

(lm) Tensions between Thailand's ruling Pheu Thai Party and the Bhumjaithai Party, until its recent exit the second-largest party in the coalition government, have erupted into a multi-front conflict centered around the Interior Ministry—long a seat of bureaucratic influence and formerly held by Bhumjaithai's leader, Anutin Charnvirakul. Now overseen by acting prime minister Phumtham Wechayachai, the ministry has become the principal arena in what amounts to a proxy war over state resources, legal enforcement, and political legacy.

One key front involves accusations that Anutin's previous administration funneled disproportionate amounts of stimulus funds to Bhumjaithai strongholds —most notably Buri Ram and Surin—under Thailand's THB 157 billion (USD 4.36 billion) local economic recovery program. Phumtham claims some local administrative organizations (LAOs) received as much as THB 700 million (USD 19.4 million), while others received as little as THB 1–3 million (USD 28,000–84,000). He also raised concerns over inconsistencies in budget documentation. Anutin and Bhumjaithai officials reject these claims, arguing that the Interior Ministry only supervises tambon-level bodies and that actual disbursements were limited to central government agencies.

In response to public scrutiny, the Department of Local Administration (DLA) issued a detailed clarification, asserting that the allocation process was impartial and based on standardized criteria such as project readiness and technical feasibility. The DLA attributed disparities to regional variations in proposal quality and familiarity with the new digital submission system. [Bangkok Post 1] [Bangkok Post 2]

Simultaneously, Phumtham has intensified pressure on the Department of Lands (DoL) – a key department under the interior ministry – for failing to enforce a 2021 Supreme Court ruling in the high-profile Khao Kradong land dispute in Buri Ram. The court had ordered the revocation of nearly 900 title deeds—covering over 5,000 rai (approximately 8.13 square kilometers)—in favor of the State Railway of Thailand. Among the contested deeds are 20 covering 288 rai (approximately 0.46 square kilometers) reportedly linked to the Chidchob family, a political dynasty central to BJT's regional power. Civic groups and the national railway union have petitioned Phumtham to enforce the ruling. He warned that the DoL director-general may face transfer if he fails to justify the inaction.

Anutin, who led the ministry at the time the dispute escalated, has denied political interference and defended the legality of all administrative decisions. He also drew parallels to the earlier Alpine land scandal involving the family of suspended prime minister and Culture Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra, which Bhumjaithai had publicly challenged earlier this year. [Bangkok Post 3] [Bangkok Post 4]

A third controversy has further sharpened focus on the intersection of political influence and land governance. The Department of Special Investigation (DSI) is now probing the alleged illegal conversion of a public road into a private airstrip within a resort complex in Nakhon Ratchasima Province linked to Anutin's family. The 1-kilometer runway reportedly overlaps a 450-meter stretch of public land and is part of a resort operated by a firm in which Anutin's sister holds a stake. Critics cite a lack of construction permits since 2007 and irregularities in title deed issuance, as the land is part of a government-managed self-help settlement zone rather than local administrative jurisdiction.

Resort lawyers claim the land is privately held, less than ten rai (approximately 0.016 square kilometers), and legally developed with authorization from the Civil Aviation Authority of Thailand. They describe the allegations as politically motivated. However, historical aerial images and public use records appear to

contradict these assertions. The DSI is coordinating with five government agencies to examine whether public assets were misappropriated or if deeds were fraudulently issued, referencing several laws including the Air Navigation Act and Forestry Act. [Bangkok Post 5] [Bangkok Post 6]

Thailand: Government concedes charter reform unlikely within term while Parliament affirms Referendum Bill

(lm) Thailand's government has acknowledged that efforts to amend the 2017 Constitution are unlikely to be completed within its remaining two-year term. Prime Minister's Office Minister Chousak Sirinil from the ruling Pheu Thai Party said delays stem largely from unresolved legal uncertainty over the number of referendums required for a full charter rewrite. The Constitutional Court has not yet ruled on this latest question, though in a 2021 ruling it held that at least one referendum is mandatory for any comprehensive constitutional rewrite.

Chousak emphasized that the process remains complex and time-consuming. Even under a best-case scenario—including two referendums, at least six months of legislative scrutiny, and the formation of a Constitution Drafting Assembly (CDA)—the timeline would exceed the current government's mandate. He also noted that any amendment requires approval from at least one-third of the Senate, whose members were appointed under military rule and are widely seen as resistant to structural reform.

The government's explanation came in response to questions in parliament over the lack of progress, even though both the Pheu Thai Party and the main opposition People's Party (PP) had submitted charter amendment proposals as early as February. Chousak said the cabinet had refrained from forwarding its own bill to avoid legal complications pending a court ruling on referendum requirements.

Despite these delays, parliament recently made a procedural breakthrough. On July 19, the House of Representatives overwhelmingly reaffirmed its original version of the Referendum Bill, with 375 votes in favor and none against, bypassing Senate-proposed amendments after the constitutionally mandated 180-day suspension period expired. The bill, which had originally entered the legislative process in late December 2023, will now proceed to royal assent.

At the heart of the deadlock was a dispute over the required threshold for future referendums. The Senate favored a double-majority requirement—demanding a majority of both eligible voters and ballots cast—while the House backed a simpler majority of ballots cast. Critics viewed the Senate's version as a deliberate obstacle to amending the military-backed charter. Under Section 137(3) of the Constitution, the House was entitled to reaffirm its version without further Senate input once the holding period lapsed.

While the reapproved version enjoyed broad support, the Bhumjaithai Party—until recently the second-largest force in the ruling coalition—voiced reservations over its blanket applicability, particularly to issues involving national security. [Bangkok Post 1] [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: Parliament advances selective amnesty bills, reigniting debate over royal defamation exclusion

(lm/msz) Thailand's House of Representatives has approved three amnesty bills in their first reading, while rejecting two broader proposals submitted by the main opposition People's Party (PP) and civil society groups. The legislative developments have reopened a national debate over whether Thailand's strict lese majeste law, which criminalizes royal defamation under Section 112 of the Criminal Code, should be included in any reconciliation framework.

The three approved bills, collectively known as the "Promote Peaceful Society Bill," were submitted by MPs from the ruling United Thai Nation (UTN) Party, the Klatham Party, and the Bhumjaithai Party (BJT). Although originating from different factions, the three share the common feature of explicitly excluding any amnesty for those convicted under Section 112. A 32-member parliamentary committee will now consolidate these drafts, using the UTN version as the baseline for further deliberation.

By contrast, the two rejected proposals—the "Amnesty for Political Offences Bill" from the PP and the "People's Amnesty Bill" supported by over 36,000 citizens—did not exclude Section 112 charges, leading many MPs to reject them as too controversial. Drafters argued that this interpretation was politically motivated and inaccurate, but opposition parties were unable to secure enough support to move the proposals forward.

Criticism of the approved bills has focused on their perceived selectivity. According to critics, the exclusion of lèse-majesté offenses means the bills would disproportionately benefit members of the conservative and royalist People's Democratic Reform Committee (PDRC), whose protests against then-Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra precipitated the 2014 military coup. The PDRC's activities—typically prosecuted under protest-related laws—would fall within the scope of the proposed amnesty.

In contrast, many members of the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD), or Red Shirt movement, as well as participants in the youth-led protests of 2020–2021, face charges under Section 112 and would not qualify for clemency under the current drafts. The Red Shirt movement emerged in response to the 2006 coup against former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, widely seen as the de facto leader of the ruling Pheu Thai Party. The more recent wave of youth protests, however, pushed beyond the traditional Red–Yellow divide by directly challenging the monarchy's political role—an unprecedented shift that led to a surge in lèse-majesté cases.

Against this backdrop, the ruling Pheu Thai Party has come under fire for not supporting the broader amnesty bills. While six Red Shirt-aligned Pheu Thai MPs did vote in favor of the rejected proposals, party leadership argued that it must balance internal factions and coalition sensitivities. PP leader Natthaphong Ruengpanyawut dismissed this justification as inadequate, calling it a political evasion. In response to criticism, Pheu Thai has stated that it has not abandoned young people or others charged under Section 112—though it has not indicated how it intends to address their legal predicament in the absence of amnesty. [Bangkok Post 1] [Bangkok Post 2] [The Nation]

Thailand: Senate presses ahead with high-level institutional appointments despite legal cloud

(lm) Thailand's parliamentary upper house, the Senate, is proceeding with a series of high-level institutional appointments despite unresolved investigations into the legitimacy of many of its members, prompting criticism over potential conflicts of interest and damage to public trust.

On July 15, the Senate confirmed Ittiporn Kaewthip as Thailand's next attorney-general. Ittiporn, currently the most senior deputy attorney-general, is set to succeed

Phairach Pornsomboonsiri on October 1. Approved with 172 votes in a closed-door session, Ittiporn had earlier received unanimous support from the Public Prosecutors Commission. A veteran prosecutor since 1987, he previously served as spokesperson for the Office of the Attorney-General and chaired a working group on guidelines for enforcing Thailand's lese-majesté law (Section 112 of the Criminal Code), which criminalizes defamation of the monarchy. [Bangkok Post 1]

Separately, on July 22, the Senate rejected a motion to delay approval votes for nominees to the Constitutional Court and Election Commission (EC), choosing instead to proceed despite an ongoing legal probe into vote-rigging in the 2024 Senate election. The motion was defeated 130–7, with 13 abstentions.

More than 200 senators, particularly from the so-called "blue bloc"—a faction reportedly aligned with the Bhumjaithai Party, which until its recent exit was the second-largest party in the ruling coalition—are under investigation by the Election Commission and Department of Special Investigation. Critics argue that allowing these senators to appoint officials who could later oversee or rule on their cases undermines institutional legitimacy.

A senator critical of the selection process, aligned with reformist and transparency-focused circles, warned that proceeding with appointments under these conditions is ethically problematic and could further erode public confidence in independent oversight bodies. She emphasized that current officeholders can remain temporarily and likened the situation to defendants selecting their own judges.

In contrast, a senator more closely aligned with conservative establishment interests defended the Senate's actions as constitutionally mandated, cautioning that delays could stall the functioning of vital institutions like the Constitutional Court or EC. He acknowledged public concern but insisted that the Senate must fulfill its legal responsibilities. [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: House Secretariat faces USD 5.1 million budget cut amid court review of misuse allegations

(msz) Thailand's House Secretariat—a body that provides administrative and logistical support to the lower house of parliament—will see its 2026 budget reduced by THB 178 million (USD 5.1 million) following

concerns over potential misuse of funds. The decision by a special House committee comes after the Constitutional Court accepted a petition against House Speaker Pichet Chuamuangphan, a lawmaker from the ruling Pheu Thai Party, over alleged violations of Section 144 of the constitution.

The allegations center on three seminar projects under the Democratic Development Promotion Project, which were reportedly tailored to benefit Pichet's home province of Chiang Rai and later redirected. Section 144 prohibits lawmakers from altering the budget bill in ways that result in the direct or indirect misuse of public funds.

To preempt legal complications, the House Secretary-General withdrew the funding requests for the disputed items. The committee then voted to approve the budget cut, though some lawmakers warned that this move could undermine the Constitutional Court's ability to issue a definitive ruling. The court is expected to deliver its decision on August 1, after hearing witness testimony. It declined to suspend Pichet from his position, stating that the matter remains under review. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Anti-corruption watchdog calls for audit of idle state buildings

(lm) The Anti-Corruption Organisation of Thailand (ACT), an anti-corruption watchdog, has called on the government to urgently audit abandoned and incomplete state-funded buildings, warning that financial losses from mismanaged public construction could exceed THB 100 billion (approximately USD 2.8 billion). The organization urged the appointment of a lead agency to inventory such properties nationwide and to establish long-term oversight mechanisms.

ACT estimates that numerous government-funded facilities—including child development centers, tourism infrastructure, and water treatment systems—remain idle due to poor inter-agency coordination and a lack of clear legal responsibility. In Trang Province alone, abandoned buildings are valued at THB 2.8 billion (USD 76 million), with extrapolated national losses projected to exceed THB 100 billion. Notable examples include the unfinished THB 2.64 billion (USD 71 million) headquarters of the National Broadcasting and Telecommunications Commission (NBTC) in Bangkok and an abandoned THB 1.4 billion (USD 37.8 million) conch aquarium in Songkhla, left incomplete for over a decade. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Former party aide urges anti-graft probe into opposition MP over cash transfer

(lm) A former aide to the leader of Thailand's third largest opposition party has filed a corruption complaint with the National Anti-Corruption Commission (NACC) against a sitting Member of Parliament. The MP, Sutham Jaritngam, represents Nakhon Si Thammarat and is affiliated with the Palang Pracharath Party—a military establishment-affiliated party that formerly led the government during General Prayut Chan-o-cha's premiership but is now in opposition.

The complainant, Netdao Watchainanwong, a former public relations assistant to PPRP leader Prawit Wongsuwon, alleges that Sutham unlawfully accepted a cash transfer of THB 120,000 (approximately USD 3,360) from her personal account. She submitted bank transfer documentation and chat records as evidence, calling on the NACC to investigate whether the transaction violated Thailand's anti-corruption law, which prohibits MPs from receiving gifts or monetary transfers exceeding THB 3,000 (USD 84), except under specific circumstances.

Netdao also stated that she is preparing a separate complaint involving alleged bribery linked to a shop in a national park, which she claims implicates a former cabinet minister and the minister's relatives. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Senator faces court action for falsely using 'Professor' title

(lm) Thailand's Election Commission (EC) has ruled that Senator Keskamol Pleansamai falsely used the title "Professor" during her candidacy, a violation that carries a penalty of up to 10 years in prison and a 20-year ban from future elections. The ruling did not directly address her claim of holding doctoral degrees.

Keskamol, a physician, was elected to the Senate in June 2024 through a cross-professional selection process, receiving the highest votes among freelance professionals. She claimed doctoral degrees in Business Administration and Political Science from California University FCE, a U.S.-based institution not accredited by U.S. authorities and whose qualifications are not recognized in Thailand. Investigations found

that the diplomas she submitted did not meet the standards for a doctoral degree.

The petitioner burged the EC to forward the case to the Election Division of the Supreme Court within the seven-day legal window. If the court accepts the petition, Keskamol will be suspended pending a final ruling. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Monastic scandal triggers urgent legal and institutional reform efforts

(lm) Thailand's top religious and government authorities have launched sweeping reform efforts in response to a growing scandal involving senior monks and a woman identified as Wilawan "Sika Golf" Emsawat. The Supreme Patriarch has called for an urgent overhaul of the country's monastic governance, urging amendments to the Sangha Act of 1962 to strengthen discipline and transparency in the clergy. Acting Prime Minister Phumtham Wechayachai announced that legal revisions are being fast-tracked in coordination with the Sangha Supreme Council and multiple government bodies. A draft is expected within two weeks. [Bangkok Post 1]

The calls for reform follow explosive revelations about "Sika Golf," a 35-year-old woman accused of engaging in sexual relationships with senior monks, blackmailing them, and laundering temple funds. She was arrested on July 16 and is under investigation for multiple offenses, including embezzlement and fraud. Police discovered that over the past three years, her bank accounts received about THB 385 million (approximately USD 10.7 million), most of which was reportedly lost to online gambling. Authorities also uncovered more than 80,000 explicit images and videos involving senior monks stored on her phones.

The Central Investigation Bureau (CIB) has since launched a broad crackdown on clerical misconduct. Police will conduct background checks on all of Thailand's roughly 300,000 monks and have requested identity data from the National Office of Buddhism (NOB). Old cases dismissed by the NOB are also being reopened, and cooperation between the police and NOB is reportedly being intensified following past delays and inaction. [Bangkok Post 2]

The scandal intensified following the unexplained disappearance of the abbot of Wat Tri Thotsathep, a prominent royal temple in Bangkok with deep historical ties to the Thai monarchy and religious

establishment. Investigators believe the abbot may have been targeted in a blackmail attempt by Wilawan. In response, the Central Investigation Bureau (CIB) has launched a nationwide crackdown. Police will conduct background checks on all of Thailand's approximately 300,000 monks and have requested identity data from the National Office of Buddhism (NOB). Dismissed cases will be reopened, and past delays in enforcement—partly attributed to insufficient coordination with the NOB—are now being addressed under tighter oversight.

The opposition People's Party is also drafting its own version of the Sangha Act, proposing reforms to ensure greater financial transparency. These include mandatory electronic donation systems for contributions over THB 100,000 (approx. USD 2,800), digital accounting, and strict penalties for misconduct involving monks. [Bangkok Post 3]

Thailand: Cannabis advocacy group warns of monopolization under new medical-use rules

(lm) A pro-cannabis advocacy network has urged Thailand's Ministry of Public Health to scrap a draft regulation that would restrict cannabis use exclusively to medical purposes, warning it risks monopolizing the industry in favor of large-scale investors and pushing out over 18,000 small shops currently in operation. The draft regulation, expected to take effect in November, requires all cannabis products to meet Good Agricultural and Collection Practices (GACP) standards and pharmaceutical-grade specifications.

The group held a protest on July 17 and called for the regulation to be revoked in favor of their alternative policy proposal, which includes establishing a subcommittee to ensure equitable cannabis policymaking. They argue that the new requirements—such as mandatory laboratory testing and strict thresholds for heavy metals, pesticides, and THC/CBD content—would raise costs and effectively bar small farmers and entrepreneurs from the market.

If the Ministry does not respond by July 28, the group plans to file a complaint with the National Anti-Corruption Commission over alleged irregularities in the licensing process, and is preparing for a larger protest in August. They also demanded the resignation of Public Health Minister Somsak Thepsuthin, accusing him of favoring corporate interests.

In response, the Department of Thai Traditional and Alternative Medicine stated it will begin strict inspections of cannabis shops to ensure compliance. While acknowledging the higher cost of pharmaceutical-grade cannabis—approximately THB 10,000 (USD 290) per kilogram—officials insist it is necessary for consumer safety and medical efficacy. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Civil society urges government to enact legal work for refugees

(acs) A civil society group in Thailand has called on the government to grant Myanmar refugees in border shelters the legal right to work. The request comes amid the withdrawal of international aid, with major donors like the United States halting support for key humanitarian agencies such as The Border Consortium (TBC) and the International Rescue Committee (IRC). The move threatens the livelihoods of over 100,000 refugees who reside in nine camps along the Thailand-Myanmar border. Many of these refugees were born and raised in Thailand, and activists argue that they should be allowed to take jobs locally without complex procedures. The network suggests implementing Thai language classes in the camps and simplifying the job application process, asserting that refugees could support the Thai economy by legally working.

The issue was discussed in a meeting of the House Committee on National Security, where officials from several ministries attended. The National Security Council (NSC), which advises the Thai government on defense and security issues, announced it would seek government support to ensure basic needs like food, water, and gas for the refugees starting this month. They also plan to explore options to allow refugees to work outside the camps legally. [Bangkok Post]

The plight of Myanmar refugees has worsened with the abrupt funding cuts, which endanger vital humanitarian services like food assistance and healthcare. The Border Consortium, which has been providing food and shelter for refugees since the 1980s, is set to end its U.S.-funded food voucher program by July 31, leaving tens of thousands without guaranteed access to food. Additionally, IRC's health clinics in the camps are shutting down due to funding cuts, leaving refugees without essential medical care, including maternal health services. [ASEAN Parliamentarians For Human Rights]

Thailand: Economic stimulus and policy proposals confront fiscal shortfall and weak growth outlook

(lm/bk) On July 22, the Cabinet approved a THB 151 billion (USD 4.38 billion) stimulus package aimed at boosting employment, infrastructure, and tourism in response to global economic volatility. The initiative targets the creation of 7.4 million jobs and a 0.4 percent GDP boost, with a strong emphasis on narrowing regional disparities.

Key allocations include THB 85 billion (USD 2.46 billion) for 34 water and transport infrastructure projects. These efforts aim to improve flood resilience across 191,000 rai (approximately 305 square kilometers) and support nearly 900,000 households. Roadworks will add 417 kilometers of new routes and repair 1,689 others, supporting over 285,000 jobs.

Tourism will receive THB 10.05 billion (USD 292 million) for attraction upgrades and safety improvements, including CCTV installations. Authorities anticipate this will attract 2.76 million more tourists and generate THB 55 billion (USD 1.59 billion) in value. Additional funds will support export resilience, community development, and a THB 10 billion (USD 292 million) loan scheme for small and medium-sized enterprises affected by U.S. tariffs. Disbursement of funds remains subject to agency verification. [The Nation]

However, these measures are being implemented against a deteriorating fiscal backdrop. The Ministry of Finance warns that Thailand may miss its FY2025 revenue target of THB 2.88 trillion (USD 83.5 billion), with net revenue collections for the first eight months (October 2024–May 2025) coming in at THB 1.7 trillion (USD 49.3 billion)—THB 12.7 billion (USD 368 million) below target. Though this figure is 1.7 percent higher than the same period last year, weaker-than-expected growth has dimmed fiscal prospects.

Initially projected to grow by 4 to 5 percent, Thailand's economy is now forecast to expand by only 1.6 to 2.6 percent, according to the Fiscal Policy Office, while the National Economic and Social Development Council (NESDC) estimates just 1.8 percent—even after factoring in the government's stimulus measures. The NESDC also cautioned that the third quarter may reveal clearer signs of contraction due to slowing exports and subdued private investment. Although first-quarter exports surged 12.3 percent from pre-tariff stocking, a second-half decline is expected.

The Revenue Department has thus far collected 0.6 percent less than targeted, and upcoming mid-year

corporate tax filings will be crucial in determining whether major listed companies—critical for corporate income tax—can close the gap. If revenue shortfalls persist, the government plans to rely on treasury reserves, currently valued at THB 338 billion (USD 9.8 billion). [Bangkok Post 1]

Against this backdrop, former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra—widely viewed as the Pheu Thai Party's de facto leader—has reemerged as a prominent voice proposing additional measures to stimulate growth. At a recent policy conference in Bangkok, Thaksin outlined a controversial "Golden Visa" scheme that would allow wealthy foreigners to obtain long-term residence and, for the first time, freehold land ownership rights in Thailand. He claimed the plan could attract one million foreigners each contributing USD 1 million, generating THB 600 billion (USD 16.5 billion) in state revenue and bolstering real estate and consumption.

While such promises evoke Thaksin's earlier policies—such as the Elite Visa introduced during his premiership in 2003—his latest land ownership plan has drawn skepticism from both domestic critics and international analysts. Observers note that Thailand's constitution and land laws currently prohibit foreign freehold land ownership outside narrow exceptions. Additionally, details remain vague on whether visa holders could purchase unrestricted land or only off-plan developments in designated areas. [Pattaya Mail]

Thaksin also urged Airports of Thailand (AOT) to increase passenger service charges by up to THB 300 (USD 9), a roughly 40 percent hike. He estimated this would yield THB 40 billion (USD 1.23 billion) in annual revenue to upgrade AOT's six airports and support Thailand's ambition to become a regional aviation hub. He envisions AOT taking a lead role in logistics, aircraft maintenance, and infrastructure connectivity.

His proposals come as Thailand faces significant headwinds. The economy has grown at less than 2 percent annually over the past decade, and 2025 forecasts remain subdued at 1.3 to 2.3 percent. Challenges include high household debt, softening exports, and lower-than-expected Chinese tourist arrivals. The Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) recently downgraded its 2025 foreign arrivals target from 40 million to 35 million, noting that only 2.3 million Chinese visitors arrived in the first half of the year—down from 3.4 million a year earlier. [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: Cabinet confirms new central bank chief who favors deeper rate cuts to revive economy

(lm) Thailand's cabinet has appointed Vitai Ratanakorn, the current president of the Government Savings Bank, as the new governor of the Bank of Thailand (BoT). His appointment is expected to mark a significant shift in the central bank's approach, with Vitai being viewed as a pro-growth candidate. He has advocated for deeper and faster interest rate cuts to stimulate the economy, arguing that the central bank must ensure that these cuts are passed on effectively to commercial lending rates. Vitai's nomination has been supported by key figures such as Finance Minister Pichai Chunhavajira and former Prime Minister Srettha Thavisin, who are aligned with the government's desire for a more active role in using monetary policy to address Thailand's sluggish economy.

Vitai's leadership is seen as a response to the economic challenges Thailand faces, including high household debt, global trade disruptions, and slow economic growth. He has emphasized the importance of coordination between fiscal and monetary authorities to address these issues, particularly in light of Thailand's struggle with weak consumption and rising debt. While Vitai's close ties to the government have sparked some debate, he has defended his independence and expressed confidence in his ability to make decisions in the best interest of the country.

His appointment comes at a time when the BoT is under pressure to support economic growth. Despite a series of rate cuts, Thailand's economy continues to face challenges, including declining tourist arrivals and rising tariffs on exports. Vitai's first task as governor will be to guide the BoT through these challenges, with analysts expecting a continued dovish stance and additional rate cuts in the near future. [Bangkok Post 1] [Bangkok Post 2]

Thailand: Government unveils soft loan package and tariff negotiations to counter U.S. trade pressure

(lm) In response to rising economic pressure from renewed U.S. protectionist measures under President Donald Trump, Thailand's government has announced a THB 200 billion (approximately USD 5.5 billion) soft loan package to support local businesses, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), affected by anticipated tariff hikes.

Finance Minister Pichai Chunhavajira stated that the loans, to be administered by the state-owned Government Savings Bank (GSB), will carry an ultra-low interest rate of 0.01 percent. The government will subsidize the difference between this rate and the GSB's cost of funds to help businesses manage liquidity and inventory costs during the adjustment period. Large firms are expected to receive support from commercial banks, with government assistance available if bank capacity proves insufficient.

The move is part of a broader response strategy that also includes ongoing trade negotiations with the U.S., where Washington is expected to increase local content requirements for goods exported into the American market from 40 percent to potentially 60–80 percent. Minister Pichai acknowledged that Thai exporters will need to recalibrate sourcing strategies, as U.S. trade policy increasingly favors domestic and allied-origin components.

Thailand, which currently sends 18 percent of its exports to the U.S., is also pushing to secure reciprocal benefits. In initial rounds of negotiations, Thailand offered to eliminate tariffs on up to 90 percent of U.S. imports and reduce non-tariff barriers. U.S. products not currently imported would also receive 0 percent tariff access in cases where Thailand has unmet demand or domestic supply constraints — with automobiles cited as one sector likely to benefit.

A final agreement, once reached, must be approved by Thailand's House of Representatives. The trade imbalance remains a key factor in talks, with the U.S. consistently running a USD 30 billion trade deficit with Thailand — a third of which comprises electronics, including components manufactured by U.S. firms in Thailand for the AI sector.

While reaffirming Thailand's openness to increased U.S. investment, especially in food processing and energy (leveraging the U.S.'s low natural gas prices), Pichai emphasized the importance of maintaining economic sovereignty and geopolitical neutrality. He warned that Thailand must avoid trade realignments that negatively affect third countries or entangle the country in global political disputes. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Central bank urges caution on proposed Financial Business Hub

(bk) The Bank of Thailand (BOT) has issued a strong warning to the government regarding the proposed Financial Business Hub, as the draft Financial Business

Hub Act moves toward its first parliamentary reading following Cabinet approval.

In a letter dated 13 June 2025, BOT Governor Sethaput Suthiwartnarueput warned that the hub must be governed by regulations that meet or exceed existing financial system standards and align with international norms. He cautioned that relaxed oversight could turn the hub into a conduit for illicit financial activities, threatening the integrity of Thailand's broader financial system.

To safeguard domestic stability, the BOT stressed that the hub should be restricted to serving non-residents only, warning that allowing access to Thai residents could expose consumers to high risks and create unfair competition with existing financial institutions. The central bank also called for a clear legal and physical separation between the hub and the country's core financial system, citing Dubai's financial free zone as a successful model.

The BOT advised against launching the hub prematurely and emphasized that the regulatory body overseeing it must be fully equipped before issuing any licenses. Given the expected breadth of services, this agency must function as a consolidated financial supervisor. The BOT further recommended that existing regulators -- including the BOT, Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), and Office of Insurance Commission (OIC) -- retain the authority to intervene during emergencies, even if a separate regulatory framework is established for the hub. [The Nation]

Thailand: State firms face restructuring pressure ahead of OECD membership bid

(lm) Thailand is preparing a sweeping realignment of its state-owned enterprise (SOE) landscape as part of its effort to join the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), a move that would make it the first ASEAN member to gain entry into the 38-member bloc.

The State Enterprise Policy Office (SEPO), under the Finance Ministry, is spearheading the drafting of reform frameworks to bring Thailand's SOEs in line with OECD expectations. Priority areas include competitive neutrality, procurement transparency, and pricing integrity. For example, SOE subsidiaries providing services to parent entities will be required to use market-based pricing mechanisms—addressing long-standing concerns about internal preferential treatment and cost opacity.

A key issue flagged by OECD consultations is Thailand's fragmented SOE typology. Entities range from legislatively chartered bodies (e.g. the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand), to listed public companies (e.g. PTT), and public organizations (e.g. the National Science and Technology Development Agency). The OECD favors a more harmonized structure—typically the limited company model—to ensure consistent oversight and market accountability. This will likely require significant legislative amendments and internal restructuring, with implications for employee status and benefit frameworks.

Thailand's OECD bid is unfolding as part of a broader institutional modernization drive. An initial memorandum is expected to be submitted to the OECD by December 2025, followed by a multi-year review and negotiation process that typically spans 7–8 years. In the interim, Thai agencies have already begun engaging with OECD counterparts. Notably, officials from the National Economic and Social Development Council participated in a Strategic Foresight workshop in June 2025, aligning long-term planning tools with the OECD's analytical frameworks. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Senate committee on border security proposed amid rising tensions

(lm) A Thai senator has proposed the establishment of a new Senate committee to address growing security challenges along the country's borders, citing incidents ranging from cross-border violence to unresolved demarcation disputes. Senator Sawat Thatsana presented the idea on July 16, pointing to escalating tensions with Cambodia near the Chong Bok area, incursions by the United Wa State Army (Red Wa Army) from Myanmar, and persistent unrest in Thailand's southernmost provinces.

He emphasized that these challenges are complex and interlinked with broader issues such as politics, economic development, human rights, and historical tensions. The proposed committee would be tasked with studying these dynamics and recommending policies to enhance security, improve relations with neighboring states, and promote long-term stability. The Senate is expected to consider the proposal within a 90-day timeframe. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Two military cadets convicted over 2017 death of fellow trainee receive suspended sentences

(lm) Thailand's Supreme Military Court on July 22 issued its final verdict in the long-delayed case of Phakaphong "Mei" Tanyakan, an army cadet who died in 2017 after being beaten by two senior trainees at the Armed Forces Preparatory School. The court sentenced the two senior cadets to 4 months and 16 days in prison, along with fines of THB 15,000 (USD 435) each. Their sentences were suspended for two years.

The court cited the defendants' lack of prior offenses and argued that allowing them to continue serving the country would be of greater benefit than further punishment. Both had been found guilty of assault and of violating military orders by imposing unauthorized disciplinary punishment on Phakaphong. The case had previously passed through the Court of First Instance and the Court of Appeal, which upheld some elements of the original ruling but dismissed others due to insufficient eyewitness testimony.

Phakaphong's death sparked public outrage after authorities initially provided little information about the circumstances. His family later filed a lawsuit against the two cadets and an instructor, alleging assault and negligence. The instructor, however, was not indicted.

The cadet's mother publicly criticized the verdict, questioning how individuals found guilty of abuse while in command positions could credibly serve the nation. She also noted that neither defendant had apologized to the family. [Bangkok Post]

Thailand: Acting prime minister reaffirms anti-drug crackdown, echoes Thaksin-era rhetoric

(lm) Acting Prime Minister Phumtham Wechayachai, a political heavyweight withing the ruling Pheu Thai Party, has reaffirmed the Thai government's commitment to combating narcotics, warning that negligent or complicit officials will be removed and face legal consequences. Speaking on national television, he echoed former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra—Pheu Thai's de facto leader, known for his controversial and deadly 2003 "war on drugs"—and suspended Prime Minister Paetongtarn, describing narcotics as a major obstacle to national development

and grassroots economic growth. Phumtham cited complaints implicating local officials in the drug trade and pledged surprise inspections. He emphasized cooperation with Interpol to dismantle regional drug networks and announced intensified border operations—such as the "Seal Stop Safe" campaign—along the frontiers with Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia. Surveillance efforts will be enhanced using CCTV and thermal drones. Phumtham, also serving as Interior Minister, stressed that systemic reform and community engagement are key to lasting impact. [Bangkok Post]

Vietnam: Former Health Minister Nguyen Thi Kim Tien may be disciplined for serious mistakes while in office

(hn) The Politburo has recommended that the Party Central Committee discipline Nguyen Thi Kim Tien, former Minister of Health, for serious violations during her tenure.

According to the Politburo, while serving as a Central Committee member, Party Secretary of the Ministry of Health, and Minister of Health, Ms. Tien showed signs of political, ethical, and lifestyle degradation. She violated Party rules and State laws in performing her duties, especially in anti-corruption, waste prevention, and setting an example, which are obligations of Party members.

Her actions were deemed to have caused very serious consequences, damaging the reputation of the Party and the Ministry of Health, and creating widespread public concern.

Ms. Tien served as Minister of Health from 2011 to 2019, and was later appointed Head of the Central Committee for Health Care of Senior Officials until she was dismissed and disciplined in November 2021.

She was held primarily responsible for the misconduct of the Party Committee of the Health Ministry during her leadership (2015-2021), including lack of oversight, systemic violations, and mismanagement that led to state asset losses and public dissatisfaction, undermining trust in the Party, the healthcare sector, and her personal reputation. [Vnexpress, in Vietnamese] [Vietnamnews]

Vietnam: Minister of Agriculture and Environment receives warning for past wrongdoing

(hn) On July 17, the Politburo issued a warning to Minister of Agriculture and Environment Do Duc Duy for violations committed during his time in Yen Bai Province, which led to serious consequences.

According to the Politburo, while serving as Deputy Secretary of the Provincial Party Committee, Party Secretary of the People's Committee, and Chairman of the Yen Bai Provincial People's Committee, Mr. Duy violated Party rules and State laws, breached democratic centralism, and failed to uphold the responsibilities and ethical standards required of Party members. These violations caused negative public opinion and damaged the reputation of the Party and local institutions.

Mr. Duy served as Deputy Minister of Construction (2015-2017), Chairman of Yen Bai Province (2017), and then Provincial Party Secretary (2020).

In August 2024, he became Minister of Natural Resources and Environment, and in February 2025, he was appointed Minister of Agriculture and Environment, a newly merged ministry combining the former Ministries of Agriculture and Natural Resources. [Vnexpress, in Vietnamese] [Vietnamnews]

Vietnam: New carbon trading system to help protect forests

(hn) A new draft decree in Vietnam aims to enhance forest protection and development by introducing, for the first time, a legal framework for the domestic trade of forest-based carbon credits. Presented in Hanoi, the draft separates carbon service provision-state-regulated agreements between forest owners and carbon emitters-from carbon credit trading, which allows businesses to freely buy, sell, or offset credits based on market forces.

This separation is intended to ensure transparency and legal consistency. The decree simplifies procedures for forest owners, granting them greater autonomy to trade credits, including with international partners. It also introduces Vietnam’s first domestic forest carbon standard, outlining how credits are calculated, managed, and traded.

Both public and private forest owners, including households and businesses, can act as service providers. Credits will be traded via contracts or a national exchange platform, with initial pricing set by provincial authorities under ministerial guidance. Revenue will be distributed through direct payments or forest protection funds, with income shared based on the area of forest contributed. While forestry is currently the country's only sector capable of generating negative emissions, some credits must be retained to meet Vietnam's climate targets. The decree is expected to attract private investment and support afforestation and restoration efforts. Oversight will be handled by the Ministries of Agriculture, Environment, and Finance, with provincial authorities managing implementation and reporting. [Vietnamnews]

Vietnam: Government introduces financial incentives to boost birth rates

(ab) The Vietnamese government is considering new measures to encourage child-birth amid concerns over a shrinking population. Under a proposed plan of USD 650 million, women up to the age of 35 with two or more children will receive financial assistance. In addition to this, a further USD 6 million is being put forward for families with only two daughters to address the growing gender imbalance.

Vietnam's fertility rate, currently at 1.91 children per woman, has been below the replacement level of 2.1 for three consecutive years. Projections indicate that if this trend continues, the country may experience negative population growth by 2054, with a potential gender imbalance leading to a surplus of men by 2059.

The proposal includes cash support, living subsidies, meal programs for preschool children, and reduced prenatal care costs. The aim is to encourage childbirth, reduce pregnancy-related costs, and support family care.

Experts emphasize that reversing the fertility decline will require not only financial incentives but also improvements in healthcare, education, and living conditions, along with a shift in societal attitudes toward family life. [Vietnamnet]

Vietnam: Government aiming for 8.3-8.5 percent growth in 2025

(ab) Vietnam aims for 8.3-8.5 percent GDP growth in 2023, up from 7.09 per cent last year, to lay the groundwork for future growth. Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh stressed the need to focus on traditional drivers like consumption, exports, and investment, while also promoting green growth and the digital economy. However, challenges loom such as geopolitical tensions, supply chain issues, and Trump's tariffs and trade wars.

This follows a statement from U.S. President Donald Trump on a nearly completed trade deal with Vietnam, which includes a 20 per cent tariff on Vietnamese goods. In Q2, Vietnam's GDP grew 7.96 percent, up from 6.93 percent in Q1. [Reuters] [Voice of Vietnam]

Vietnam: Public security ministry acquires majority stake in lead telecom company

(ab) Vietnam's Ministry of Public Security has taken control of a majority stake in FPT Telecom from the State Capital Investment Corporation (SCIC) to strengthen national cybersecurity and information security. Previously, SCIC held 50.17 per cent of the company, with private FPT Corp maintaining control.

The transfer is part of efforts to enhance the ministry's role in national security and digital infrastructure, as the Ministry has increasingly engaged with the telecom sector, including its previous acquisition of MobiFone. The move aligns with government policies to restructure state-owned enterprises and bolster digital sovereignty.

FPT Telecom, which plays a significant role in Vietnam's undersea fiber-optic cable development, is expected to contribute to the country's digital initiatives, including the establishment of a digital government and national data platforms.

The recent promotion of key members within the Ministry of Public Security, including the rise of To Lam to influential positions within the ruling party, has drawn attention. Moves like the acquisition of FPT Telecom could be seen as part of the broader efforts to consolidate the influence of the Ministry. [Reuters] [Vietnamnews]

Vietnam: Credit conditions projected to remain stable in H2 2025

(ab) Analysts at Vietnam Investors Service (VIS) expect Vietnam's credit conditions to remain stable in the second half of 2025, citing proactive fiscal policies and institutional reforms. Infrastructure, construction, real estate, and power sectors are set to benefit most from increased government spending and streamlined regulations. In contrast, export-driven industries may struggle due to external market challenges. Banks are forecast to remain strong, while finance companies could face funding and asset quality pressures.

However, Citi Group gave a more muted outcast. With the US announcing new 20 per cent tariffs on most Vietnamese exports and even higher rates on certain goods, they noted how it remains to be seen how Vietnam's credit conditions will be affected once these take full effect. [Vietnamplus] [Vietnam Investment Review]

Vietnam: Special visa exemptions for high-profile foreigners proposed

(ab) The Ministry of Public Security in Vietnam has submitted a draft decree proposing visa exemptions lasting up to five years for certain categories of foreign nationals. The measure aims to facilitate the entry and stay of individuals considered valuable to the country's economic and cultural development.

The proposed exemptions would allow visa holders to stay for 90 days per entry and include options to apply for temporary residence permits and related documentation. This differs from current policies, which typically offer shorter visa-free stays and apply only to citizens of selected countries.

Eligible groups outlined in the proposal include executives from top global companies, doctoral-level experts in science, technology, economics, and management from OECD countries, medical professionals, internationally recognized artists and athletes, tourism ambassadors, and social media influencers with over one million followers. Applicants must meet criteria such as verified engagement plans and a clean record regarding Vietnam's reputation.

The draft aims to attract foreign professionals and cultural figures by easing immigration requirements in specific fields. [Vietnamnet]

Vietnam: Public backlash grows over Hanoi's upcoming petrol motorbike ban

(ab) Hanoi's plan to ban petrol-powered motorbikes in its central districts starting July 2026 has generated significant public concern and criticism, including from voices within state-controllled media.

The policy targets nearly 7 million motorbikes—almost one per resident—as part of efforts to combat severe air pollution. While environmental benefits are acknowledged, many residents fear the ban will disproportionately affect low-income individuals who rely on motorbikes for their livelihoods, such as delivery workers and daily commuters. The high cost of electric motorbikes and an underdeveloped public transport system intensify these worries.

Critics argue the ban risks pushing pollution to city outskirts and creating economic hardship without sufficient support or infrastructure in place. A survey found 58 per cent of respondents view the ban as "unfeasible." Memes and social commentary highlight skepticism and frustration, noting petrol cars remain unaffected despite their environmental impact.

Even some government-aligned commentators describe the measure as potentially "discriminatory" against poorer citizens and question why cars are exempt. Calls emphasize the need for phased, well-supported transitions, improved public transit, and alternative pollution-reduction strategies.

Overall, the backlash reflects concerns about equity, practicality, and readiness for such a drastic policy shift in a city heavily dependent on motorbikes. [The Observer] [Vietnamnet] [Vietnam News]

Vietnam: Food supply risks amid African swine fever outbreaks

(ab) Vietnam is experiencing widespread African swine fever (ASF) outbreaks, with over 514 cases reported across 28 of 34 provinces in 2025. More than 30,000 pigs have been infected, died, or culled. The government warns that the disease poses significant risks to the pig farming industry, food security, and the environment.

Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh has ordered urgent actions to contain the outbreaks, including faster detection, culling infected animals, and preventing illegal transport or slaughter of sick pigs. Local

authorities have been held accountable for outbreaks caused by negligence.

Vietnam approved the domestic use of its first home-grown ASF vaccine this year, but questions surrounding low vaccination rates remain. Possible issues with availability, cost, or effectiveness could be to blame.

The situation continues to be closely monitored by relevant ministries amid concerns over ongoing spread, especially in regions with large pig populations. [Dan Tri International News] [Reuters]

International Relations, Geopolitics and Security in Asia

China-India tensions sharpen as Beijing begins mega-dam project on transboundary river in Tibet

(lm) China has commenced construction on the world's largest hydropower facility in Tibet's Yarlung Tsangpo canyon, triggering regional concern over its geopolitical, environmental, and economic implications. The CNY 1.2 trillion (USD 167 billion) project—named the Motuo Hydropower Station—marks a significant escalation in China's strategic harnessing of water resources originating on the Tibetan Plateau, a region supplying key transboundary rivers across Asia.

The Yarlung Tsangpo, which flows into India as the Siang and Brahmaputra and later into Bangladesh as the Jamuna, is a critical waterway for both agriculture and livelihoods downstream. Chinese authorities

assert the project will generate up to 300 billion kWh annually—three times the capacity of the current world's largest operating hydropower plant, the Three Gorges Dam—largely for external consumption in China's east. The launch also included the establishment of a new state-owned firm, China Yajiang Group, to oversee project implementation.

India and Bangladesh have formally raised concerns about the project. Indian officials warn of the dam's potential to enable upstream control over vital water flows, framing it as a strategic vulnerability. Citing risks of both seasonal drying and abrupt water discharges, India is accelerating its own dam construction in Arunachal Pradesh, notably the Upper Siang project, as a defensive buffer. New Delhi has emphasized the need for consultation, data transparency, and safeguards for downstream interests.

China, for its part, maintains it has a legitimate right to develop within its territory and claims the dam has undergone rigorous environmental review. Official narratives stress benefits such as disaster mitigation and regional economic upliftment. However, civil society voices and Tibetan rights groups highlight forced displacement, biodiversity loss, and the potential for seismic instability in the dam zone, located in one of China's most active fault regions.

The project introduces a new long-term friction point in already fraught India–China relations, which have seen tentative stabilization following the 2020 border clash but remain strategically competitive. Water, now emerging alongside trade and territorial disputes as a security concern, could increasingly define bilateral risk trajectories. [Bangkok Post] [BBC] [Bloomberg] [South China Morning Post]

China reiterates condemnation of U.S. hegemonism, protectionism at Shanghai Cooperation Organization Foreign Ministers' Meeting

(dql/yq) China hosted on July 16 the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Foreign Ministers' Meeting. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi used the occasion to call for reform of the global governance system and urged the SCO to promote an "equal and orderly multipolar world."

In an apparent reference to the U.S., he criticized hegemonism, power politics, and rising protectionism, arguing that some countries prioritize narrow self-

interest at the expense of global stability and demanding that the SCO must uphold fairness, justice, and shared values while defending the legitimate rights of its member states.

In addition, Wang emphasized the need for continued efforts to combat terrorism, separatism, and extremism—longstanding priorities of the SCO—while also broadening the bloc's agenda to strengthen economic cooperation, scientific innovation, and resilient supply chains.

Expressing concern about growing instability in the Middle East, he reaffirmed China's support for Iran's right to peaceful nuclear development and reiterated Beijing's opposition to unilateral sanctions, in a veiled rebuke of U.S. policy. Iran joined the SCO in July 2023. [SCMP]

On the sidelines of the foreign ministers' meeting, Wang held bilateral talks with his Iranian counterpart Abbas Araghchi, reaffirming China's support for Iran's peaceful use of nuclear energy and offering to play a constructive role in stabilizing the Middle East. He reassured China's continued support of Iran's fight against "bullying acts," and its readiness "to deepen mutual trust, strengthen cooperation, expand exchanges, and promote the steady and long-term growth of China-Iran relations." [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China 1]

Separately, Chinese President Xi Jinping met with the SCO foreign ministers, urging them to resist hegemony and bullying, and to contribute to global stability through solidarity and cooperation. China is set to host the SCO summit in Tianjin on August 31 and September 1. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China 2]

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov underscored the bloc's increasing role in shaping a more equitable multipolar order, citing unanimous condemnation of Israeli strikes on Iranian infrastructure and U.S. attacks on Iranian nuclear sites. He also noted the group's understanding of Russia's position on the war in Ukraine, issued as the U.S. threatened new sanctions against countries maintaining trade ties with Moscow. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Russia]

EU sanctions Chinese banks over Russia ties

(yq/dql) In its 18th sanctions package targeting Russia, the European Union has blacklisted two small Chinese banks—Suifenhe Rural Commercial Bank and Heihe

Rural Commercial Bank—for allegedly facilitating crypto-based transactions to support sanctioned Russian imports. [European Council]

This marks the first time Chinese financial institutions, rather than companies, have been sanctioned by the EU since the war in Ukraine began. The decision comes despite strong objections and diplomatic pressure from Beijing. Chinese officials warned EU counterparts of consequences and lobbied to exclude the banks. While China failed to prevent the sanctions, it succeeded in securing a six-month review clause, offering a potential path for delisting if the banks cease activities that support the Russian military. [SCMP 1]

The move adds tension ahead of a high-stakes EU-China summit this week, where European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and European Council President Antonio Costa will meet President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Qiang. The EU plans to press China on its economic support for Russia, particularly its role in supplying dual-use goods.

China maintains it has normal trade relations with Russia and denies providing military aid. In addition, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi made clear during his recent visit to Europe to attend the 13th round of China-EU High-level Strategic Dialogue that China does not to see Russia losing the war (see AiR No. 27, July/2025, 2), reflecting fundamentally contradicting views and strategic interests between Beijing and Brussels regarding Russia.

Against this backdrop, expectations for the summit remain modest, with hopes focused on open dialogue and potential cooperation on climate issues ahead of COP31.

The sanctions on the Chinese banks came shortly after China announced on July 16 that it is seeking normalization of legislative ties with the European Parliament, more than four years after the latter suspended official legislative dialogue, effectively halting mutual exchanges their Chinese counterparts. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China]

The freeze of ties in May 2021 came after China retaliated EU sanctions on Chinese officials over allegations of human rights abuses in Xinjiang with sanctioning ten European Union (EU) citizens—including five Members of the European Parliament (MEP)—as well as four EU entities. One of them was the European Parliament's Human Rights Subcommittee.

The Chinese foreign ministry's announcement came shortly after Beijing lifted sanctions on former German MEP Reinhard Bütikofer, signaling a step toward normalizing relations with the European Parliament after years of strained ties. Bütikofer, a prominent critic of the Chinese government, was the only former MEP among those sanctioned in 2021. The removal of his sanctions follows China's earlier decision in April to lift restrictions on sitting MEPs and is seen as a gesture to resume high-level engagement with the European legislature.

A renewed round of political dialogue is now expected, with an official meeting between China's National People's Congress (NPC) and the European Parliament planned for October in Brussels—the first since 2018.

However, several Chinese sanctions remain in place on European researchers, think tanks, and national parliamentarians, while the EU's own 2021 sanctions over human rights abuses in Xinjiang also remain unchanged. The EU continues to cite the absence of improvements in China's human rights record, a claim Beijing firmly denies. [SCMP 2] [Reuters]

China threatens to block Panama ports

(dz) China has threatened to block the USD 22.8 billion sale of Hong Kong-based CK Hutchison's global port assets—including terminals at both ends of the Panama Canal—to a U.S.-linked consortium unless China's state-owned shipping giant COSCO is included in the deal as an equal partner.

The sale, agreed in March (see AiR No. 10, March/2025, 2), would transfer an 80 percent stake in 43 ports across 23 countries to a consortium led by BlackRock and the Mediterranean Shipping Company (MSC), but still requires Beijing's approval.

The move has significant geopolitical implications, as the deal has been framed by former U.S. President Donald Trump as a win for U.S. efforts to curb Chinese influence over critical maritime infrastructure. China has rejected U.S. claims that it controls the Panama Canal, calling the accusation baseless.

In response to the proposed deal, China launched an antitrust investigation and instructed state-owned enterprises to suspend new business with CK Hutchison founder Li Ka-shing's family. Chinese state media condemned the sale as a U.S. attempt to undermine China's global interests under the guise of trade policy. Meanwhile, Panamanian authorities

confirmed an ongoing audit of Hutchison's port concessions (see AiR No. 11, March/2025, 3).

China's push may be successful because parties involved are reportedly open to Cosco's inclusion. With the July 27 exclusivity deadline fast approaching, China's intervention may force consortium partners to revisit deal terms, thus shifting the balance of global port ownership amid rising economic contestation. [Reuters] [The Wall Street Journal]

China advances African iron ore supply with major railway projects in Guinea and Algeria

(dql) China is set to start receiving iron ore shipments from Guinea and Algeria this year as key railway and port infrastructure projects near completion, addressing longstanding logistical barriers. These developments are crucial for China's strategic goal to diversify iron ore imports beyond dominant suppliers Australia and Brazil, which together provide about 80 percent of the global seaborne supply.

In Guinea, the Simandou mine—home to one of the world's largest undeveloped iron ore deposits—is preparing to begin shipments as early as November. A newly completed 650km railway, built by China Railway Construction Corporation (CRCC), connects the mine to the Atlantic coast, enabling efficient transport. The project, a joint venture involving Rio Tinto and Chinese firms such as Chalco Iron Ore Holdings, aims to reach full production capacity of 60 million tonnes annually within 30 months.

Similarly, Algeria is advancing a 950km railway linking the Gara Djebilet mine in the Sahara Desert to Mediterranean ports. The first 135km section near Tindouf is completed despite harsh desert conditions. The railway, also constructed by CRCC, will facilitate exports from one of the world's largest iron ore deposits, estimated at 3.5 billion tonnes.

Experts predict these new supply routes could ease iron ore prices, currently forecast to remain between USD 80 and USD 100 per ton over the next 18 months. Although China's steel output declined 9 percent in June compared to last year, its iron ore imports hit a 2025 monthly high, indicating sustained demand that bodes well for African exporters. [SCMP]

Japan signs agreement to expand mine action cooperation with United Nations

(ja) The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) have signed a memorandum of understanding to strengthen and expand their cooperation in landmine disposal, particularly in Africa—one of the world's most heavily mine-contaminated regions due to ongoing and past armed conflicts.

The agreement formalizes collaboration through regular information-sharing and joint events and opens the door to expanding support to additional countries. The agreement also includes cooperation with the Cambodian Mine Action Centre (CMAC), leveraging Cambodia's extensive demining experience to conduct training and monitoring in African nations.

JICA has supported CMAC since 1998 and has also partnered with UNMAS since 2023 on workshops for field workers in Africa.

Japan remains actively engaged in global demining efforts, recently collaborating with Cambodia to assist in clearing Russian-laid mines in Ukraine. It will also chair the next meeting of the Ottawa Convention in December in Geneva, underscoring its commitment to international mine action and disarmament norms. [Kyodo News]

EU seeks to deepen ties with Japan

(dql) European Council President Antonio Costa has announced that the European Union plans to elevate its relationship with Japan to a new level during the July 23 summit in Tokyo, with a focus on trade and security cooperation. In an interview with Kyodo News, Costa emphasized the EU and Japan's commitment to upholding the international rules-based order and promoting free and fair trade, particularly amid concerns over high U.S. tariffs under President Donald Trump. [European Council]

Costa and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen will meet Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba in Tokyo following their visit to the World Exposition in Osaka. The leaders are expected to launch a "Japan-EU Competitiveness Alliance" aimed at strengthening industrial ties and advancing economic security cooperation.

Costa referred to Japan as the EU's closest partner in the Pacific and indicated plans to explore cooperation

on a broad trans-Pacific free trade agreement involving Japan, the UK, and ten other countries. On security, he stressed enhancing EU-Japan collaboration to better equip both regions, noting the interconnectedness of Pacific and European security given Russia's invasion of Ukraine and North Korea's support for Moscow. [Kyodo News]

Japan targets Chinese and Taiwanese steel in first major anti-dumping investigation

(dql) Responding to a petition by Nippon Steel—Japan's largest steelmaker—and other domestic producers the Japanese government has launched an anti-dumping investigation into nickel-based stainless cold-rolled steel sheets and strips imported from China and Taiwan. The petition claims that imported products are being sold in Japan at prices up to 50 percent lower than those in China and up to 20 percent lower than those in Taiwan, forcing Japanese manufacturers to lower their prices despite rising production costs, resulting in profit losses.

The investigation, jointly announced by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) and the Ministry of Finance, is expected to conclude within a year and may lead to the imposition of anti-dumping duties. [METI]

The move reflects Japan's growing concern over China's excess steel production and state-supported exports, which have contributed to global market distortions. While several countries have already imposed trade remedies against China, Japan has so far refrained from doing so. [Reuters]

Japan joins 27 nations in demanding immediate end of war in Gaza

(dql) Japan has joined 27 other countries—including the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and several European nations—in issuing a joint statement calling for an immediate end to the war in Gaza. The statement condemned Israel's severe restrictions on humanitarian aid and the killing of civilians, including children, labeling recent deaths of over 800 Palestinians seeking assistance as "horrifying." It criticized Israel's aid delivery model as dangerous and degrading, urging compliance with international humanitarian law. [Government, UK]

The countries signing the statement include: Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Japan, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, The Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the UK.

Israel rejected the criticism, accusing the statement of being "disconnected from reality" and blaming Hamas for prolonging the conflict. The U.S. also dismissed the appeal, with Ambassador Mike Huckabee calling it "disgusting."

Germany notably did not sign the statement, though its foreign minister expressed grave concern over the humanitarian situation and called on Israel to expand aid access. [The Mainichi]

North Korea issues warning over U.S. bomber drill near peninsula

(fw) North Korea has issued a warning after the United States deployed B-52H bombers for a joint military exercise with Japan and South Korea over the East China Sea on July 11. The drill, which saw the American bombers escorted by Japanese F-2 and South Korean KF-16 fighter jets, was meant to showcase the allies' ability to respond rapidly to regional security threats. [Korea JoongAng Daily]

North Korea's Defense Ministry condemned the drills, calling them a "main danger factor" that increases military tensions in the region. Pyongyang asserted its right to take countermeasures against what it considers provocative military actions, warning of "grave consequences" if such activities continue. North Korea claims its armed forces remain on high alert in response to these joint exercises. [Newsweek]

The U.S., Japan, and South Korea say the exercise demonstrates strong collaboration and their commitment to deterrence, regional security, and maintaining order based on international law. Both Japan and South Korea benefit from the U.S. nuclear umbrella, a pledge to defend allies against nuclear threats, particularly from North Korea, which has an estimated 50 nuclear warheads and continues to expand its arsenal (AiR No.28, July/2025, 3).

South Korean president appoints high-profile special envoys to U.S., EU

(fw) South Korean President Lee Jae Myung has appointed high-profile special envoys to the United States and the European Union as part of an intensified diplomatic strategy to bolster Seoul's international partnerships and tackle pressing economic and security issues.

On July 17, President Lee named Park Yong-maan, former chairman of Doosan Group and the Korea Chamber of Commerce and Industry, as his special envoy to the United States. Park will head a delegation that includes lawmakers Han Jun-ho and Kim Woo-young. The mission comes amid critical tariff negotiations, as the U.S. administration considers a 25 percent reciprocal tariff on South Korean goods from August 1.

Park's established connections in both U.S. business and government circles are seen as advantageous for representing Korea's interests and clarifying President Lee's policies since taking office. The delegation's timetable for departing to Washington remains unconfirmed, leaving it unclear if they will arrive before the impending tariff deadline. President Lee's administration is currently sending special envoys to a total of 14 countries, with Park being the fifth appointee in this wave.

Earlier the same day, Lee consulted with Kim Chong-in, a bipartisan political heavyweight, who advised caution and a long-term approach in the ongoing U.S. tariff talks. Concerns have been raised about misperceptions in the U.S. regarding Lee's foreign policy orientation, mainly fears that he might adopt a stance too conciliatory or friendly toward China and North Korea. These concerns stem from Lee's past references to engaging with North Korea and maintaining balanced ties with both China and the U.S., which some in the U.S. interpret as potentially weakening the Korea-U.S. alliance. [Korea JoongAng Daily] [Chatham House]

Parallel to these efforts, President Lee also dispatched a delegation led by former Environment Minister Yoon Yeo-joon as his special envoy to the European Union, where meetings with European Council President Antonio Costa and European Parliament Vice President Christel Schaldemose were held in Brussels on July 15. The South Korean foreign ministry reported that the delegation conveyed Seoul's commitment to closer cooperation with the EU, focusing on advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence and climate change. The talks also emphasized resuming inter-Korean dialogue and building trust for peace on the Korean Peninsula. Yoon delivered a personal letter from President Lee to Costa, expressing hope for an

early Korea-EU summit. Both sides agreed to further expand strategic cooperation, including more robust parliamentary exchanges. [The Korea Times]

Taiwan, EU pledge to deepen cooperation on democratic resilience

(dql) President Lai Ching-te emphasized the importance of cooperation between Taiwan and the European Union (EU) in defending democratic values during a July 22 meeting with a delegation from the European Parliament's newly formed Special Committee on the European Democracy Shield. Marking its first-ever visit to Asia, the committee's trip to Taiwan highlights the deepening ties between Taiwan and Europe. [Office of the President, Taiwan]

Lai described Taiwan as being on the front line of the global struggle for democracy and expressed the country's readiness to share its experience in building societal resilience. He noted that Taiwan's efforts, including the establishment of the Whole-of-Society Resilience Defense Committee, aim not at any specific adversary but at safeguarding its democratic way of life.

Committee Chair Nathalie Loiseau stressed the shared challenges faced by Taiwan and the EU—particularly foreign interference, disinformation, and cyberattacks. [Taiwan News] [Reuters]

The visit comes days before Chinese President Xi Jinping will meet European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and European Council President Antonio Costa on July 24 in Beijing to mark 50 years of diplomatic ties between China and the European Union.

Taiwan plans presidential visit to Latin American allies with U.S. stopovers likely

(yl) Taiwan is preparing for President Lai Ching-te's upcoming state visits to Latin American diplomatic allies, including Paraguay, Guatemala, and Belize, with expected stopovers in New York and Dallas. While the Presidential Office has not confirmed the itinerary, Paraguayan President Santiago Pena publicly stated that Lai will be received in Paraguay in August, highlighting the two countries' close ties.

Visits by Taiwanese presidents to the region often include transits through the United States, which are

diplomatically sensitive but politically significant, given Washington's status as Taiwan's key backer. [Taipei Times] [Reuters]

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs said such invitations reflect strong bilateral relationships, and that facilitating high-level overseas visits remains a core diplomatic task. Meanwhile, the U.S. State Department confirmed any stopovers would follow past precedent, focusing on comfort and dignity, without implying a change in policy.

The trip comes amid growing global attention to Taiwan's international visibility, as well as recent high-level exchanges with allies across the Pacific and Latin America. [Taipei Times] [South China Morning Post]

India under increased pressure from NATO and EU over continued oil trade with Russia

(lm/kb) India is facing intensifying pressure from both the United States and the European Union over its continued energy cooperation with Russia, prompting strong pushback from New Delhi and Moscow.

U.S. Senator Lindsey Graham—a senior Republican lawmaker known for his hawkish foreign policy positions—warned that the Trump administration may impose tariffs of up to 500 percent on countries like India, China, and Brazil that continue to import Russian oil, accusing them of sustaining Moscow's war in Ukraine. He claimed these three countries account for around 80 percent of Russia's crude exports and labeled their trade as "blood money." [NDTV]

NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte echoed these warnings, threatening secondary sanctions unless the countries press Russian President Vladimir Putin into peace negotiations within 50 days. India firmly rejected the warnings, emphasizing that affordable energy access remains a national priority and cautioning against "double standards." New Delhi underlined that its energy procurement is guided by market conditions and national needs.

Currently, India imports about 88 percent of its crude oil, with Russia now supplying around 40 percent—up from less than 2 percent prior to the Ukraine war. Despite Western sanctions, Moscow's discounted oil has helped India stabilize domestic pricing. Indian officials stress the country's diversified supply base, now spanning roughly 40 countries, and have indicated no pressure to alter sourcing strategies. Petroleum

Minister Hardeep Singh Puri reiterated that India remains committed to procuring non-sanctioned oil at the best available prices, regardless of origin. [The Indian Express]

Amid this backdrop, the European Union has triggered further tensions by including Nayara Energy—an Indian refinery partly owned by Russia's state-run oil giant Rosneft—in its 18th sanctions package. The EU's move, which aims to curb Russian energy revenues and sanction evasion, was met with sharp condemnation from Rosneft. The company called the sanctions "unjustified," claiming they breach international legal norms and infringe on India's sovereignty. Rosneft noted that it holds less than a 50 percent stake in Nayara, exercises no control, and that the refinery operates as an Indian legal entity with an independent board.

Rosneft warned that the sanctions threaten India's energy security and accused the EU of engaging in unfair competition. The refinery, located in Gujarat, is a key contributor to India's domestic fuel supply, and its inclusion in the sanctions regime underscores the broader geopolitical risks of India's strategic energy positioning. In parallel, Indian policymakers continue engaging U.S. counterparts to explain their rationale and avert punitive tariffs, while preparing contingency plans to shift toward suppliers in Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates if necessary. [Reuters 1] [Reuters 2]

U.S. designates Pakistan-backed group behind attack in Indian-administered Kashmir as terrorist organization

(lm) The United States has formally designated The Resistance Front (TRF)—a proxy of the Pakistan-based group Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT)—as a terrorist organization after it claimed responsibility for the April 22 attack in Indian-administered Kashmir that killed 26 civilians. The designation criminalizes any U.S.-based financial or logistical support and marks a notable move in tightening global scrutiny on Pakistan-linked militant networks.

India welcomed the move, citing it as long-overdue acknowledgment of TRF's operational role in regional violence. For years, India has pushed for UN action against the group, often blocked by Pakistan and China. [The Indian Express]

Islamabad responded by dismissing TRF's links to Lashkar-e-Taiba and called the Kashmir investigation

“inconclusive.” Pakistani officials accused India of using terror listings to push anti-Pakistan narratives and claimed their own record of dismantling extremist outfits. However, Pakistan did not provide new findings or timelines for the stalled investigation. The foreign ministry also attempted to pivot attention to other armed groups, urging international recognition of Baloch separatists as threats—part of Islamabad’s broader effort to shape the global counterterrorism agenda. [Arab News]

The U.S. move comes as Islamabad faces mounting external pressure over cross-border militancy and domestic instability. While the April attack triggered a brief military escalation in May, with Indian strikes on alleged militant infrastructure in Pakistan, the latest diplomatic developments suggest Washington is aligning more closely with India’s counterterrorism priorities.

Pakistan-Afghanistan thaw deepens as ministers meet and trilateral rail corridor gains traction

(za) Pakistan and Afghanistan are moving toward closer strategic alignment, marked by a series of high-level engagements and infrastructure cooperation.

On July 20, Pakistan’s Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi met with his Afghan counterpart, Sirajuddin Haqqani, in Kabul to discuss counterterrorism cooperation, border management, and refugee repatriation. The visit followed earlier foreign ministry-level talks and a trilateral dialogue in Beijing that upgraded Pakistan-Afghanistan ties to the ambassadorial level.

A key focus of the engagement is Pakistan’s demand that the Afghan Taliban prevent the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) from launching attacks across the border. Islamabad maintains that the group operates from Afghan territory, a claim denied by Kabul. Analysts say Pakistan seeks public reassurances and direct action from the Afghan side to restrict the TTP’s capacity and movement. Naqvi reiterated that Pakistan wishes to foster lasting, “brotherly” ties but stressed the need for joint efforts to end regional militancy. [Arab News 1] [Arab News 2]

Tied to these diplomatic efforts is the July 17 signing of a framework agreement for a feasibility study on the Uzbekistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan (UAP) Railway Project. The proposed 573-kilometer corridor would connect Termiz in Uzbekistan with Peshawar via Mazar-i-Sharif and Logar in Afghanistan. With an

estimated cost of USD 4.8 billion, the railway aims to provide landlocked Central Asian countries with direct access to Pakistani ports such as Karachi and Gwadar, reducing dependence on northern trade corridors through Russia.

For Pakistan, the project strengthens its ambition to become a regional transit hub and complements its broader connectivity push under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). For Afghanistan, the railway offers critical infrastructure development and integration into regional trade. However, security volatility in Afghanistan, technical hurdles like rail gauge incompatibility, and the need for sustained trilateral cooperation pose significant challenges to implementation. [Arab News 3] [DAWN]

Pakistan affirms diplomatic immunity of Iranian envoy after FBI names him in abduction case

(za) Pakistan has confirmed that Iranian Ambassador Reza Amiri Moghadam enjoys full diplomatic immunity, following the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) naming him in connection with the 2007 abduction of retired American special agent Robert Levinson from Iran's Kish Island. Moghadam, listed by the FBI on July 15 among its most wanted individuals, is accused of having led the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security's (MOIS) operations unit at the time.

The FBI alleges that Moghadam—also known as Ahmad Amirinia—and two other MOIS officials facilitated Levinson's abduction and later helped conceal Iran's involvement. One of the co-accused, Gholamhossein Mohammadnia, previously served as Iran's ambassador to Albania before being expelled in 2018, while the third, Taghi Daneshvar, was identified as a counterespionage officer.

According to U.S. authorities, Iranian officials attempted to deflect responsibility for Levinson's disappearance by attributing the incident to a militant group operating in Pakistan's Balochistan region. The FBI has reiterated its commitment to seeking accountability, stating that Levinson likely died in captivity, and continues to offer up to USD 5 million in rewards for information on his whereabouts. An additional USD 20 million has been pledged through the U.S. State Department's Rewards for Justice program. [Arab News]

Brunei participates in ASEAN disaster emergency response exercise

(dql) A six-member team from Brunei's Fire and Rescue Department Special Technical Rescue Assistance (Satrea) unit has departed for Phnom Penh, Cambodia to take part in the ASEAN Regional Disaster Emergency Response Simulation Exercise (Ardex) 2025, held from July 22 to 24. The exercise, simulating a large-scale flood disaster caused by a typhoon, involves collapsed buildings and damaged infrastructure, requiring intensive search and rescue operations.

Satrea's involvement aims to test its readiness, coordination, and logistical capabilities in a complex international disaster scenario. The exercise also provides practical experience aligned with International Search and Rescue Advisory Group (INSARAG) standards. Brunei's participation highlights its ongoing commitment to regional disaster preparedness and cooperation under the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response. [The Star]

Cambodia hosts ASEAN disaster simulation exercise

(gm) Cambodia is hosting the ASEAN Regional Disaster Emergency Response Simulation Exercise 2025 (ARDEX-25) from July 22 to 24 in Phnom Penh, bringing together over 650 participants from ASEAN member states, Timor-Leste, ASEAN dialogue partners, and international organizations to evaluate regional disaster preparedness and coordination mechanisms. The three-day exercise, held at the Royal Cambodian Army's Special Forces Command, is led by the National Committee for Disaster Management (NCDM) in collaboration with the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre). The simulation will include table-top exercises, command post simulations, and field training components. [Phnom Penh Post]

ARDEX is ASEAN's flagship biennial disaster response simulation, designed to test the region's joint response capacity and operational readiness during large-scale emergencies. Participants will simulate the full disaster response cycle, ranging from search and rescue and rapid impact assessment to healthcare, food distribution, shelter, and sanitation services for affected populations.

This year's scenario will also test ASEAN's Standard Operating Procedure for Regional Standby Arrangements (SASOP) and the role of the ASEAN Secretary-General as the regional humanitarian assistance coordinator. Secretary-General of ASEAN Dr. Kao Kim Hourn will deliver opening remarks and hold bilateral meetings with Cambodian officials, including Senior Minister Kun Kim, who chairs the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Disaster Management. [ASEAN] [Cambodianess]

The ARDEX-25 builds on the outcomes of the previous simulation hosted in Indonesia in 2023 and is expected to strengthen interagency coordination, stress-test communication systems, and foster closer partnerships with international organizations, UN agencies, and donor partners. Senior Minister Kun Kim will preside over the July 22 opening ceremony, while Minister of National Defence Tea Seiha is scheduled to officiate the closing on July 24. According to the NCDM, all logistical and technical preparations have been completed.

Cambodia launches climate-resilient agriculture training with EU and German support

(gm) The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF), in collaboration with the EU and Germany, has launched a new Training of Trainers (ToT) program aimed at building the capacity of Commune Agriculture Officers (CAOs) to support climate-resilient cashew and pepper production across rural Cambodia. Unveiled on July 17 in Kampong Thom province, the initiative brings together 169 participants, including CAOs, farmers, ministry officials, private sector actors, and development partners. The training equips officers with technical knowledge and facilitation skills tailored to local crop conditions and post-harvest practices, with the goal of strengthening Cambodia's public agricultural extension system. [Phnom Penh Post] [European Union]

The program supports the government's Priority 6 policy, which emphasizes CAO deployment and the development of modern agricultural cooperatives. Agriculture Ministry Secretary of State Yang Saing Koma said the initiative directly supports these policy priorities and will help CAOs guide farmers in adopting sustainable and productivity-enhancing practices.

EU officials highlighted the program's role in strengthening Cambodia's competitiveness in international markets, particularly for high-value crops

like cashew and pepper. Bryan Fornari, head of cooperation at the EU delegation to Cambodia, noted that improving food safety and environmental standards is key to accessing global markets, especially in Europe.

The program also aligns with the broader Team Europe strategy, which promotes deforestation-free supply chains and inclusive, sustainable growth. Germany's contribution reflects its commitment to enhancing food security and climate-smart agriculture in Cambodia.

Beyond training, the initiative is expected to enhance CAO support to farmers in areas such as access to finance, technical advice, and market integration, further reinforcing Cambodia's rural development strategy and boosting export capacity for processed agricultural products.

Indonesia busts online gambling ring tied to Cambodia, China

(ms) Indonesian police have dismantled an international online gambling syndicate with ties to Cambodia and China, arresting 22 suspects during coordinated raids in four cities on June 13.

According to the National Police's Criminal Investigation Agency (Bareskrim), the network operated gambling websites such as Tanjung899 and Akasia899, using Indonesian SIM cards to create WhatsApp accounts and mass-distribute promotional messages. Profits were allegedly laundered through third-party bank accounts and converted into cryptocurrency.

Authorities seized over 2,600 SIM cards, 354 mobile phones, 23 computers, and other equipment. The network is believed to have generated profits in the hundreds of billions of rupiah.

The suspects face charges under Indonesia's Criminal Code, the Electronic Transactions Law, and the Anti-Money Laundering Law, carrying penalties of up to 15 years in prison and fines of up to Rp1 billion (USD 61,000).

The case adds to growing concerns over transnational online fraud. The Indonesian Embassy in Cambodia reported handling more than 2,500 cases involving citizens linked to scam operations in the first half of 2025. [Antara] [Tempo]

Malaysia and ASEAN call for veto power reform of UN Security Council

(tl) Malaysia, in collaboration with ASEAN member states, is proposing for reforms to the United Nations (UN) Security Council's veto power. Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Mohamad Hasan highlighted that despite overwhelming support for Gaza-related resolutions at the UN General Assembly, their implementation is frequently obstructed by vetoes from the five permanent member countries China, France, Russia, the UK, and the US.

The push for reform follows growing frustration with the Council's delay and inaction amid the Gaza crisis. Mohamad also noted Malaysia's success in rallying ASEAN and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members to issue a joint statement on Gaza. He added that Malaysia is expanding its coalition with like-minded countries to consistently advocate for Gaza on the global stage.[Bernama]

Exercise Keris Strike 25 kicks off with 4,000 troops from Malaysia, U.S., Australia

(ga) Exercise Keris Strike 25 (KrS25), involving more than 4,000 military personnel from Malaysia, the United States, and Australia, will run from July 17 to 29 across key locations in Perak, Malaysia. The trilateral exercise is led by the Malaysian Second Infantry Brigade, with support from the U.S. Army's 1-27 Infantry Regiment (25th Infantry Division) and Australia's Rifle Company Butterworth.

This marks the 30th iteration of the annual exercise, which first started in 1994 as a bilateral engagement between Malaysia and the U.S., and now sees the ADF participating for the second time as a full member.

The Malaysian contingent comprises 415 officers and 3,322 other ranks, while the United States contributes 50 officers and 183 other ranks. Australia participates with seven officers and 129 other ranks.

KrS25 focuses on enhancing joint operational planning, interoperability, and logistics coordination. The U.S. contribution is led by the 2nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team of the 25th Infantry Division, supported by the 45th Field Artillery Brigade from the Oklahoma Army National Guard. Malaysian forces include the ASTROS Battery, with joint firepower coordination exercises

planned alongside U.S. High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS).

The exercise includes Staff Exercises (STAFFEX), Subject Matter Expert Exchanges (SMEE), Cross Training Exercises (CTX), and Field Training Exercises (FTX), with the FTX phase scheduled for July 24 to 29 as the exercise's main component.

Key training events encompass a live fire exercise, jungle FTX, and SMEEs covering areas such as medical services, military police, civil affairs, legal cooperation, chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, and high-yield explosives (CBRNE) response, and multi-domain operations. [Bernama] [DVIDS]

US to build naval repair facility on Philippine Island near disputed waters with China

(dnb/ms) The United States Navy will construct a boat maintenance facility on the Philippine Island of Palawan to support Philippine military vessels operating in the contested waters of the South China Sea. Announced by the US Embassy on July 16, the project will be located at Naval Detachment Oyster Bay in Puerto Princesa, a remote site near maritime flashpoints such as Ayungin Shoal.

Palawan, a long island on the western edge of the Philippines, lies close to the Spratly Islands—areas at the heart of territorial disputes involving China, the Philippines, and several other Southeast Asian nations. The facility will service small Philippine naval craft and include storage and multipurpose rooms. While the US emphasized that the site is not a military base, it is widely seen as part of broader logistical support efforts under the two countries' 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty.

The Mutual Defense Treaty commits both the Philippines and the US to support each other if either is attacked in the Pacific region. It forms the legal backbone of the alliance and is frequently cited by Washington as a guarantee that it would defend Philippine forces, vessels, or aircraft if they come under armed attack, including in the South China Sea.

The project was approved by the Philippine government and is being undertaken in coordination with the Philippine military. It follows other US-funded infrastructure developments allowed under the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), which permits US forces rotational access to select Philippine military sites. Though not an official EDCA

site, Oyster Bay plays a key role in supporting resupply missions to Ayungin Shoal, where Philippine troops remain stationed aboard the BRP Sierra Madre.

This announcement comes amid ongoing tensions with China, in exactly these waters of the South China Sea. Local officials have welcomed the new US facility, calling it a much-needed addition to defense infrastructure. [Associated Press] [Philippine News Agency] [PhilStar] [Rappler]

The announcement coincided with the completion of the 8th US-Philippines Maritime Cooperative Activity, held within the Philippines' exclusive economic zone on July 16. The bilateral exercise involved guided-missile destroyers, maritime patrol aircraft, and Philippine Coast Guard vessels, focusing on combined targeting, domain awareness, and communication drills. The operation, part of ongoing efforts to maintain regional stability and readiness, also marked the anniversary of the 2016 arbitral ruling rejecting China's expansive claims in the South China Sea—an award the US continues to recognize and support. [Philippine News Agency] [USINDOPACOM]

China overtakes US as Vietnam's top seafood market in H1 2025

(ab) In the first half of 2025, China imported over USD 1 billion of Vietnamese seafood—a 48 per cent increase year on year—surpassing the US, which imported USD 898 million amid tariff-related disruptions.

Chinese demand surged sharply while US imports declined after a May order spike ahead of July tariffs. Trade instability with the US has prompted Vietnamese exporters to shift focus toward more stable markets like China, and to diversify into Canada, Australia, South Korea, and Japan.

Such market volatility raises questions about the geopolitical and economic ramifications of the US's foreign policy towards Vietnam, and its effects on great power politics in the region. [Vietnamnet] [China Daily]

Bangladesh turns to Boeing and wheat imports to narrow U.S. trade gap

(lm) Bangladesh has signed a major wheat import agreement with the United States and is negotiating the purchase of 14 Boeing aircraft as part of a strategic

effort to rebalance trade relations and mitigate the impact of a forthcoming U.S. tariff hike. Effective August 1, Bangladeshi exports to the U.S. will face a 35 percent tariff—significantly higher than the rates imposed on competitors such as Vietnam (20 percent) and Indonesia (19 percent).

The wheat agreement, signed on July 20 in Dhaka, commits Bangladesh to importing 700,000 tonnes annually over five years. The deal, formalized between the Ministry of Food and U.S. Wheat Associates, aims to secure a stable supply of high-quality grain while demonstrating Dhaka's willingness to expand imports from the United States. This move is intended to address the persistent bilateral trade imbalance, which exceeds USD 6 billion, and to strengthen Bangladesh's position in ongoing trade negotiations.

The parallel Boeing procurement, while still under negotiation, is viewed as a complementary measure to signal high-value commitment to U.S. industry. Although delivery timelines and contract value remain undisclosed, both initiatives are seen as part of Dhaka's broader trade diplomacy ahead of the third round of bilateral talks in Washington next week.

The U.S. has explicitly called for greater Bangladeshi imports as a condition for improved tariff treatment. In response, Dhaka has proposed expanding purchases of U.S. cotton, soybeans, liquefied natural gas (LNG), and other goods. These proposals, conveyed earlier this year by senior advisers, form part of a coordinated strategy to avert lasting damage to Bangladesh's export-led growth model, particularly in the garments sector, which is highly dependent on U.S. market access. [Reuters] [The Daily Star]

U.S. deepens defense cooperation with Bangladesh; focus on unmanned aerial systems and joint exercises

(lm) The United States is advancing its strategic defense partnership with Bangladesh by supporting the development of a new Unmanned Aerial System (UAS) capability, aimed at enhancing maritime domain awareness and operational readiness in regional security and peacekeeping contexts. According to the U.S. Embassy in Dhaka, the RQ-21 Blackjack system will be jointly operated by a mixed regiment of Bangladeshi army and navy personnel.

The initiative coincides with a series of joint military exercises scheduled for the summer, reflecting a broader trajectory of interoperability and capability

building. “Exercise Tiger Lightning,” in its fourth year, emphasizes counterterrorism, jungle warfare, medical evacuation, and IED response training. “Exercise Tiger Shark 2025,” an ongoing Special Forces exchange since 2009, focuses on tactical skills including patrol boat handling and small arms marksmanship, enhancing the preparedness of Bangladesh’s Special Warfare Diving and Salvage Unit and Para Commando Brigade. Additionally, “Exercise Pacific Angel” highlights humanitarian response coordination, emphasizing the operational role of the C-130 fleet in disaster relief and aeromedical missions.[The Daily Star]

Japan provides Bhutan USD 1.72 million grant for human capital development and bilateral cooperation

(lm) Japan has granted Bhutan approximately BTN 143 million (USD 1.72 million) under the Human Resource Development Scholarship (JDS) program, aiming to boost Bhutanese human capital and strengthen bilateral ties. The grant, equivalent to JPY 243 million, was formalized through a Japanese Official Development Assistance (ODA) agreement signed in Thimphu on July 17. It will be disbursed in five tranches through December 2032.

The JDS program is designed to support postgraduate studies in fields critical to Bhutan’s development, such as economic policy, public administration, agriculture, disaster risk management, and infrastructure. Initiated in 2018, the program has so far enabled 36 Bhutanese professionals to return with master’s degrees and three with doctorates. Currently, 13 Bhutanese scholars are studying in Japan, and eight more are set to depart this summer. [Kuensel]

Cambodia and Vietnam advance legal and economic ties

(gm) Cambodia and Vietnam have advanced a series of high-level legal, political, and economic engagements last week, reinforcing bilateral coordination amid shifting regional dynamics. The two countries concluded their 9th Political Consultation on July 17 in Hanoi, co-chaired by Deputy Foreign Minister Nguyen Manh Cuong and Secretary of State Ung Rachana. The meeting reviewed implementation of past agreements, discussed emerging regional issues, and identified priorities for future cooperation. Both sides reaffirmed commitments to accelerate land border demarcation

and jointly manage shared boundary areas. [Khmer Times 1]

They also pledged to deepen cooperation in security, defense, trade, and people-to-people exchange. Officials noted strong growth in two-way trade, which surpassed USD 10 billion in 2024 and reached USD 4.34 billion in the first half of 2025. Cambodian exports totaled USD 2.19 billion during that period, while imports from Vietnam stood at USD 2.15 billion.

Separately, a Cambodian delegation led by Secretary of State Ung Rachana also met with Vietnamese Foreign Minister Bui Thanh Son, agreeing to promote high-level visits and finalize new bilateral cooperation agreements. Preparations are underway for Senate President Hun Sen's participation in Vietnam's 80th National Day and upcoming joint mechanisms, including the 21st session of the Joint Committee and the 13th Conference on Border Provinces Cooperation. [Vietnam News]

These developments follow recent economic outreach efforts, including the Cambodia Chamber of Commerce's (CCC) July 14–16 mission to Vietnam. The CCC and the Vietnam–Cambodia Business Association signed a memorandum of understanding aimed at institutionalizing trade facilitation, joint investment, and market access initiatives. [Khmer Times 2] [Kiri Post]

Officials on both sides reiterated their shared goal of increasing bilateral trade to USD 20 billion and emphasized the strategic importance of economic diversification and cross-border infrastructure. Cambodia has framed the Vietnam relationship as a stabilizing alternative amid ongoing trade friction with the United States and unresolved tensions with Thailand. [Khmer Times 3]

Cambodia and Vietnam maintain extensive cooperation across agriculture, finance, telecommunications, and manufacturing. Vietnam currently holds more than 200 investment projects in Cambodia, with a combined value approaching USD 3 billion. Both sides are expected to continue expanding practical engagement through consultation platforms and regional mechanisms.

Cambodia, Australia advance climate-resilient water governance initiative

(gm) Cambodia and Australia have launched a national consultation process for the Cambodia Climate

Resilience Water Governance Programme (CCRWGP), a new initiative designed to modernize the country's water governance systems and improve resilience to climate-related risks.

The July 17 workshop in Phnom Penh brought together over 170 representatives from government agencies, civil society, development partners, and the private sector. The consultation marked a key step in finalizing a coordinated roadmap aimed at improving water management in the face of increasing droughts, floods, and shifting rainfall patterns.

The CCRWGP will support legal reform, inclusive governance, data systems, and locally led pilot programs. The initiative aligns with Cambodia's Pentagonal Strategy and long-term development goals, including the aim to achieve upper-middle-income status by 2030.

Phase I implementation is expected to begin later this year, with the Ministry of Water Resources and Meteorology leading coordination and incorporating feedback from the workshop into the final program design. Australia's development cooperation will provide technical and institutional support for the effort. [Phnom Penh Post]

China-aligned hackers escalate cyber espionage against Taiwanese semiconductor sector

(dz) Cyberattacks linked to China against Taiwan's semiconductor industry are on the rise, according to findings of an American enterprise cybersecurity and compliance firm. The current escalation is notable given the intensifying geopolitical and technological rivalry. As Washington tightens export controls on advanced chip technologies and the China-U.S. tech race accelerates, Beijing appears to have stepped up its intelligence-gathering efforts to close the gap.

According to cybersecurity firm Proofpoint, at least three China-linked hacking groups—UNK_FistBump, UNK_DropPitch, and UNK_SparkyCarp—conducted targeted phishing campaigns between March and June. These attacks focused on Taiwanese semiconductor design and supply chain firms, as well as investment analysts covering the sector. Approximately 15 to 20 organizations were targeted, including small enterprises, multinational banks, and leading chipmakers such as TSMC, MediaTek, UMC, Nanya, and RealTek. [Proofpoint]

These cyber operations reflect a broader trend of increasing attacks by Chinese actors on sectors critical to the global tech ecosystem. In parallel, groups such as Volt Typhoon and Salt Typhoon—believed to be affiliated with the People's Liberation Army and Chinese intelligence services—have reportedly breached U.S. infrastructure networks, allegedly as part of preparations for potential conflict.

While Beijing consistently denies involvement in state-backed cyber espionage and asserts that cyberattacks are a global threat it firmly opposes, cybersecurity experts suggest that China-aligned hackers often act with implicit state support. Their primary targets tend to be advanced technology sectors vital to China's national development objectives. These operations are widely believed to support China's drive for semiconductor self-sufficiency—an essential component of its ambitions in artificial intelligence and long-term technological sovereignty. [Reuters] [Taipei Times]

China warns U.S. of confrontation ahead of August 1 tariff deadline

(efg/dql) China's Commerce Minister Wang Wentao has called for restoring stable trade relations with the United States, stressing the importance of dialogue over confrontation and urging Washington to act with the responsibility expected of a major power. Speaking ahead of an August 12 deadline for a durable tariff agreement, Wang warned that failure to reach a deal could trigger new tariffs exceeding 100 percent, severely disrupting global supply chains. [Xinhua] [China Daily]

Wang emphasized the economic interdependence between the two countries and pointed to earlier negotiations in Geneva (see AiR No. 19, May/2025, 2) and London (see AiR No. 23, June/2025, 2) as proof that disputes can be resolved through high-level communication. He reiterated that China would defend its national interests but remained open to cooperation, aiming to reduce misunderstandings and enhance consensus.

Signs of easing tensions include a 32 percent increase in China's rare earth exports in June, potentially linked to recent trade agreements, and U.S. chipmaker Nvidia's resumption of AI chip sales to China. Wang cited these developments as evidence that forced economic decoupling is unfeasible. [AInvest]

While acknowledging that U.S. tariffs on Chinese goods remain high at 53.6 percent, Wang noted that both countries recognize their mutual dependence, particularly in sectors where goods and services are difficult to substitute. Nonetheless, he reaffirmed China's readiness to engage in talks, while also being prepared for a trade conflict if necessary. [Reuters]

On the other side, U.S. Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent told reporters that the Trump administration prioritizes the quality of trade agreements over meeting the August 1 deadline, when steep tariffs will take effect for countries without deals. While President Trump may extend the deadline for countries engaged in productive negotiations, Bessent warned that failure to reach agreements could result in higher tariffs, increasing pressure on trading partners.

He added that trade talks with China are expected soon, acknowledging concerns over China's continued imports of sanctioned Russian and Iranian oil and overcapacity in sectors like steel. He also encouraged European allies to align with Washington on secondary tariffs against Russia. [Reuters 2]

Despite aggressive efforts, Washington has struggled to finalize trade deals with key partners such as India, the European Union, and Japan. Talks have proven more difficult than anticipated, leading to mounting frustration abroad. The EU is now exploring retaliatory "anti-coercion" measures, including restrictions on U.S. services and public procurement access, as hopes for a balanced agreement with Washington fade. German Chancellor Friedrich Merz criticized the U.S. stance, saying it resists a symmetrical tariff framework. [CNBC 1] [Financial Express] [CNBC 2] [News.am]

Meanwhile, US President Donald Trump may reportedly visit China to meet with Chinese President Xi Jinping ahead of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Seoul, scheduled between October 31 and November 1. Alternatively, the two leaders could hold talks on the sidelines of the summit in South Korea. [South China Morning Post]

China rejects U.S. threats of secondary sanctions over trade with Russia

In a statement earlier last week, China's foreign ministry responded to President Donald Trump's threat to impose secondary sanctions on countries buying Russian oil. The tariffs would take effect if Russia and Ukraine fail to reach a peace agreement within 50 days.

The ministry reiterated China's stance on the Ukraine crisis, reaffirming its firm opposition to "illicit unilateral sanctions and long-arm jurisdiction. It urged all parties to support a political resolution and warned that "tariff wars have no winners," adding that "coercion and pressure will lead nowhere." [Reuters 3] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, People's Republic of China] [Global Times]

Similarly, NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte warned that countries like China, Brazil, and India could face serious consequences if they persist in buying Russian oil. He urged these countries to pressure President Putin to "get serious about peace talks," warning that the sanctions would "slam back" significantly. [Reuters 4]

China, India, and Brazil—responsible for the bulk of Russia's energy exports—are at the center of Washington's growing concerns. Along with South Africa, they form the core of the BRICS alliance, which has been increasingly vocal about challenging U.S. global dominance.

U.S. senior banker barred from leaving China amid criminal probe

(dql) A senior Wells Fargo banker, Chenyue Mao, has been barred from leaving China due to her involvement in an unspecified criminal investigation, as confirmed by the Chinese foreign ministry on July 21. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China]

The U.S. citizen and managing director at the bank—a major American multinational financial services firm—is under official "exit restrictions" imposed by Chinese authorities. In response, Wells Fargo has suspended all business travel to China and is seeking Mao's release through official channels. [Reuters 1]

The U.S. embassy criticized the use of what it called "arbitrary exit bans," highlighting their negative impact on U.S.-China relations and urging Beijing to allow affected U.S. citizens to return home. The Chinese foreign ministry defended the measure, asserting that all individuals in China must comply with local laws. [BBC]

In a separate case, the U.S. State Department has confirmed that China has blocked a U.S. Patent and Trademark Office employee from leaving the country, despite the individual being there in a personal capacity. While the person's identity and detention

status remain undisclosed, the case is under close review, with ongoing diplomatic engagement.

The individual, a Commerce Department employee, reportedly traveled to China months ago to visit family but was barred from leaving for allegedly failing to disclose U.S. government employment on his visa application.

According to critics, these cases reflect a broader pattern of China using exit bans on both domestic and foreign nationals in connection with civil disputes, regulatory enforcement, or criminal investigations. Analysts argue that such measures are sometimes employed as tools for political pressure or diplomatic leverage. [Reuters 2]

China accuses Canada of violating WTO regulation over new tariffs

(dz) The Chinese embassy in Ottawa has condemned Canada's latest imposition of 25 percent tariffs on steel imports containing Chinese-origin steel, accusing Ottawa of violating World Trade Organization (WTO) rules and disrupting global trade.

The move, announced by Prime Minister Mark Carney on July 16, targets steel melted and poured in China, even if processed in third countries, and is aimed at shielding Canada's steel industry from alleged dumping triggered by U.S. tariffs.

This development comes shortly after Canada and China agreed in June to begin mending strained trade relations. The embassy criticized the measure as unjustified, legally baseless, and damaging to bilateral economic ties, warning it could undermine efforts to restore cooperation.

Canada had already imposed 25 percent tariffs on Chinese steel and aluminum and last year implemented 100 percent tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles, effectively shutting them out of its market. In retaliation, China imposed tariffs on Canadian agricultural goods worth USD 2.6 billion and launched an anti-dumping probe into Canadian canola, with results expected by September, though the review could be extended.

The Chinese embassy indicated that if Canada withdraws its discriminatory tariffs, China may reciprocate by suspending or lifting its countermeasures. Despite the escalating tensions, Canadian officials, including International Trade

Minister Maninder Sidhu, have expressed readiness to reengage in trade talks with China. [The New York Times] [Reuters]

China and Iran reaffirm strategic ties

(dz) On July 16, in Tianjin, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Iranian Foreign Minister Seyed Abbas Araghchi reaffirmed the long-standing diplomatic partnership between their two countries, pledging to deepen mutual cooperation amid continued global geopolitical tensions.

Wang praised the resilience of China-Iran relations over the past half-century, emphasizing that the bilateral partnership had "withstood the test of the volatile international landscape." He reaffirmed Beijing's support for Iran's sovereignty, national dignity, and its efforts to resist power politics and uphold its legitimate interests through diplomatic negotiations. He also expressed China's readiness to expand strategic coordination, enhance trust, and promote sustainable, long-term development of bilateral ties.

Araghchi, in turn, thanked China for its continued diplomatic support, stating that Iran remained firmly committed to strengthening the comprehensive strategic partnership. He expressed Iran's willingness to enhance high-level exchanges and mutual backing in international forums.

The two sides also discussed the Iranian nuclear issue. Araghchi reiterated Iran's position that it does not seek to develop nuclear weapons but firmly upholds its right to peaceful nuclear energy. He emphasized Iran's openness to renewed negotiations based on equality and mutual respect.

In response, Wang reaffirmed China's consistent opposition to the use or threat of force and its support for dialogue-driven solutions. He welcomed Iran's diplomatic posture and pledged that China would continue playing a constructive role in facilitating negotiations and promoting peace and stability across the Middle East region. [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China] [Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Beijing]

South Africa seeks to deepen trade ties with China amid looming U.S. tariffs

(dql) Facing a 30 percent U.S. tariff on exports from August 1, South Africa is seeking to deepen trade ties

with China to offset potential economic fallout and address its growing trade imbalance with Beijing. A high-level delegation led by Deputy President Paul Mashatile visited Beijing to promote investment and diversify South Africa's exports toward higher-value goods such as pharmaceuticals, automotive components, and green technologies.

Speaking at the South Africa-China Investment Forum during the China International Supply Chain Expo on July 16, Mashatile highlighted that South Africa's trade deficit with China had ballooned to nearly USD 10 billion by 2023. He stressed the need to overcome barriers to Chinese market access and expand value-added exports to rebalance the trade relationship.

While exports to China reached over USD 30 billion in 2023—more than double those to the U.S.—analysts warned against over-dependence on China, noting that while China is a key alternative, it cannot simply replace the U.S., especially considering potential "chilling effects" on U.S. investments in South Africa, such as Ford's USD 1 billion commitment now reportedly under review.

The U.S. remains a vital market, with 2024 exports totaling USD 14.7 billion. Yet China's move to scrap tariffs on goods from 53 African countries (excluding Eswatini) gives South Africa duty-free access, though competition and the need for quality improvements remain critical challenges. [SCMP]

Argentina eases entry requirements for Chinese nationals

(dql) Argentina has eased entry requirements for Chinese citizens by allowing those with valid U.S. visas to enter the country without needing an Argentine visa for tourism or business. The policy shift, announced under President Javier Milei, aims to boost tourism and remove barriers that have hindered the country's economic development. The move mirrors China's recent decision to grant visa-free access to citizens of Argentina and other major Latin American economies, reflecting a broader effort to strengthen bilateral ties.

China is Argentina's second-largest trading partner and a key investor in infrastructure, energy, and mining. It has also provided crucial financial support through a multi-billion dollar currency swap line.

The decision underscores Argentina's growing alignment with China, further solidified by its 2022 accession to the Belt and Road Initiative, and highlights

the geopolitical significance of deepening Sino-Latin American cooperation. [Reuters]

China turns to Brazil to secure strategic minerals, expand industrial ties

(dz) China is reportedly redirecting its critical minerals supply chain through Brazil in a subtle yet strategic move to mitigate ongoing trade tensions with the United States, signaling another significant shift in global trade dynamics. According to a new report by the China–Brazil Business Council (CBBC), Brazil's rare earth compound exports to China surged to USD 6.7 million in the first half of 2025—tripling year-on-year—even as Brazil's overall trade surplus with China narrowed to USD 12 billion, the lowest level since 2019.

This increase underscores Beijing's efforts to diversify supply sources and reduce its overreliance on domestic rare earth production amid intensifying geopolitical pressures. The surge is also linked to China's evolving industrial policy and its ongoing trade friction with the U.S., suggesting that Brazil is absorbing some of the pressure resulting from these tensions.

Analysts note that China is now applying its "energy and food security" strategy to rare earths, seeking to secure stable access to strategic minerals abroad. This approach aligns with Beijing's broader consolidation of its rare earth sector, which currently controls over 90 percent of global refining capacity through export quotas and a tightly regulated licensing system.

Notably, there has also been remarkable growth in Brazil's exports of manufactured goods to China, including items such as taps, rubber tubing, and gas-measuring devices. These products have increased by over 1,000 percent, reaching a total value of USD 55 million. At the same time, Chinese exports to Brazil have risen sharply—particularly hybrid vehicles, which increased by 52 percent in unit terms to USD 1.38 billion, now accounting for 84 percent of Brazil's hybrid vehicle market. [South China Morning Post] [Rare Earth Exchanges]

These trends reflect Beijing's strategic pivot toward emerging markets like Brazil as key partners in reshaping global supply chains and expanding economic ties beyond the influence of the United States and Europe.

This trajectory reflects a broader Chinese strategy that combines geopolitical diversification with industrial

policy. For Brazil, the opportunity lies in building domestic processing capacity and establishing governance frameworks to transform raw mineral exports into long-term strategic assets. As structural interdependencies deepen, China is expected to pursue long-term agreements, invest in local mining and refining operations, and explore partnerships in magnet alloy production—mirroring its earlier initiatives in Brazil's energy and agricultural sectors.

Meanwhile, the United States has intensified its efforts to challenge China's dominance in the rare earths market by introducing a new pricing system. This initiative offers guaranteed prices to domestic producers such as MP Materials in an attempt to spur investment. Analysts suggest that this U.S. pricing strategy could reshape global supply chains, potentially raising costs for manufacturers while offering an alternative to China's low-cost market control. [Reuters 1]

In the latest development, Brazil's finance ministry has confirmed that Brazil is set to establish a tax advisory office in China to strengthen cooperation on tax and customs matters, reflecting deepening ties between the two countries amid rising global trade tensions.

The new office in Beijing will support information exchange to combat tax violations and offer technical guidance to foreign investors, aiming to enhance legal certainty and improve the business environment. According to the ministry, the decision is not politically motivated but responds to the growing importance of Brazil-China trade relations.

Brazil currently operates tax attaché offices in Washington, Buenos Aires, Asunción, and Montevideo. The Beijing office, under discussion since early 2023, is seen as marking a strategic step in Brazil's evolving foreign economic policy. [Reuters 2]

Indian Prime Minister Modi to attend Maldives' Independence Day amid diplomatic recalibration

(lm) Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi will make a state visit to the Maldives from July 25–26, during which he will serve as guest of honor at the country's 60th Independence Day celebrations and inaugurate multiple joint infrastructure and development projects. The visit also marks 60 years of diplomatic relations between the two countries and comes amid a broader reset in bilateral ties.

The state visit – Modi's third to the Maldives, but his first under the Muizzu administration – follows a period of early turbulence in the Maldives–India relationship after President Mohamed Muizzu assumed office in late 2023 on an explicitly anti-India platform, pledging to expel Indian military personnel. Tensions intensified further in early 2024 following disparaging remarks made by Maldivian deputy ministers and Muizzu's pointed comments during a visit to China. However, both governments have since prioritized normalization through high-level engagement and economic collaboration.

One key milestone in this rapprochement was India's extension of a USD 400 million currency swap agreement to the Maldives Monetary Authority in October 2024, which significantly helped ease the country's foreign exchange liquidity pressures. The agreement underscored India's role as a vital economic partner at a time of fiscal vulnerability for Malé.

During his visit, Modi is expected to meet President Muizzu for bilateral talks, inaugurate several India-supported development initiatives, and witness the signing of multiple memoranda of understanding aimed at strengthening cooperation across sectors such as infrastructure, health, and maritime security. The visit is being positioned by both sides as a symbol of renewed trust and mutual interest. [The Sun 1] [The Sun 2]

India-Nepal boundary and security talks resume ahead of Nepali leader's visit to New Delhi in September

(lm/as) Nepal and India are reactivating a range of bilateral mechanisms related to cross-border security, legal cooperation, and boundary management after several years of diplomatic stagnation. These developments come ahead of Nepali Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli's official visit to New Delhi on September 16, his first since returning to office in 2024. The visit is expected to formalize a broader normalization process, although no official agenda has yet been released. For both sides, the meeting offers an opportunity to reset relations that had been strained by a boundary dispute triggered in 2019, when India released a new political map including the Kalapani region—an area at the tri-junction of Nepal, India, and China, claimed by both Nepal and India but long administered by Indian security forces. [The Kathmandu Post 1]

In late July, Nepal and India are scheduled to hold home secretary-level talks on July 23–24 in New Delhi, resuming discussions that have been dormant for nearly a decade. These meetings aim to advance stalled negotiations on an Extradition Treaty and a Mutual Legal Assistance Agreement. They will also explore practical collaboration on border security—including counter-terrorism, drug and human trafficking, joint management of integrated check posts, and forensic and intelligence cooperation. Additionally, they will build upon recommendations from the March 2025 Joint Working Group on Border Management in Pokhara.

A second key forum, the Nepal–India Boundary Working Group (BWG), is set to reconvene in New Delhi from July 27 to 29, marking its first meeting since 2019. The BWG, established in 2014, is the highest-level bilateral mechanism tasked with technical fieldwork along the Nepal–India border, excluding the disputed areas of Kalapani and Susta. It oversees the construction, repair, and GPS-based verification of boundary pillars, clearance of no-man's land, and the identification of cross-border land holdings by nationals of either country. These technical efforts were largely halted by the Covid-19 pandemic and the escalation of the Kalapani dispute, though some temporary maintenance has continued through Nepal's Armed Police Force and India's Sashastra Seema Bal. According to Nepal's Department of Survey, out of 8,554 boundary markers, 1,325 are missing and nearly 2,000 are damaged. [The Kathmandu Post 2] [The Kathmandu Post 3]

The resumption of both home secretary and BWG meetings signals a calibrated diplomatic reset. Prime Minister Oli's visit is deliberately timed to coincide with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's birthday on September 17 and reflects Nepal's effort to re-engage with India at a high level following years of strained ties. Although Oli has publicly denied any deterioration in bilateral relations, his administration had faced difficulties in securing a visit since the 2020 publication of Nepal's map asserting claims over Kalapani. The situation was further complicated by his official visit to China in late 2024 and Nepal's formal alignment with Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative, both of which intensified Indian suspicion. While prior encounters between Oli and Modi—such as those on the sidelines of the 2024 UN General Assembly and the 2025 BIMSTEC summit—were seen as cordial but inconclusive, recent diplomatic efforts appear to have restored the basis for structured engagement.

No India-U.S. mini trade deal expected before August 1 as key sectors block interim pact

(lm) India and the United States are unlikely to reach a mini trade agreement before the August 1 deadline, as critical disagreements remain unresolved despite intensified negotiations. The fifth round of talks, held in Washington from July 13–17, concluded without a breakthrough. The negotiations were led by India's chief negotiator Rajesh Agrawal and U.S. Assistant Trade Representative Brendan Lynch and focused on securing an interim arrangement before the suspension of reciprocal U.S. tariffs—set at 26 percent—expires.

Talks centered on longstanding sticking points, including agriculture, dairy, automobiles, and tariff relief. India has firmly rejected U.S. demands for duty concessions in the agricultural and dairy sectors, citing domestic sensitivities and a consistent policy of excluding dairy from all trade agreements. Domestic farmer associations have also called on the Indian government to exclude agriculture entirely from the deal, underscoring the sector's political and economic sensitivity.

India instead seeks the removal of the 26 percent supplementary tariffs and reductions in existing duties on steel (currently 50 percent), aluminum (50 percent), and automobiles (25 percent). It is also pressing for improved access for its labor-intensive export sectors—such as textiles, garments, leather goods, chemicals, shrimp, bananas, and oil seeds—and minimum import price protections in select categories.

The U.S. is pushing for broader tariff concessions and market access for industrial goods, electric vehicles, petrochemicals, genetically modified crops, wines, dairy items, and tree nuts. Discussions also included regulatory cooperation on non-market economies and export controls (SCOMET).

Although a broader Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA) is still targeted for conclusion by September or October 2025—with the goal of doubling bilateral trade to USD 500 billion—both sides had aimed to seal an interim deal before the August 1 deadline to avoid renewed tariff measures imposed by the Trump administration earlier this year. While more than a dozen countries have already received formal tariff notices, India has not, leaving room for continued negotiations. [The Times of India 1] [The Hindu] [NDTV]

A sixth round of talks is scheduled for the second half of August, when a U.S. delegation will visit Delhi. India's

position remains that any trade deal must safeguard core national interests, particularly in sectors with high employment or political exposure. [Upstox] [The Times of India 2] [CNBC TV 18]

India-UK to sign major free trade agreement aimed at doubling bilateral trade by 2030

(lm) Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi will travel to the United Kingdom from July 23–24 to sign the long-awaited India–UK Free Trade Agreement (FTA), a landmark deal expected to double bilateral trade to USD 120 billion by 2030. Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal will accompany him for high-level talks with UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer, covering trade, investment, defense, climate cooperation, and professional mobility. The agreement, finalized in May and now undergoing final legal review, is one of India's most comprehensive bilateral trade deals to date. [Deccan Herald] [Business Today]

The FTA will eliminate duties on 99 percent of Indian exports to the UK and reduce Indian tariffs on 90 percent of British tariff lines, including 92 percent of current UK exports to India. Key tariff concessions include cutting India's duties on whisky and gin from 150 percent to 75 percent immediately, and eventually to 40 percent over a ten-year phase-in. Automotive duties on select UK vehicle imports will be reduced from 100 percent to 10 percent, initially covering internal combustion engines and gradually expanding to electric and hybrid vehicles under quota arrangements.

The agreement also enhances mobility for professionals and service providers. Both countries have committed to granting national treatment in sectors such as telecommunications, construction, and environmental services. India has pledged to maintain a 74 percent cap on foreign direct investment (FDI) in banking and insurance for UK firms, ensuring regulatory predictability.

In parallel, a new Double Contribution Convention (DCC) will allow workers to pay social security in only one country during temporary postings, addressing longstanding concerns over fragmented benefit records. Creative professionals, including chefs, musicians, and independent service providers, are also expected to benefit from liberalized entry rules.

The agreement will require Cabinet approval in India and parliamentary ratification in the UK, with

implementation likely in 2026. Negotiations on a separate Bilateral Investment Treaty (BIT) are still underway.

The UK is currently India's sixth-largest investor, with USD 36 billion in cumulative foreign direct investment (FDI), while India has invested nearly USD 20 billion in the UK. Trade currently stands at USD 60 billion, and both sides have positioned the FTA as a key driver of future growth. [Financial Express] [FirstPost]

US reduces tariff on Indonesian goods to 19 Percent

(ms) U.S. President Donald Trump has agreed to lower tariffs on Indonesian exports from 32 percent to 19 percent, the most favorable rate among ASEAN countries, following direct negotiations with Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto. The announcement was made on Tuesday, July 16, after weeks of intensive discussions between trade officials from both countries.

The reduced tariff rate averts an earlier U.S. plan to impose a blanket 32 percent tariff on all Indonesian imports starting August 1. Indonesia secured the improved terms through high-level meetings, including negotiations between Indonesia's Coordinating Minister for Economic Affairs Airlangga Hartarto and U.S. Secretary of Commerce Howard Lutnick in Washington, D.C.

In exchange, the U.S. will receive full tariff- and non-tariff-barrier-free access to the Indonesian market—marking the first time American companies will enjoy unrestricted entry into Indonesia's economy. President Trump emphasized that third-country trans-shipments through Indonesia will also be subject to the 19 percent rate if those countries face higher tariffs.

Indonesia has committed to import USD 15 billion in American energy products and USD 4.5 billion in agricultural goods. The agreement also includes a pledge to purchase 50 Boeing aircraft, mostly 777 passenger jets, though details on the purchasing entities—whether state-owned or private—have yet to be confirmed by Indonesian officials.

In an exclusive development tied to the broader agreement, Indonesia's sovereign wealth fund Danantara is preparing to sign an USD 8 billion engineering, procurement, and construction contract with U.S. engineering firm KBR Inc. (formerly Kellogg Brown & Root) to build 17 modular oil refineries across

the country, according to sources and an official economic ministry presentation seen by Reuters.

The refinery deal, disclosed by Economic Minister Airlangga Hartarto during a closed-door briefing with business leaders, further deepens the trade and energy cooperation between the two countries. While previously unreported, the contract represents a significant U.S. industrial footprint in Indonesia's energy infrastructure push.

President Trump also highlighted Indonesia's critical copper reserves—vital to electric vehicle and semiconductor production—as a strategic interest. Under the deal, Indonesian copper will enjoy tariff-free access to the U.S. market, even as tariffs on copper from other global suppliers have increased.

The agreement marks a strategic economic shift for Indonesia, enhancing trade access while inviting significant U.S. investment in its energy sector. It also signals a broader pivot in U.S.-ASEAN trade relations, positioning Indonesia as a key partner in America's regional economic strategy. [Antara] [BBC] [Jakarta Global] [Reuters] [Tempo] [Voice of Indonesia]

Indonesia and China strengthen ASEAN cooperation and regional initiatives

(ms) Foreign Minister Sugiono met with the Ambassador of China to ASEAN, Hou Yanqi, on 15 July in Jakarta to discuss follow-ups from the ASEAN–China Post-Ministerial Conference recently held in Kuala Lumpur.

During the meeting, Sugiono emphasized the importance of strong ASEAN–China collaboration in promoting regional peace, stability, and economic prosperity. He reaffirmed Indonesia's support for practical cooperation that delivers tangible benefits for the ASEAN community.

Key topics included the implementation of the ASEAN–China Plan of Action 2026–2030, preparations for signing the upgraded ASEAN–China Free Trade Area (ACFTA 3.0) at the ASEAN-China Summit in October, and deepening collaboration under the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

Sugiono also expressed appreciation for China's commitment to signing the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ) Protocol without reservations, calling it an important step toward lasting peace in the region.

China has been ASEAN's comprehensive strategic partner since 2021 and remains its largest trading partner for goods, accounting for over 18 percent of ASEAN's total trade in 2024. Both sides reiterated their commitment to strengthening connectivity, supply chain resilience, and digital economy cooperation under ongoing regional initiatives. [Foreign Ministry, Indonesia]

Indonesia, Belarus deepen ties with focus on fertilizer trade

(ms) President Prabowo Subianto met Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko in Minsk on July 15, as part of a broader diplomatic tour aimed at strengthening Indonesia's global partnerships. During their three-hour meeting, held at Lukashenko's residence, the two leaders discussed bilateral cooperation, with a particular focus on trade in fertilizers and agricultural commodities.

Prabowo invited Lukashenko to visit Indonesia, an offer the Belarusian president welcomed, recalling his previous visit in 2013. The meeting followed Prabowo's attendance at the Bastille Day parade in Paris and concluded his two-week diplomatic tour through the Middle East, South America, and Europe.

Fertilizer trade was a key point of discussion. Indonesia is seeking reliable access to potash and other fertilizers to support domestic food production. Belarus, one of the world's leading potash exporters, currently supplies more than 78 percent of its exports to Indonesia in the form of fertilizers. In 2024, bilateral trade between the two countries grew 44 percent to USD 128.4 million, according to the Indonesian Foreign Ministry. [Antara] [Indonesia Business Post] [Pozirk]

Japanese man sentenced to 3.5 years in jail by Chinese court for spying

(ja) The Beijing No. 2 Intermediate People's Court convicted a Japanese Astellas Pharma Inc. employee of espionage, sentencing him to three years and six months in prison.

The man in question had served as an executive at the pharmaceutical company's China unit and a senior official of the Japanese Chamber of Commerce and Industry in China. He was detained in March 2023, formally arrested in October of the same year, and

indicted in August 2024. The Japanese government has repeatedly urged China to free the individual, including at a summit between Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba and Chinese President Xi Jinping that took place in Peru in November 2024.

China has recently stepped up its scrutiny of foreign individuals and organizations as part of efforts to strengthen national security ever since the introduction of a counterespionage law in 2014 and a national security law in 2015. Since then, 17 Japanese citizens have been detained for alleged spying, with five still remaining in China.

A revised counterespionage law had also been implemented in 2023, broadening the scope of what constitutes spying activities to bolster national security, a move that worried foreign businesses and expatriates about its arbitrary enforcement.

The detention of Japanese nationals in China has been a significant contributing factor to the decline of Japanese expatriates in the country, with the figure falling below 100,000 for the first time in 20 years to 97,538 in October 2024. [Kyodo News] [Al Jareeza]

Japan, Kazakhstan commit to cooperation on nuclear test aftereffects

(fw) Kazakh Prime Minister Olzhas Bektenov met with Hidehiko Yuzaki, Governor of Japan's Hiroshima Prefecture, on July 16. Part of Yuzaki's visit to the former Soviet Union where more than 450 nuclear tests were conducted, the meeting emphasized expanding the strategic partnership between Kazakhstan and Japan, strengthening economic cooperation, working together to support victims of radiation and prevent the spread of nuclear weapons. [NHK 1] [NKH 2]

A key topic was enhancing collaboration between Hiroshima Prefecture and Kazakhstan's Abai region, particularly through the Hiroshima-Semey Initiative and participation in the Mayors for Peace international movement. Both parties expressed commitment to cooperation ahead of the upcoming Review Conferences of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT).

In addition, Bektenov stated Kazakhstan's intentions to deepen cooperation with Japan in health care and social support for individuals affected by radiation, alongside advancing radioactive medicine technologies. Bektenov welcomed Japan's planned

grant allocation aimed at mitigating the consequences of nuclear tests in the Semey region, expressing confidence that this support would sustainably enhance healthcare outcomes. [Kazinform International News Agency]

Between 1949 and 1989, the Semey Test Site was one of the Soviet Union's primary nuclear weapons testing grounds, where hundreds of nuclear explosions occurred. These tests caused severe environmental contamination and long-term health problems for the local population, including radiation sickness, increased cancer rates, genetic mutations, and birth defects.

Japan lodges protest against South Korean military drills in disputed territory

(ja) The Japanese government submitted a strong protest against South Korea on July 17 after it had conducted military drills near remote islets in the Sea of Japan that Japan claims but are currently controlled by South Korea. [Kyodo News]

The South Korean navy confirmed that it had carried out the drills, the first since President Lee Jae Myung took office in June. South Korea's Yonhap News Agency also reported that troops did not land on the islets and that the biannual regular training was closed to the public and was held in a similar scale to previous years. [Yonhap News Agency]

Sweden's SAAB proposes new warship to Japan

(dql) Swedish defense firm Saab is proposing its CB90 fast combat boat to the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force (JGSDF), offering a highly maneuverable, multipurpose platform suitable for a variety of missions, including troop transport, surveillance, and amphibious operations. The CB90, already in use by several countries including the U.S. and Ukraine, features high speed (over 45 knots), a range of 550 km, and customizable configurations such as remote weapon stations and advanced sensor systems. [Militarnyi]

Saab's proposal comes amid Japan's efforts to bolster defense capabilities in the Nansei Islands in response to China's growing military assertiveness. The CB90 could significantly enhance the JGSDF's ability to

defend remote islands by filling operational gaps left by current platforms such as RHIBs, transport vessels, and AAV-7s, which each suffer from limitations in speed, protection, or range. The CB90's versatility could support troop landings, reconnaissance, and special operations in both conflict and peacetime scenarios, including humanitarian relief and maritime patrols.

One logistical hurdle is the distance between Japan and Sweden, which raises concerns about cost and sustainment. However, Saab is open to local production under license, following a model already used in other countries.

If pursued, Japan could become a regional hub for production and export of the CB90, similar to its ongoing roles in license-producing Finland's Patria AMV and exporting domestically produced vessels like the Caimen-Japan to Southeast Asia. [Naval News]

Japan offers upgrade Mogami frigate to Australia

(fw) On July 22, the Japanese government held a briefing in Canberra for Australian political and business leaders to promote an upgraded version of its Mogami-class frigate for export. Japan is seeking to secure a contract for Australia's planned acquisition of 11 new frigates, a project estimated at AUD 10 billion (USD 6.51 billion).

During the presentation, Takeshi Ishikawa, Commissioner of the Acquisition, Technology and Logistics Agency at Japan's Ministry of Defense, emphasized that the enhanced Mogami-class frigate is capable of integrating with U.S. military systems. This feature, he noted, would significantly enhance interoperability between Australia, the United States, and Japan.

Ishikawa also highlighted the frigate's operational efficiency, noting that it requires only about 90 crew members—approximately half the typical complement for a vessel of its size. This reduced crew requirement, he explained, could result in cost savings equivalent to 30 percent of the ship's hull price.

Australia is expected to choose between the upgraded Japanese Mogami frigate and a competing German design by the end of the year. [The Japan Times]

Malaysia and Singapore explore strategic cooperation

(tl) Malaysia and Singapore are exploring plans to collaborate in three strategic areas, including GovTech, affordable housing, and public sector reform. Malaysia's Chief Secretary to the Government, Shamsul Azri Abu Bakar, highlighted these areas as prioritized collaboration during his three-day working visit to Singapore last week.

Malaysia aims to learn from Singapore's experience in implementing GovTech initiatives and managing public housing through its Housing Board. Discussions also focused on reforming public sector practices to enhance governance and service delivery.

Singapore welcomed the cooperation, signaling openness to sharing best practices to strengthen bilateral ties and institutional capabilities. In a separate remark, Shamsul also pointed to Singapore's longer life expectancy, urging Malaysians to lead healthier lifestyles as part of preventive healthcare efforts. [Bernama]

Malaysia to follow diplomatic protocol on controversial US ambassador nomination

(tl) Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim has responded to the proposed nomination of Nick Adams as the next US ambassador to Malaysia, stating that it is still too early to take a firm position. While the announcement was made by the US President Donald Trump on social media, Malaysian officials have yet to receive a formal communication regarding the appointment.

Anwar emphasized that Malaysia would handle the matter in line with established diplomatic procedures, highlighting the importance of maintaining healthy bilateral ties with the United States. [Malay Mail 1]

The nomination has sparked public and political debate in Malaysia. Adams, an Australian-born media personality who became a US citizen in 2021, is known for his provocative online persona and staunch support for Trump. Despite having no formal and traditional experience in diplomacy, Adams has frequently appeared at Trump rallies and is best known for his outspoken social media presence, and media commentary, including his self-styled "alpha male" branding and open admiration for the U.S. chain Hooters. The restaurant chain is criticized for

objectifying women and often associated with "sexualized" or "male-centered" dining experience. [Malay Mail 2]

On 18 July, dozens of Malaysians staged a protest near the US Embassy in Kuala Lumpur against Adams' nomination. Organized by youth wings of Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's ruling coalition, Pakatan Harapan (Alliance of Hope), the demonstrators voiced strong objections to Adams's history of inflammatory, pro-Israel stance, and Islamophobic remarks.

A memorandum was submitted urging the US government to withdraw the nomination and instead select a more moderate and regionally sensitive candidate. The experts remarked that his nomination has placed Malaysia's government in a diplomatic dilemma, as it navigates sensitive trade negotiations with the US before 1 August deadline. [Malay Mail 3]

Malaysia to stand firm on Halal certification in US trade talk

(tl) According to Trade Minister Tengku Zafrul Aziz, Malaysia has reaffirmed that its halal certification standards and Bumiputera-related policies are non-negotiable in ongoing trade discussions with the United States.

This stance comes in response to criticism in the US Trade Representative's 2025 report (USTR), which cited Malaysia's strict halal import rules and Bumiputera equity requirements as trade obstacles that contributed to the imposition of a 24 percent tariff in April. However, Tengku Zafrul emphasized that these policies are rooted in national interests and lessons from past experiences.

Malaysia remains open to dialogue but insists that key policies, including Bumiputera participation in local ownership and strategic sectors and procurement preferences, will not be compromised under any trade deal. [Free Malaysia Today]

Bumiputera refers to the ethnic Malay population and other indigenous peoples who are accorded special rights and privileges under the country's constitution and policies.

Malaysia, Türkiye to deepen defense ties with tactical vehicle deal

(dql) Turkish defense manufacturer Katmerciler is set to sign an agreement with Malaysia for the export of its "Eren" 4×4 light tactical vehicle during this week's International Defense Industry Fair (IDEF 2025) in Istanbul. The deal will be formalized with Malaysia's Deftech, signaling strengthened defense cooperation between Türkiye and Malaysia.

Katmerciler is showcasing several key assets at IDEF 2025, including the Hizir mine-resistant ambush-protected (MRAP) vehicle and a specialized version of the O-IKA 2 unmanned ground vehicle (UGV) equipped with the UKAP remote-controlled weapon system, developed in partnership with Turkish defense electronics company Aselsan.

The Hizir features a 400-horsepower engine, V-shaped armored chassis, and energy-absorbing seats, offering strong mobility and protection in high-threat environments. It can carry nine personnel, reach speeds of up to 120 km/h, and tackle slopes up to 70 percent.

The UKAP UGV boasts advanced remote weaponry, satellite communication, and a range of capabilities—from reconnaissance and mine clearance to casualty evacuation and payload transport—underscoring Türkiye's growing technological edge in unmanned military platforms. [Anadolu Ajansı]

The agreement reflects deepening defense ties between Türkiye and Malaysia, two key Muslim-majority nations with expanding strategic cooperation. It also highlights Türkiye's ambitions to strengthen its position as a major arms exporter in Southeast Asia, while offering Malaysia access to modern, combat-proven land systems to enhance its defense capabilities.

Last month, Malaysia confirmed the deployment of three Turkish-made Anka-S unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to enhance its maritime domain awareness in the South China Sea, with operations based in Labuan and expected to begin later this year. [Asia Times]

China and Maldives sign new agreement on agriculture cooperation

(lm) The Maldives and China have signed a new agreement to implement a China-funded coconut tree pest control project aimed at safeguarding local agriculture and promoting sustainable farming practices. The initiative, signed by Maldivian Agriculture Minister Dr. Mariyam Mariya and Chinese

Ambassador Kong Xianhua, will bring Chinese experts to the Maldives to provide training, establish pest control systems, and build a dedicated facility to support implementation. [The Sun]

Maldivian President strengthens UK ties, reaffirms Commonwealth engagement, seeks investment support

(lm) Maldivian President Mohamed Muizzu has returned from a high-level visit to the United Kingdom, where he held talks with key British leaders and Commonwealth officials to deepen bilateral and multilateral cooperation. The visit marked the 60th anniversary of Maldives–UK diplomatic relations.

During the visit, Muizzu met with King Charles III, Secretary of State David Lammy, and Speaker of the House of Commons Sir Lindsay Hoyle, and participated in the Maldives–UK Business Forum. A new Memorandum of Understanding was signed between the West London Chambers of Commerce and the Maldivian Ministry of Economic Development and Trade, aiming to attract further investment. Additionally, the Maldives launched a new international branding initiative for its fisheries sector under the label From Maldives. [The Sun] [The Sun]

The President also met with Commonwealth Secretary-General Shirley Ayorkor Botchwey. Muizzu reiterated the Maldives' goal of achieving developed country status by 2040 and positioned the country as a leading advocate among Small Island Developing States (SIDS) for climate resilience, sustainable fisheries, tourism, and democratic governance. The Secretary-General expressed continued support for Maldivian development priorities. [The Sun] [The Sun]

The engagement with the Commonwealth carries particular significance given the Maldives' complex history with the organization. The country originally joined in 1982 but withdrew in 2016 under President Yameen amid criticisms of democratic erosion. It rejoined in 2020 under President Solih after initiating governance reforms and restoring international cooperation.

Mongolia, Kyrgyzstan upgrade relations

(dql) Mongolian President Khurelsukh Ukhnaa met with Adylbek Kasymaliev, Chairman of the Cabinet of

Ministers and Chief of Staff of the Kyrgyz Presidential Administration, on July 22 to mark the elevation of Mongolia–Kyrgyzstan relations to a Comprehensive Partnership.

Over ten intergovernmental and interagency agreements were signed during Khurelsukh visit to the Central Asian country, reinforcing the legal framework for cooperation and setting the stage for deeper engagement. [Montsame]

The centerpiece of the agreements was a Joint Declaration establishing a Comprehensive Partnership. Other key agreements were formalized in areas such as legal affairs, agriculture, digital development, science, culture, and education. Notable accords include an Extradition Treaty, mutual recognition of driving licenses, and a foreign ministry cooperation program for 2026–2027.

Sectoral collaboration will expand through memoranda on wool processing, digital innovation, cultural exchange, strategic studies, and joint academic research, alongside agreements between the countries' national academies of science and state broadcasters.

The wide scope of the signed documents underscores the accelerating momentum in Kyrgyz-Mongolian relations, as both nations work to institutionalize deeper ties. [Trend News Agency]

Croatia, Mongolia deepen cooperation trade and diplomacy

(dql) Mongolia and Croatia conclude a series of bilateral agreements aimed at strengthening cooperation across key sectors. Among the agreements—signed during the official visit of Croatian Foreign Minister Gordan Grlić-Radman to Ulaanbaatar on July 17, during the official visit of Croatian Foreign Minister Gordan Grlić-Radman to Ulaanbaatar, was the Agreement on International Road Transport of Goods and Passengers, which provides a legal framework to boost bilateral trade, develop new transport and logistics routes, and facilitate closer ties between citizens and businesses.

The two sides also signed a Memorandum of Understanding between their foreign ministries, intended to enhance cooperation at regional and international levels, support joint diplomatic initiatives, and promote mutual engagement in multilateral forums. A separate MoU on forestry cooperation

between Mongolia's Forest Agency and the Croatian Forests Company lays the groundwork for long-term collaboration in sustainable forest management, focusing on afforestation, reforestation, and combating desertification and land degradation.

In addition, a MoU between the Mongolian National Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Croatian Chamber of Economy aims to foster inter-chamber relations, support business initiatives, and create favorable conditions for enterprise-level cooperation. [Montsame 1] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Croatia]

In a separate meeting with Grlić-Radman, Mongolian Prime Minister Zandanshatar Gombojav reaffirmed his country's commitment to strengthening mutually beneficial cooperation with Croatia as an important partner in Europe. He emphasized that expanding ties across socio-economic sectors remains a priority of Mongolian foreign policy and welcomed the signing of bilateral agreements aimed at deepening collaboration.

Both sides discussed expanding bilateral ties in trade, economy, education, tourism, and forest management. [Montsame 2]

Mongolia, Saudi Arabia enhance connectivity with air transport agreement

(dql) During an official visit to Mongolia, President of the General Authority of Civil Aviation (GACA) of Saudi Arabia, Abdulaziz Al-Duailej, met with Mongolian Minister of Road and Transport Borkhuu Delgersaikhan to discuss enhancing bilateral cooperation in civil aviation. The meeting also saw the signing of an air transport services agreement between the two governments.

Aimed at strengthening air connectivity, the agreement aims establishes a legal and regulatory framework for air transport operations. [Saudi Press Agency] [Akipress]

India and Myanmar discuss border security following cross-border drone strike on insurgent camps

(dql) A high-level Indian military delegation, led by Lieutenant General Shrinjay Pratap Singh, visited Myanmar's capital Naypyidaw on July 16 to discuss

border security following a recent cross-border drone strike by the Indian army on separatist camps in Myanmar's Sagaing Region.

The delegation met with deputy junta chief Soe Win, where they reportedly discussed military cooperation, Indian assistance for post-earthquake recovery, border stability, rule of law, development, and the junta's planned December election.

On July 13, the Indian army launched a drone attack involving over 100 drones against bases of the United Liberation Front of Asom-Independent (ULFA-I) in Nanyun and Lahe townships, killing five insurgents, including three senior commanders, and injuring 19 others. ULFA-I is a long-standing insurgent group fighting for Assam's independence from India. [The Irrawaddy]

India shares a 1,600 km porous and mountainous border with Myanmar, facilitating rebel movements between the two countries. Ethnic insurgents from northeast India, including Naga, Manipuri, and Assamese groups, maintain camps in Sagaing and use them as launch points for attacks on Indian forces.

Rights groups urge Thailand to grant legal work rights to 107,000 Myanmar refugees

(nf) Eleven rights groups have urged the Thai government to immediately permit more than 107,000 refugees, principally Karen and Karenni from Myanmar, to work legally, pointing to decades of displacement and mounting humanitarian issues. In a joint statement issued on 18 July, the groups emphasized that numerous refugees have been in nine temporary camps in Mae Hong Son, Tak, Kanchanaburi, and Ratchaburi provinces for more than 40 years, with at least 40% being born or growing up in Thailand.

Though Thailand has been offering food, shelter, and essential services for a long time, the organizations maintained that ongoing refusal to grant legal work rights has created economic and social tensions, particularly among young people with no hope for the future. They cautioned that humanitarian aid is running out, with food and health services due to terminate in a number of shelters after 31 July 2025.

The groups urged the government to pilot a lawful work scheme for registered refugees to engage in daily commuting employment near their shelters without fear of legal consequences. They proposed an easy,

free work permit system, Thai language training, and planning cooperation with the government agencies, employers, and refugee communities.

Describing refugees as untapped human capital, the statement pointed out that enabling their self-reliance could help Thailand's aging population and support local economies. [Mizzima]

Belarus ratifies agreement with Myanmar on protection of classified information

(nf/nj) On 14 July, the Belarusian Telegraph Agency (BelTA) reported that President Aleksandr Lukashenko signed into law an agreement with Myanmar on the mutual protection of classified information. The agreement seeks to create a legal basis for the protection of state secrets exchanged in the course of bilateral cooperation.

The pact was inked amid increasing relations between the two governments, after the official visit of Myanmar's military chief, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, to Belarus in March. It aims to ensure closer cooperation between the two nations in fields such as military, military-technical cooperation, scientific studies, and other sensitive fields.

BelTA said that the agreement is aimed at not just safeguarding state secrets but also enhancing the general framework of friendly bilateral relations between Belarus and Myanmar. The step highlights the determination of the two nations to enhance strategic relations amid international criticism of their respective authoritarian regimes. [Mizzima]

Meanwhile, Belarusian universities are training Myanmar military personnel in advanced technical tactics, according to rights group Justice for Myanmar. At Belarusian State University, ten junta members are studying geo-information and military law. The Belarusian State University of Informatics and Radioelectronics is assisting officers with radio-electronic engineering research to strengthen air defense systems.

In addition, 34 personnel are enrolled in advanced studies at Belarusian State Technological University, which provides training in ground forces logistics and weaponry tactics. The program’s principal met with junta generals in May. [Justice for Myanmar] [The Irrawaddy]

Myanmar junta and Russia propose trilateral trade corridor via India to counter sanctions

(nf) Myanmar's junta and Russia are forging ahead with proposals for a trilateral trade corridor connecting Russia to Myanmar's Yangon Port through India's Mumbai Port. The proposal was discussed in Naypyitaw between junta Transport Minister General Mya Tun Oo and a Russian delegation led by Alexander Shatirov of the Roscongress Investment Fund. The corridor would involve Russian goods being exported to Southeast Asia via Yangon, making Myanmar a regional transshipment hub.

The encounter comes after Mya Tun Oo's participation in the 28th St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, during which he pitched Myanmar's logistical potential. Fertilizer imports and two-way e-commerce growth were also discussed.

The project is also a part of the two countries' broader plans to create alternative trade routes amid Western sanctions. Myanmar is also interested in becoming a member of the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and other regional bodies like BRICS and the SCO.

India has made no public statement regarding the suggested corridor, which might overlap with its own Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Project—its proposed project to link India's northeast with Myanmar's Sittwe Port. The corridor would give Russia an important economic outlet and bolster Myanmar-Russia ties while potentially affecting regional trade patterns in the face of growing global isolation. [The Irrawaddy]

North Korea criticizes Japan's defense expansion

(fw) North Korea has accused Japan of moving to become a "military giant" after the release of Japan's latest defense white paper, approved by Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba's cabinet on July 15. A North Korea foreign ministry official said the document serves as a step-by-step "war scenario" and criticism of Japanese remilitarization.

Japan's defense white paper argues that China's growing military activities pose a significant threat. The white paper also calls North Korea's military actions a "more grave and imminent threat to Japan's national security than ever before." In response to these

concerns, Japan is increasing its defense spending over several years, following calls from the United States for greater allied burden-sharing under President Donald Trump's second term.

Japan is not only ramping up military capabilities but also strengthening defense partnerships with the United States and regional allies to respond to potential threats, including a possible Chinese invasion of Taiwan. This shift in Japanese security strategy aligns with broader regional trends, as many U.S. allies are also boosting defense budgets in response to rising security challenges in East Asia. [The Straits Times]

North Korea's new strategy targets South Korea

(fw) North Korea is reportedly adapting its approach toward South Korea by exploiting the country's internal political divisions and the declining influence of NGOs focused on North Korean human rights. The regime is closely monitoring changes in South Korean society, especially among younger generations, and using these observations to inform its evolving strategy.

Previously known as the National Reunification Institute and affiliated with the United Front Department, this organization has been renamed the Institute of Enemy State Studies and now operates under Bureau 10 of the Workers' Party Central Committee—the nominal unit charged with managing external and diplomatic affairs.

The Institute focuses heavily on analyzing South Korean youth attitudes, noting an increase in indifference or even hostility toward unification. This phenomenon, referred to as "de-ethnification", indicates a weakening sense of shared ethnic identity. Pyongyang's leadership views this psychological distancing as an opportunity to deepen divisions within South Korean society and undermine unification narratives. Analysts believe that youth disengagement opens space for North Korean information and psychological operations promoting the "two-state narrative".

Additionally, the Institute is assessing the deteriorating conditions of South Korean NGOs that focus on North Korean human rights. Many of these groups depend on foreign funding, have reduced activity, and face uncertain prospects for government support. Pyongyang perceives their weakening as a strategic chance to reduce societal opposition and international pressure concerning its repression, potentially allowing

the regime greater freedom to intensify its control without triggering protests or sanctions.

The strategy being finalized by October includes domestic propaganda highlighting South Korea's political fragmentation, the youth's lack of interest in unification, and the decline of human rights groups as evidence of instability and chaos in the South Korean system. [Daily NK]

North Korean senior female officials visit Russia

(fw) A delegation of senior North Korean female officials, headed by Kim Jong-sun, director of the ruling party's central committee department, has embarked on July 21 on an official visit to Russia. The visit marks the latest in a series of exchanges between the two countries. [KCNA]

Kim Jong-sun, who oversees various labor organizations in North Korea, leads the delegation, signaling the visit's likely focus on enhancing cooperation with Russian women's groups. While specific details about the agenda were not disclosed, the trip reflects the growing cooperation between Pyongyang and Moscow across various sectors. [The Korea Times 1]

Last week, a delegation from Russia's Ministry of Emergency Situations, led by Deputy Minister Roman Kurynin, arrived in Pyongyang on July 14, to engage in talks with North Korean counterparts on potential collaboration in disaster prevention, science, and technology. [The Korea Times 2]

China and Pakistan deepen strategic, diplomatic, and media cooperation

(lm) Pakistan and China have reaffirmed their multifaceted partnership through high-level diplomatic meetings, military cooperation, and a new media collaboration agreement, as regional strains and strategic competition intensify across South and Central Asia.

During the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Council of Foreign Ministers meeting in Beijing, Pakistan's Deputy Prime Minister Ishaq Dar met with Chinese President Xi Jinping, where both sides emphasized their enduring "iron-clad" friendship and a shared commitment to regional stability. Dar praised

China as Pakistan's "All-Weather Strategic Cooperative Partner" and reiterated support for joint projects under the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the flagship Belt and Road Initiative venture granting China direct access to the Arabian Sea via Gwadar port. [Arab News 1]

Meanwhile, in Rawalpindi, Pakistan's top military officer, General Sahir Shamshad Mirza, marked the 98th anniversary of China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) by reaffirming defense ties and praising Beijing's stabilizing role in the region. He pledged Pakistan's "unwavering commitment" to the safety of thousands of Chinese nationals working on CPEC-linked projects, many of whom operate in conflict-prone areas such as Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. [Arab News 2]

In the cultural and media sphere, Pakistan and China signed a new agreement to strengthen media cooperation during the 2025 SCO Television Festival in Xinjiang. The pact includes joint content creation, journalist exchanges, and training programs aimed at countering disinformation and enhancing shared regional narratives. The agreement underscores efforts to institutionalize soft power cooperation through platforms like the SCO Media Agency. [Arab News 3]

Pakistan and U.S. shift focus from trade to long-term investment amid tariff tensions

(lm) Pakistan and the United States are recalibrating their economic engagement, seeking to move beyond traditional trade and toward long-term strategic investment. This comes after a new round of high-level talks in Washington between Pakistan's Finance Minister Muhammad Aurangzeb, U.S. Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick, and U.S. Trade Representative Jamieson Greer.

The dialogue followed the U.S.'s recent imposition of a 29 percent "reciprocal tariff" on Pakistani exports under trade measures announced in April by President Donald Trump. Islamabad has warned the duties could harm its fragile export-led recovery—particularly as nearly 90 percent of Pakistan's exports to the U.S. are textile-based.

Despite this, both sides expressed optimism that the talks would yield mutually beneficial outcomes. While reaffirming the U.S.'s position as Pakistan's largest export destination—with shipments reaching USD 5.44 billion in FY2023–24 and growing 10 percent

year-on-year as of February 2025—they emphasized the need to diversify beyond textiles.

Minister Aurangzeb signaled that the future of the bilateral economic relationship lies in strategic investment, not just trade. He said both sides have identified priority areas including minerals and mining, artificial intelligence, digital infrastructure, and crypto technologies. These, he noted, could form the basis of a “step change” in economic cooperation.

Pakistan is pushing for a broader economic partnership that includes U.S. investment in emerging sectors. Aurangzeb hinted at forthcoming “leadership-level” announcements and stressed the importance of swiftly transitioning from resolving trade disputes to launching investment discussions. [Arab News 1] [Arab News 2]

U.S. lawmaker condemns shrinking freedoms in Pakistan

(lm) U.S. Congressman Chris Smith has sharply criticized Pakistan’s human rights situation, warning that basic freedoms are deteriorating under the current government and denouncing the continued incarceration of former prime minister Imran Khan. Speaking at a congressional hearing on “political repression” in Pakistan, held by the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, Smith described Pakistan as a country facing rampant violations of civil liberties, media suppression, and denial of free elections.

Smith, a senior Republican and co-chair of the bipartisan commission, labeled Pakistan’s 2024 general election as "widely seen as unfree and unfair," citing bans on Khan’s Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party, harassment of its officials, internet shutdowns, and significant voting irregularities. He described Khan, who remains jailed in Rawalpindi, as a popular leader targeted for confronting corruption and military overreach.

Testifying at the hearing, PTI senior figure Zulfi Bukhari claimed Khan and his wife are held in prolonged solitary confinement under "inhumane conditions," and described the military trials of PTI supporters as part of a political purge.

Smith called for a stronger U.S. response, urging the Trump administration to reaffirm its commitment to democracy and human rights in Pakistan. The hearing underscores growing international concern over

Pakistan's internal repression and democratic backsliding. [Arab News]

UK lifts ban on Pakistan's national airlines, restoring key air corridor

(za) The United Kingdom has lifted its five-year ban on Pakistani airlines, including Pakistan International Airlines (PIA), reestablishing a critical aviation link between the two countries. The ban was initially imposed in 2020 following a fatal PIA crash and a pilot licensing scandal, which raised serious concerns over air safety and regulatory oversight. The suspension significantly disrupted travel and trade, particularly for the large Pakistani diaspora in the UK.

British authorities confirmed the decision after Pakistan's Civil Aviation Authority implemented substantial reforms aimed at improving aviation safety and compliance. PIA is now preparing to seek formal flight permissions, with plans to resume services on the Islamabad–Manchester route.

The reopening of UK routes holds both commercial and symbolic significance. It supports PIA's operational recovery as Pakistan advances efforts to privatize the airline under a reform package backed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). [Arab News] [Reuters]

Pakistani military award conferred on Saudi naval chief as both countries deepen maritime cooperation

(lm) Pakistan has conferred the Nishan-e-Imtiaz (Military), one of its highest military honors, on Vice Admiral Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Gharibi, Chief of the Royal Saudi Naval Forces, in recognition of his role in advancing bilateral naval cooperation. The award was presented by President Asif Ali Zardari during a special investiture ceremony at the Presidential Palace in Islamabad, attended by senior military and diplomatic officials from both countries.

The ceremony underscored the strategic dimension of Pakistan–Saudi Arabia relations, particularly in the maritime and defense sectors. President Zardari expressed appreciation for the Royal Saudi Naval Forces' participation in Pakistan-hosted naval events, including Exercise AMAN-25 and the AMAN Dialogue-25 held in February 2025. He highlighted the

importance of continued joint training and operational collaboration and praised Saudi Arabia's confidence in Pakistan's naval training systems.

In a subsequent meeting, Zardari reiterated Pakistan's gratitude for Saudi Arabia's consistent financial and diplomatic support, especially during periods of economic stress. He also acknowledged the broader strategic alignment between the two countries and praised Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's reform agenda, describing it as a driver of long-term regional stability and transformation. [Arab News]

Pakistan-Libya defense industrial cooperation to deepen after top-level military talks

(lm) Pakistan and Libya have agreed to expand defense industrial cooperation and technical collaboration following a meeting between Libyan Armed Forces Commander-in-Chief Lieutenant General Saddam Khalifa Haftar and Pakistan's Army Chief Field Marshal Asim Munir in Rawalpindi on July 18.

While military training ties have continued—particularly in aviation and engineering—this latest agreement signals a shift toward joint defense production and technical exchange. The move marks a strategic revival of bilateral military engagement rooted in Cold War-era cooperation, when Libya actively supported Pakistan's defense capabilities under Muammar Qaddafi. Qaddafi, who ruled Libya from 1969 to 2011, was a longtime authoritarian leader known for his pan-Arab and anti-Western stance, and he maintained strong ties with various Muslim-majority countries, including Pakistan. [Arab News]

Philippines strengthens backchannel defense links to Taiwan

(ms) The Philippines is discreetly expanding its security coordination with Taiwan in response to growing concerns over Chinese military activity in the region, according to a recent report by The Washington Post. Although there has been no formal change in Manila's adherence to the one-China policy, the report indicates that practical cooperation between the two governments is advancing, particularly in the defense and maritime sectors.

The report, based on interviews with officials and analysts from both the Philippines and Taiwan, describes a series of developments that point to a gradual shift in the Philippines' strategic posture. Among them are joint coast guard patrols in the Bashi Channel, informal defense dialogues involving military academics and officials, and Taiwanese observers attending US -Philippine military drills near the northern Philippines.

Philippine Defense Secretary Gilbert Teodoro, interviewed by the Washington Post, stated that the security of Taiwan and the Philippines are increasingly interlinked. He emphasized that Chinese military presence near Philippine waters, along with cyberattacks and intelligence activities attributed to Beijing, have heightened Manila's concerns. "It would be hiding from the obvious to say that Taiwan's security will not affect us," Teodoro said.

While Philippine authorities officially present recent engagement measures—such as easing travel restrictions for Taiwanese nationals—as economic in nature, unnamed sources cited in the report claim they are also intended to support closer security ties. Coordination is reportedly progressing behind the scenes, including intelligence sharing and discussions on maritime surveillance.

According to the report, some regional observers believe the Philippines' evolving relationship with Taiwan could complicate its already strained ties with China. Beijing has previously issued warnings in response to statements and actions it sees as favoring Taipei, including comments by Philippine military leaders referencing the possibility of conflict over Taiwan.

Despite this, there is growing consensus among Manila's security policymakers that cooperation with Taiwan is becoming strategically unavoidable. Analysts cited in the report note that the Philippines' geographic proximity to Taiwan, combined with its defense alliance with the United States and the presence of more than 150,000 Filipino workers on the island, mean the Philippines could be directly affected by any cross-strait conflict.

While Philippine officials have been careful to downplay the implications of recent activity, the Washington Post report suggests that both sides are preparing for closer coordination should regional tensions continue to escalate. [Taipei Times] [The Washington Post]

In response to the report, China lodged a formal diplomatic protest. On July 19, Chinese foreign ministry official Liu Jinsong summoned Philippine Ambassador to China Jaime FlorCruz to express “strong dissatisfaction” over the deepening ties with Taiwan. According to Reuters, Beijing criticized the Philippines’ "negative moves" in maritime and cross-strait affairs, reflecting its ongoing efforts to deter any perceived erosion of the One-China principle. [Taiwan News]

Philippine president in US ahead of July 23 meeting to seek tariff relief and deepen strategic ties

(dnb/ms) Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. is set to meet US President Donald Trump on July 23 at the White House, as Manila seeks to secure a more favorable trade deal ahead of looming tariff hikes. The bilateral talks follow Marcos’ meetings with US Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, as part of a six-day official visit to the United States from July 20 to 26.

The visit comes as Washington prepares to raise tariffs on Philippine goods from 17% to 20% by August 1—a move Marcos has described as “very severe.” Philippine trade officials are hoping to negotiate improved terms, pointing to the country’s strategic alliance with the US and its growing importance in regional security.

Analysts say Marcos may have a stronger negotiating position than Vietnam or Indonesia, which recently accepted higher tariff baselines of 20% and 19%, respectively. The Philippines is the first Southeast Asian nation to engage Trump directly in his second term.

In parallel, economic discussions have focused on the Luzon Economic Corridor, a major infrastructure initiative co-developed with the United States and Japan. Backed by an initial US grant of USD 3.8 million, the corridor aims to link key ports and industrial zones in Subic, Clark, Manila, and Batangas. Expanded investment in rail connectivity and supply chain infrastructure is under discussion, with interest from US semiconductor and logistics firms.

On defense, Marcos reaffirmed the Philippines–US Mutual Defense Treaty during talks at the Pentagon on July 21, citing China’s increasing pressure in the South China Sea. Joint military cooperation, including access to Philippine bases and advanced weapons training, has intensified in recent months.

The outcome of Tuesday's meeting may determine whether the Philippines can secure tariff concessions that shield key exports and deepen its role as a strategic partner in the Indo-Pacific. [ABS-CBN] [GMA-News] [Manila Bulletin] [Philippine News Agency]

Singapore attributes critical infrastructure cyberattack to suspected China-linked, state-sponsored group

Singapore has confirmed that a cyberattack targeting its national critical infrastructure was carried out by a state-sponsored threat group known as UNC3886, according to Home Affairs and Law Minister K. Shanmugam on July 18. While Singapore stopped short of naming the state involved, cybersecurity firm Mandiant has previously linked the group to China-affiliated actors—a claim Beijing continues to deny.

The Cyber Security Agency of Singapore (CSA) said UNC3886 was detected in segments of the country's 11 designated critical sectors, which include energy, finance, healthcare, and transport. The agency has not disclosed which sectors were affected but described the attackers as highly sophisticated and persistent. Investigations are ongoing. [Channel NewsAsia]

The Chinese Embassy in Singapore rejected the implication, stating on social media that China itself is frequently a victim of cyberattacks. UNC3886 has previously been associated with operations targeting defense and telecom networks across the U.S. and Asia.

Minister Shanmugam warned that such intrusions pose a serious threat to national security, with the potential for espionage and disruption of essential services. This incident follows Singapore's worst-known cyberattack in 2018, when hackers breached the SingHealth system and stole data from 1.5 million patients.

Authorities say all critical sectors are now under heightened surveillance, with increased information-sharing and defensive coordination across agencies. [Reuters] [Singapore Statutes Online] [The Straits Times 1] [The Straits Times 2]

Singapore and Malaysia completes joint army exercise

(nl) The Singapore Armed Forces (SAF) and the Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF) wrapped up the 29th edition of Exercise Semangat Bersatu (XSB) on 16 July, following a week-long bilateral training conducted in Singapore.

More than 600 soldiers from SAF's 2nd Singapore Infantry Brigade and 3rd Battalion, Singapore Infantry Regiment, trained alongside counterparts from MAF's 5th Battalion, Royal Malay Regiment. The exercise included joint planning, tactical maneuvers, and urban operations, aimed at strengthening interoperability and professional exchange.

XSB was first held in 1989 and underscores the longstanding defense ties between Singapore and Malaysia. Beyond the annual drill, both armed forces engage through regular exchanges, joint courses, and multilateral platforms such as ASEAN Defence Minister's Meeting (ADMM)/ADMM-Plus and the Five Power Defence Arrangements. [Ministry of Defence, Singapore]

Indonesia-Singapore infant trafficking allegations spark cross-border investigation

(ms/nl) Indonesian authorities have uncovered a suspected infant trafficking network believed to have smuggled babies across borders, with Singapore identified as a primary destination. According to Indonesian investigators, the network has been active since 2023 and is thought to have trafficked at least 25 infants—most of whom were allegedly destined for adoption in Singapore, while others were moved within Indonesia.

Law enforcement in Indonesia has arrested more than a dozen individuals linked to the operation, including brokers accused of arranging informal payments to birth mothers. Six infants have been rescued, five of whom were reportedly being prepared for overseas adoption. Authorities are now working to trace the end recipients and determine how the children may have crossed borders, possibly under false identities.

In response, Singapore's police stated that they have not received any reports or verified intelligence suggesting trafficked infants were brought into the country. Nevertheless, Singaporean authorities confirmed they are aware of the case and expressed readiness to cooperate with their Indonesian counterparts.

The case has drawn regional attention and revived longstanding concerns over child trafficking routes in Southeast Asia. A similar incident in 2016 saw arrests in Indonesia's Batam for the suspected sale of an infant to individuals based in Singapore. Investigations are ongoing in both countries. [BBC News Indonesia, in Indonesian] [Channel NewsAsia] [The Straits Times]

Singapore Deputy Prime Minister visits U.S. to seek tariff relief and deepen economic ties

(nl) Singapore Deputy Prime Minister Gan will be visiting the U.S. this July 20 til 26, marking the latest in a series of high-level visits aimed at reinforcing economic and strategic ties with Washington. His trip follows Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan who visited U.S.'s Marco Rubio, highlighting Singapore's perspective due to the impact of the tariff imposed.

According to the Ministry of Trade and Industry, Mr. Gan's visit will deepen cooperation in emerging sectors such as technology and energy, while reaffirming the broad-based nature of the Singapore-U.S. partnership.

Mr. Gan is expected to meet senior U.S. officials, lawmakers, and business leaders in New York and Washington. He will also speak at a roundtable hosted by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, where he will address current global economic challenges and explore areas for further commercial collaboration.

The visit comes just ahead of planned U.S. tariff actions expected in early August — a development closely watched by regional businesses, including those in Singapore. [The Straits Times] [Channel NewsAsia] [Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore]

South Korea launches first international carbon emission reduction project in Cambodia

(fw) The Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy announced that South Korea is set to collaborate with Cambodia on distributing electric motorcycles and installing charging stations, marking Seoul's inaugural international carbon emission reduction initiative under the Paris Agreement

The project aims to cut approximately 680,000 tons of carbon dioxide emissions in Cambodia. Of this, carbon

credits equivalent to 400,000 tons will be transferred to South Korea to support its nationally determined contributions toward carbon neutrality. Under the Paris Agreement framework, such arrangements that known as internationally transferred mitigation outcomes (ITMOs), allow a host country to sell carbon credits to a buyer country in exchange for investments, capacity-building assistance, and access to clean technologies.

South Korea has committed to lowering greenhouse gas emissions by 40 percent from 2018 levels by 2030 and achieving carbon neutrality by 2050. Expanding cooperation with Cambodia in the transport sector is also planned to enhance further emission reductions.

This project represents South Korea's first internationally approved carbon reduction effort and expects it to become a mutually beneficial model of intergovernmental cooperation, leveraging Cambodia's dedication to emission cuts alongside the technological and investment strengths of Korean firms. [The Korea Times]

South Korea seeks deeper strategic and economic ties with India

(fw) Former South Korean Prime Minister Kim Boo-kyum, now serving as President Lee Jae-myung's special envoy, arrived in New Delhi on a two-day mission focused on deepening the relationship between South Korea and India. During his visit on July 17 to 18, Kim held high-level discussions with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, and other key officials. This diplomatic outreach forms part of President Lee's broader strategy to reinforce partnerships with major global players.

The discussions highlighted several priority areas, including advancing a Mobility and Partnership Agreement (MPA) to enable Indian workers to participate in South Korea's Employment Permit System, which currently excludes India despite involving 16 other countries. Both sides also focused on revitalizing efforts to broaden the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), originally signed in 2009. With bilateral trade standing at approximately USD 28 billion—well short of the USD 50 billion target by 2030—Kim's visit seeks to accelerate progress and address longstanding challenges hindering expansion. [Asian Community News]

At the courtesy meeting with Modi, Kim delivered a personal letter from President Lee reaffirming the commitment to strengthen the Korea–India Special Strategic Partnership, which celebrates its 10th anniversary this year. Modi welcomed the initiative, expressing eagerness to host President Lee in India soon and emphasizing India's growing economic and manufacturing capabilities as opportunities for deeper bilateral collaboration. He specifically noted interest in cooperation in shipbuilding, defense, electronics, green hydrogen, and emerging technologies. Both leaders acknowledged the vital role their democracies play in fostering peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region.

Further meetings with External Affairs Minister Jaishankar and Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla reinforced mutual commitments to enhancing economic, technological, defense, and maritime cooperation, alongside expanding people-to-people exchanges. These engagements reflect a comprehensive agenda aimed at transforming the Korea-India partnership into a more robust, multi-dimensional alliance. [The Korean Herald] [Maeil Business Newspaper]

South Korea, Indonesia discuss deepening maritime defense cooperation

(fw) South Korea and Indonesia have committed to enhancing their maritime defense partnership, focusing on joint initiatives to strengthen military capabilities and regional stability.

The renewed focus was discussed during a courtesy visit by Park Soo-Deok, Chargé d'Affaires ad interim of the South Korean Embassy, to the Indonesian Ministry of Defense in Jakarta on July 15, where Lieutenant General Tri Budi Utomo, Secretary General of the Indonesian Ministry of Defense, received him. Strategic areas of cooperation were addressed during the meeting.

Key topics included the development of warships, the formation of a Joint Defense Cooperation Committee (JDCC), conducting joint military exercises, and fostering collaboration between the Korea Naval Academy and the Indonesian Navy Academy. Both parties also discussed advancing cooperation in defense industry development, aiming to boost technological capabilities and local production. [ANTARA]

South Korea considers resuming individual tours to North Korea to improve inter-Korean relations

(fw) South Korea is exploring options to enhance ties with North Korea, including the possibility of allowing individual tourist visits to the North, a move that could serve as a diplomatic gesture to reopen dialogue between the two Koreas. This consideration comes amid President Lee Jae Myung's broader policy aimed at easing tensions and revitalizing inter-Korean relations, which have been at a low point for years.

The South Korean Unification Ministry confirmed it is reviewing a range of measures to improve relations, without specifying details. The ministry noted that individual tours do not violate international sanctions imposed on North Korea, which restrict financial transactions that could support the North's nuclear and missile programs.

South Korea previously offered group tours to North Korea's Mount Kumgang resort, which were suspended in 2008 after a tragic incident where a South Korean tourist was shot by a North Korean soldier in a restricted area. Since then, official inter-Korean tourism has remained dormant. Meanwhile, North Korea reopened the Kalma beach resort in the eastern city of Wonsan earlier this month but has not yet allowed foreign visitors, including South Koreans, to enter. [AnewZ]

The government's consideration of individual travel was discussed during a National Security Council meeting on July 10, with a senior official describing the review as a long-term process. The move aims to use tourism as a confidence-building measure that could pave the way for resuming stalled inter-Korean dialogue and cooperation. [Yonhap News Agency]

South Korea, Pakistan seek deeper technology and digital skills partnership

(fw) Federal IT Minister Shaza Fatima Khawaja of Pakistan met with South Korean Chargé d'Affaires Park Jae-lark to discuss opportunities for expanding cooperation in technology, digital skills development, and research between the two countries.

The meeting focused on expanding ties in technological innovation, human resource development, and partnerships between industry and academia. Minister Shaza Fatima reaffirmed Pakistan's

commitment to equipping its youth for the digital economy through advanced training programs and international cooperation. She emphasized the need for strategic engagement with Korean institutions to foster innovation and elevate technical education standards.

Park welcomed these initiatives and pledged South Korea's support for strengthening cooperation in emerging technologies, joint research, and capacity-building projects. The two officials agreed to identify practical areas where collaboration could drive technological advancement and economic growth for both nations. [Profit by Pakistan Today]

South Korea steps up high-level U.S. engagements to resolve tariff dispute before August deadline

(fw) As the August 1 deadline for U.S. tariffs looms, South Korea is stepping up diplomatic efforts to avert trade penalties. National Security Adviser Wi Sung-lac departed for Washington on July 20, shortly after a July 6–9 visit during which he met U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio. South Korea has proposed a "package deal" addressing both economic and security issues and suggested a summit between President Lee Jae-myung and former President Trump, reportedly supported by Rubio. [Yonhap News Agency]

In parallel, Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Koo Yun-cheol and Trade Minister Yeo Han-koo will meet their U.S. counterparts, Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent and Trade Representative Jamieson Greer, in Washington on July 25 for the first high-level tariff talks since April. South Korea's Foreign Minister Cho Hyun and Industry Minister Kim Jung-kwan are also scheduled to visit the U.S. later in July for related discussions. [The Korea Times]

These efforts follow former President Trump's letter extending the negotiation window despite announcing a 25 percent tariff on South Korean imports effective August 1. South Korea aims to resolve the dispute by balancing economic interests with security cooperation to prevent tariff imposition and preserve bilateral relations.

South Korea, Turkey pledge to deepen strategic partnership

(fw) During a July 17 phone conversation, South Korean President Lee Jae Myung and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan have mutually agreed to enhance cooperation across key sectors including defense and arms manufacturing, nuclear power, and green energy, signaling a substantial strengthening of their bilateral ties.

In addition to defense, the two countries will advance their collaboration in the nuclear power sector. South Korea's expertise as a leading nuclear power generator offers a valuable foundation for technology sharing and implementation of best practices with Turkey. This partnership is expected to facilitate energy security and innovation initiatives beneficial to both sides.

Green energy initiatives are another cornerstone of the agreement, with both nations prioritizing the reduction of carbon emissions and the transition toward sustainable renewable energy sources. This alignment complements South Korea's long-term energy strategy aimed at diversifying its energy portfolio and reducing fossil fuel dependency. [AInvest]

President Lee emphasized the historical bond between South Korea and Turkey, rooted in cooperation since the Korean War, and expressed his pleasure in the continuous development of bilateral relations grounded in this shared legacy. Turkish President Erdogan reciprocated by congratulating Lee on his assumption of office and acknowledging South Korea's democratic resilience. [The Korea Herald]

China donates full 2025 school uniform fabric to Sri Lanka as grant

(lm) China has donated the full fabric requirement for Sri Lanka's 2025 national school uniform program as a grant valued at LKR 5.17 billion (approximately USD 17.6 million). The donation was formally handed over on July 16 during a ceremony at the Ministry of Education, attended by Education Minister Harini Amarasuriya and Chinese Ambassador Qi Zhenhong.

The contribution marks the continuation of China's material support, which had previously supplemented Sri Lanka's uniform needs in 2023 and 2024. The 2025 grant, however, fully covers the national requirement for the first time. Sri Lanka has also formally requested similar support for the 2026 school year. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka to reimburse up to USD 1.65 million to Indian conglomerate on renewable energy project

(lm) Sri Lanka is preparing to reimburse between LKR 300–500 million (approximately USD 1–1.65 million) to India's Adani Green Energy – the standalone clean-energy subsidiary of India's Adani Group, one of Asia's largest private conglomerates – following the company's withdrawal from two renewable energy projects in the Northern Province. The exit stems from a pricing dispute with the new National People's Power (NPP)-led government.

Adani had signed the original agreement under the previous administration to construct wind power facilities in Mannar and Pooneryn with an intended investment of USD 442 million, aiming to contribute at least 350 megawatts to the national grid by 2025. However, the company officially withdrew in May 2025, citing untenable pricing conditions and requested reimbursement for its preliminary expenses related to feasibility studies and investigations conducted with Sri Lanka's Sustainable Energy Authority (SEA).

After seeking legal advice, Sri Lankan authorities concluded that partial reimbursement is warranted—excluding permit fees already paid by Adani. Final disbursement awaits Attorney General consultation and board approval. Once resolved, the government intends to relaunch tenders for the same projects, with Adani permitted to reapply. [Daily Mirror]

Canadian minister under scrutiny for past support of man linked to banned Sri Lankan militant group

(lm) Canada's Public Safety Minister Gary Anandasangaree is facing mounting criticism after it was revealed that he previously advocated for a Sri Lankan national, Senthuran Selvakumaran, whose immigration application has long been rejected by Canadian authorities due to alleged ties to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)—a separatist militant organization that fought for an independent Tamil state in Sri Lanka and is listed as a terrorist group in Canada.

Anandasangaree wrote letters in 2016 and again in 2023—prior to entering the federal cabinet—urging the Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) to reconsider Selvakumaran's application for permanent residency. In his 2023 letter, he described the agency's

stance as “cruel and inhumane,” shortly before being appointed Minister of Crown-Indigenous Relations. He assumed his current role as Public Safety Minister in May 2025.

Critics argue that his past advocacy is inappropriate given national security concerns. Although Anandasangaree has formally recused himself from files involving the LTTE or its alleged Canadian affiliate, the World Tamil Movement, some former security officials and advocacy groups say his intervention undermines Canada’s counterterrorism standards. Prime Minister Mark Carney has defended the minister, saying Anandasangaree had been transparent and retains his confidence.

Selvakumaran’s application has been denied since 2005 due to what authorities describe as his prolonged involvement with the LTTE. While he admitted to distributing propaganda for the group during a prior asylum claim in the United Kingdom, he later withdrew that statement, attributing it to poor legal advice. His appeals have been consistently rejected, with the Federal Court most recently upholding the denial on national security grounds. [Daily Mirror]

Sri Lanka explores oil imports amid mounting pressure over U.S. tariff deadline

(lm) Sri Lanka is intensifying efforts to secure trade relief from the United States, its largest export market, as mounting tariff pressures threaten key sectors and economic recovery trajectories. Following a recent U.S. decision to impose a 30 percent tariff on Sri Lankan coconut-based products—effective August 1—virtual negotiations are now underway between the two countries. These replace a previously planned diplomatic visit to Washington and are being led by Sri Lanka’s Ministry of Finance. [Daily Mirror 1] [Daily Mirror 2]

The new tariff directly endangers Sri Lanka’s USD 857 million coconut export industry, with the U.S. accounting for over USD 160 million in annual purchases. More broadly, Sri Lankan officials say that the United States has proposed granting tariff-free access to between 70 and 80 percent of Sri Lanka’s total exports, potentially covering over 1,100 products, including garments and agricultural goods. However, the specific list remains confidential pending the outcome of negotiations. [Daily Mirror 3] [Daily Mirror 4]

In 2024, Sri Lanka recorded a trade surplus of USD 2.6 billion with the United States, with USD 3 billion in exports versus only USD 368.2 million in imports. In response, the Sri Lankan government is exploring increased imports from the U.S.—including oil—as a way to rebalance trade and strengthen its position in the negotiations. The country currently imports oil worth USD 300–400 million per month, and the state-run Ceylon Petroleum Corporation (CPC) is assessing the feasibility of importing U.S. crude oil, particularly West Texas Intermediate (WTI), for specification testing. Structural constraints remain, however, as U.S. oil trading is dominated by private firms, making government-to-government deals unviable. Still, U.S. companies have shown interest in participating in Sri Lanka's tender processes. [Daily Mirror 5]

Former President Ranil Wickremesinghe has urged the current administration to use Sri Lanka's sovereign bond restructuring as leverage during the negotiations, warning that failure to secure favorable trade terms could undermine reforms tied to the International Monetary Fund program. He has also called for broader strategic diversification through engagement with regional blocs like the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and deeper alignment with partners such as China, Japan, and India, in light of global geopolitical realignments. [Daily Mirror 6]

China-linked hackers target Taiwan's semiconductor industry

(acl) On July 16, cybersecurity firm Proofpoint published a report documenting an increase in cyberattacks by China-linked hackers targeting Taiwan's semiconductor industry. According to the report, 15 to 20 organizations faced attacks between March and June, ranging from small business to global enterprises, including at least one US-based international bank.

Proofpoint identified at least three distinct hacking groups aligned with China, UNK_FistBump, UNK_DropPitch, and UNK_SparkyCarp, that primarily used spear-phishing to collect intelligence and gain access. Targets included entities involved in semiconductor manufacturing, design and testing, as well as financial investment analysts specializing in the market. [Taiwan News]

The report suggests that these attacks reflect China's strategic priority to achieve semiconductor self-sufficiency and decrease reliance on global supply chains in light of tightened US export controls. Recent

restrictions on exports of US-designed chips, many of which are manufactured in Taiwan, have increased pressure on China to secure alternative sources and develop domestic capabilities, especially for use in artificial intelligence.

The Chinese embassy in Washington responded by stating that Beijing "firmly opposes and combats all forms of cyberattacks and cybercrime," and that cyberattacks "are a common threat faced by all countries, China included." [Taipei Times]

Japan highlights China's military pressure on Taiwan in latest defense white paper

(yl/acl) Japan's recently released 2025 defense white paper underscores escalating Chinese military activities around Taiwan, describing them as efforts to isolate the administration of President Lai Ching-te and normalize coercive pressure. The document points to large-scale exercises such as "Joint Sword 2024A" and "2024B" conducted shortly after Taiwan's presidential inauguration and National Day last year, framing them as part of Beijing's attempt to signal political dissatisfaction and deter deepening U.S.-Taiwan ties.

According to the report, these drills exhibit three key traits—combat realism, propaganda intent, and normalization. The PLA has intensified simulations of joint precision strikes and blockades, while Chinese media amplify psychological pressure through staged footage and expert commentary. The white paper warns that such actions aim to unilaterally shift the status quo, prompting Japan to reaffirm its commitment to strengthen defense capabilities and monitor the situation with heightened urgency. [Focus Taiwan] [Taipei Times]

Japanese companies warned of no government evacuation support in case of Chines attack on Taiwan

Separately Japanese government officials have informed companies operating in Taiwan that they would be "on their own" if a Chinese attack necessitated evacuating staff. This warning has contributed to a significant decline in foreign direct investment (FDI) from Japan, one of Taiwan's largest sources of investment.

Companies have been receiving these warnings for around three years, discouraging further Japanese investment into Taiwan. In 2024, FDI from Japan—Taiwan's third-largest source after the EU and US — fell

by 27 per cent to USD 452 million, down from USD 1.7 billion in 2022.

According to Teikoku Databank, around 3,000 Japanese companies operate in Taiwan with approximately one-third involved in manufacturing sectors, particularly in semiconductor materials and equipment. Retailers and restaurant groups also make up a significant amount of Japanese investment.

Under the country's pacifist constitution, the Japanese military can only be deployed abroad with approval from a host government. Since Japan does not formally recognize Taiwan, the Taiwanese government is unable to mobilize the military. Japanese officials noted that China would be unlikely to grant the Japanese military approval to conduct evacuations.

With no security guarantees from Japan or the US, the "risk assessment pretty much leads us to little interest in Taiwan" as an investment market, a Japanese executive said. This development reflects growing economic uncertainties for Taiwan amid escalating cross-strait tensions, which could also deter other countries and investors seeking stability in the region. [Financial Times] [Taiwan News]

Taiwan, Philippines strengthen security cooperation amid shared concerns over China

(yl) Taiwan is expanding behind-the-scenes security cooperation with the Philippines, including joint coast guard patrols in the Bashi Channel and participation in military exercise planning. Although the Philippines does not formally recognize Taiwan, both sides have deepened unofficial exchanges, with Filipino defense scholars attending forums with top Taiwanese generals earlier this year. [Taipei Times] [Taiwan News] [The Washington Post]

The cooperation comes as both countries face increasing pressure from China, particularly in the South China Sea. Taiwanese officials were recently invited as observers to the Kamandag joint drills held near the Batanes Islands, less than 200 km from Taiwan.

Philippine Defense Secretary Gilbert Teodoro acknowledged Taiwan's security as directly relevant to the Philippines and stressed that engagement with Taiwan is part of a broader regional response to Chinese military expansion [Taipei Times] [Taiwan News]

U.S. House of Representatives passes bills in support for Tawain

(dql) The U.S. House of Representatives unanimously passed on July 21 the Taiwan Conflict Deterrence Act, which mandates the disclosure and monitoring of U.S.-held assets owned by top Chinese Communist Party (CCP) officials if China invades Taiwan. Introduced by Republican leaders Lisa McClain and Brad Sherman, the bill targets CCP Politburo Standing Committee and Central Committee members responsible for Taiwan-related policies.

Under the law, the U.S. Treasury must report to Congress on these officials' assets, including their value, nature, and associated financial institutions, while assessing any illicit acquisition methods. The Treasury Secretary is authorized to freeze these assets and block access to U.S. financial institutions. The bill also bans major financial transactions between U.S. entities and immediate family members of the targeted officials. Public summaries of the findings will be made available in multiple languages.

This legislative move follows a March intelligence report revealing significant wealth held by CCP leaders' families, including those linked to Xi Jinping, often concealed through intermediaries. [Taiwan News]

In an earlier move last week, the House also passed the Department of Defense Appropriations Act for fiscal year 2026, which includes an amendment prohibiting the Pentagon from using maps that depict Taiwan and its outlying islands as part of China. The bill allocates USD 830 billion in military spending, including USD 460 million for Taiwan's security.

The amendment bars the use of funds to create, procure, or display any map portraying Taiwan, Kinmen, Matsu, Penghu, Wuciou, Green Island, or Orchid Island as part of the People's Republic of China.

Despite their geographical proximity to mainland China, Kinmen, Matsu, Penghu, Wuciou, Green Island, or Orchid Island are governed by Taiwan.

Although the amendment does not alter official U.S. policy, it reinforces congressional support for Taiwan by ensuring Pentagon maps reflect Taiwan's de facto independence. [Taipei Times]

French national strategy report says China's threat to Taiwan destabilizes region

(acl) France's 2025 National Strategic Review, released on July 14, raised concerns about China's repeated military exercises around Taiwan. The report emphasized that these activities have heightened tensions and contributed to regional unease.

According to the review, China's ambition to surpass the US as the world's top power by 2050 is driving the increasing frequency and scale of military activities around Taiwan. It also highlighted China's advancements in quantum computing and artificial intelligence, along with its refusal to halt fissile material production – making it the only permanent member of the UN security council not to do so – as causes for concern.

Anxieties throughout the region have also been exacerbated by the volatility of American policy under President Donald Trump, with the review noting that several of the US' Asian allies are increasingly uncertain about the reliability of US security guarantees. Concerns were also raised over France's overseas territories, particularly with New Caledonia, with the review suggesting that China may be eyeing the territory for its strategic location and nickel resources.

The review further emphasized Taiwan's critical role in global trade and technology, warning that France should anticipate global economic risks if conflict arises, particularly with Taiwan's key role in the semiconductor supply chain.

The report was published at a time when French President Emmanuel Macron increased the defense budget to EUR 64 billion Euros (USD 74 billion) by 2027, two years ahead of schedule. The move underscores rising concerns over instability in the Indo-Pacific region and the potential for far-reaching economic and security consequences amid escalating cross-strait relations. [Focus Taiwan] [Taiwan News]

Guatemalan lawmakers visit Taiwan

(yl/dql) On July 17, President Lai Ching-te reaffirmed Taiwan's commitment to deepening its alliance with Guatemala to defend democracy, freedom, and global prosperity during a meeting with Guatemalan Congressional President Nery Abilio Ramos y Ramos in Taipei. [Office of the President, Taiwan]

The meeting was part of a five-day visit of a Guatemalan congressional delegation to Taiwan aimed at deepening diplomatic ties and sectoral cooperation. [Taiwan News]

Lai highlighted longstanding diplomatic ties and expanding cooperation in agriculture, education, healthcare, and women's empowerment. He emphasized recent progress, including a signed Letter of Intent on semiconductor collaboration and efforts to train professionals in the sector. He also expressed appreciation for Guatemala's support for Taiwan's international participation and opposition to China's interpretation of UN Resolution 2758.

Ramos, for his part, reiterated Guatemala's support and presented a congressional resolution backing Taiwan's inclusion in global organizations.

Cambodia– Thailand border tensions escalate over newly planted landmine incident

(bk) Tensions between Thailand and Cambodia have once again intensified following the discovery of newly planted anti-personnel mines along their shared border near the strategic Chong Bok Pass in Thailand's Ubon Ratchathani Province. The area lies within a tri-border region where Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos converge and had previously been cleared and classified as a "green zone"—a designation used by Thailand Mine Action Centre (TMAC) to indicate that land is safe for civilian and military activity after formal demining and verification.

The latest incident occurred on July 16 when three Thai soldiers were injured—one losing a foot—after stepping on a Russian-made PMN-2 landmine, a type not used or procured by Thailand. The TMAC confirmed the device was recently laid, and subsequent mine clearance operations uncovered more than 100 mines in the vicinity. The placement of the mines in areas already certified as cleared is seen by Thai officials as a calculated attempt to disrupt patrol movements and violate international law.

In response, Bangkok issued a formal protest on July 21, condemning the act as a blatant breach of the 1997 Ottawa Convention, which both countries signed and ratified, and also of the 2000 bilateral Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on border demarcation. Bangkok emphasized that it has never deployed the mine type discovered and cited clear evidence indicating Cambodian involvement.

Thailand is reportedly considering escalating the issue to the United Nations. The Royal Thai Army has also scheduled briefings with foreign defense attachés and urged ASEAN and the international community to condemn Cambodia's alleged violation. Thai officials rejected Cambodian media claims implying Thai culpability, stating the images in question stem from earlier training exercises unrelated to the incident.

Cambodia has denied responsibility through a diplomatic note issued by the Cambodian Mine Action and Victim Assistance Authority (CMAA), which emphasized its mine clearance record and reaffirmed its commitment to international treaties. However, conflicting statements from Cambodian agencies—some asserting the mines were within Thai territory, others claiming they were located inside Cambodia—have undermined the credibility of Phnom Penh's position. [Bangkok Post 1] [Bangkok Post 2] [Bangkok Post 3] [Bangkok Post 4] [Bangkok Post 5] [Bangkok Post 6] [The Nation 1] [The Nation 2]

Thailand's trade talks with U.S. reveal structural constraints and geopolitical undercurrents

(msz) Thailand's ongoing trade negotiations with the United States reveal structural limitations in its economic positioning, complex geopolitical considerations, and a strategic preference for calibrated liberalization over aggressive market opening. The talks—centered on reducing steep U.S. tariffs currently averaging 36 percent on Thai exports—have intensified ahead of a Washington-imposed August 1 deadline, beyond which punitive rates could remain in place.

While Thai negotiators have offered to eliminate tariffs on up to 90 percent of U.S. goods, Deputy Finance Minister Paopoom Rojanasakul has ruled out full tariff elimination, citing the need to protect domestic industries and ensure reciprocal gains. Strategic sectors such as agriculture and small enterprises remain shielded. Commerce Minister Jatuporn Buruspat confirmed that revised proposals have been submitted to Washington. According to estimates from the Thai Chamber of Commerce, the revised framework could reduce Thailand's USD 46 billion trade surplus with the U.S. by up to 70 percent over three years, potentially bringing average tariffs down to 18–20 percent.

Thailand's approach stands in contrast to Vietnam, which has been able to offer full tariff liberalization

due to a broader network of free trade agreements (27 in total). Economist have pointed out that Thailand's narrower FTA base and internal industrial constraints prevent it from matching Vietnam's strategy. They also warn that U.S. trade demands increasingly blur economic and geopolitical boundaries—leveraging trade policy to extend regional influence and, in some cases, shape internal political dynamics of partner countries.

Recently, Thailand's leadership explicitly rejected reports that it would permit a permanent U.S. naval presence in Phang Nga province, amid unconfirmed suggestions that Washington seeks a strategic foothold to monitor maritime routes through the Strait of Malacca. This adds a security dimension to trade discussions, especially as the U.S. seeks to re-anchor its Indo-Pacific strategy. Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Pichai Chunhavajira acknowledged the geopolitical underpinnings of the talks, stating that any deal must balance national interest with external expectations. [Bangkok Post 1] [Bangkok Post 2] [Bangkok Post 3]

Vietnam: Crackdown on illegal online activities leads to mass arrests and deportations

(hn) More than 140 Vietnamese citizens were detained in Cambodia between July 14 and 15 during a major crackdown on illegal online activities, including cybercrime and online fraud. The operation, which involved over 1,000 people across Phnom Penh, Poipet, and Sihanoukville, is part of Cambodia's effort to combat cross-border online scams. The Vietnamese Embassy in Phnom Penh is working with Cambodian authorities to verify detainees' identities, ensure humane treatment, and facilitate repatriation where possible. [Vietnamnews1]

In a related development, 45 Vietnamese nationals-35 men and 10 women - were deported from Cambodia and returned via the Mộc Bài International Border Gate. These individuals were illegal residents, many of whom were tricked by fake job offers promoted on social media and later forced into online scams. Victims who resisted were reportedly subjected to abuse, including beatings and threats. Vietnamese authorities continue to warn citizens to be cautious of suspicious overseas job offers and encourage families seeking help to contact the Vietnamese Embassy or Consular Department. [Vietnamnews2]

US President says Vietnam trade deal nearly finalized

(ab) US President Donald Trump has announced that a trade agreement with Vietnam is nearly complete, though he did not think it necessary to release specific details. The deal, which follows a preliminary agreement earlier this month, will reduce US tariffs on Vietnamese imports to 20 per cent, down from the 46 per cent threatened in April. Trump also stated that goods deemed to be illegally transshipped through Vietnam would face a 40 per cent tariff.

While the agreement has yet to be finalized, key details, including which products fall under the 20 per cent tariff and the definition of "illegal transshipment," remain unclear. Vietnam has not confirmed the tariff rates but issued a joint statement on the trade framework.

The US-Vietnam trade relationship has significantly strengthened since the start of the US-China trade war in 2018. Vietnam has seen a surge in exports to the US, which, along with increased imports from China, has led to an almost equal trade flow of around USD 140 billion in 2024. [Reuters]

Announcements

Upcoming online events

23 July 2025 @ 5:00 p.m. – 6:00 p.m. (GMT-4), Center for a New American Security, US

Virtual Event | The Future of U.S. Foreign Assistance

The CNAS event on July 23 will feature a discussion on the future of U.S. foreign assistance amid global instability and rising strategic competition. Representative Ami Bera and Lisa Curtis will examine how aid advances American values and interests while addressing recent funding cuts that threaten global development efforts. The event will explore how U.S. aid policy must adapt to domestic constraints, rebuild credibility, and maintain leadership in a changing world. Audience members can participate with live questions. For more information, see [CNAS].

23 July 2025 @ 10:00 a.m. (GMT-4), Atlantic Council, US

An inside look at Russian abuses against Ukraine's frontline communities

This Atlantic Council event will feature the premiere of Being near: Faith in the frontline city of Kherson, a short film documenting Russian persecution of civilians and religious communities in occupied Ukraine. Produced by filmmaker Zachary Tarrant, the film highlights the harsh realities in Kherson, including drone attacks, torture, and repression. Following the screening, a panel of experts will discuss Russia's systematic efforts to erase Ukrainian identity through violence and religious persecution. The event aims to raise awareness and promote accountability. For more information, and to register for this online event, see [Atlantic Council].

24 July 2025 @ 5:00 p.m. (GMT-4), Foreign Policy Research Institute, US

AUKUS Under the Microscope: Successes, Setbacks, and Strategic Stakes

This Foreign Policy Research Institute event offers a timely evaluation of the AUKUS security partnership. Experts will assess its foundational goals, progress since launch, and key achievements, including advancements in undersea capabilities and defense innovation. The discussion will also address ongoing challenges such as industrial capacity limits and alliance coordination. Providing a balanced analysis, the event aims to clarify AUKUS's strategic impact and future prospects as a landmark trilateral initiative among Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. For more information, and to register for this online event, see [Foreign Policy Research Institute].

24 July 2025 @ 9:00 a.m. – 10:00 a.m. (GMT-4), Asia Society Policy Institute, US

Unpacking the Thailand-Cambodia Border Conflict

Join ASPI for a timely discussion on the escalating Cambodia-Thailand border conflict, its political fallout, and regional implications. The panel will examine the roots of the dispute, the suspension of Thai Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra, and the breakdown of bilateral diplomacy. Experts, including Professor Sophal Ear, will explore how the standoff threatens ASEAN unity at a crucial moment. Moderated by ASPI's Bryanna Entwistle, the event will assess potential outcomes and regional responses to the unfolding crisis. For more information, and to register for the online event, see [Asia Society Policy Institute].

24 July 2025 @ 10:30 a.m. (GMT-4), Atlantic Council, US

Strengthening the resilience of the Caribbean services sector

This Atlantic Council event will explore the growing importance of the Caribbean services sector for U.S. and regional interests. Featuring a panel of experts, the discussion will highlight investment opportunities in tourism, outsourcing, and telecommunications, while addressing the challenges posed by global volatility. Speakers will examine policies and incentives to boost investment, and how regional and international collaboration can support innovation, financial access, and development. The event aims to strengthen U.S.-Caribbean cooperation in building a resilient, future-ready services sector. For more information, and to register for this online event, see [Atlantic Council].

24 July 2025 @ 3:00 p.m. – 4:00 p.m. (GMT-4), Cato Institute, US

Presidential Tariff Authorities and the Need for Reform

This event will feature a fireside chat with Rep. Suzan DelBene and the Cato Institute's Scott Lincicome on the growing use of executive authority to impose tariffs

without congressional oversight. Though the Constitution grants tariff powers to Congress, modern laws have allowed the president broad discretion in trade policy, raising concerns about transparency, accountability, and constitutional balance. The discussion will explore the implications of this shift and how Congress can reassert its role in shaping U.S. trade policy. For more information, see [CATO Institute].

24 July 2025 @ 5:30 p.m. – 8:30 p.m. (GMT-4), Cato Institute, US

Libertarianism vs. Conservatism Intern Debate

This event will feature a lively debate between interns from the Cato Institute and the Heritage Foundation, examining the key philosophical and policy differences between libertarianism and conservatism. While both ideologies champion individual liberty and limited government, they often diverge on issues like trade, immigration, and national security. The discussion will explore which worldview offers more effective solutions to today's most pressing challenges, providing insight into the evolving relationship—and tensions—between these two influential strands of American political thought. For more information, and to register online, see [CATO Institute].

25 July 2025 @ 9:30 a.m. – 11:00 a.m. (GMT+8), ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore

In Search of Thailand's New Industrial Strategy

This webinar revisits the evolving role of industrial policy in Thailand, tracing its journey from the Thailand 4.0 initiative to current efforts in electric vehicles and semiconductors. As global trade tensions and China's rise reshape economic models, the discussion will assess whether manufacturing still matters in Thailand's future and how its strategy compares with Korea and Taiwan. Panelists will also debate the relevance and risks of industrial policy in today's economy and explore how Thailand can adapt amid shifting geopolitical dynamics. For more information and to register for this online event, see [Yusof Ishak Institute].

25 July 2025 @ 8:00 a.m. – 6:00 p.m. (GMT-8), Hoover Institution, US

The Milk Tea Alliance: Inside Asia's Struggle Against Autocracy And Beijing

This Hoover Institution event features historian Jeffrey Wasserstrom discussing his new book, Milk Tea Alliance: Inside Asia's Struggle Against Autocracy and Beijing. Focusing on youth-led movements in Burma, Thailand, and Hong Kong, Wasserstrom will explore how activists across Asia have built transnational solidarity against authoritarianism and China's regional influence. The talk will examine the origins, strategies, and symbolism of the Milk Tea Alliance, highlighting how digital activism and shared resistance narratives are reshaping the landscape of democracy and dissent in Asia. For more information, and to register to join online see [Hoover Institution].

28 July 2025 @ 12:00 p.m. – 1:30 p.m. (GMT-4), Institute for Policy Studies, US

The Transformation of Industrial Politics

This event explores the evolving relationship between industrial policy and civil society amid a global climate crisis. Panelists will examine how trade unions, community organizations, and environmental NGOs have engaged with or resisted state-led industrial strategies—especially when these harm labor standards, communities, or ecosystems. The discussion will also consider whether the current revival of industrial politics can produce a more inclusive, just, and sustainable model that transforms traditional power dynamics between the state, economy, and society. For more information, see [Institute for Policy Studies].

29 July 2025 @ 9:30 a.m. – 10:30 a.m. (GMT-4), The Heritage Foundation, US

ICE Pact: The Icebreaker Collaboration Effort and Arctic Security Conversation

This event will explore the strategic significance of the ICE Pact, a trilateral agreement between the U.S., Canada, and Finland aimed at bolstering Arctic security, shipbuilding capacity, and supply chain

resilience. Featuring DHS Acting Assistant Secretary Joseph Alm and Heritage Foundation experts Brent Sadler and Wilson Beaver, the discussion will focus on the One Big Beautiful Bill Act's $8.6 billion investment in U.S. icebreaker expansion and its implications for national security, economic competitiveness, and countering Russian and Chinese presence in the Arctic. For more information see [The Heritage Foundation].

29 July 2025 @ 9:00 a.m. – 10:00 a.m. (GMT-4), The Dailouge, US

China's Global Security Initiative in Latin America

This event will examine China's Global Security Initiative (GSI) and its emerging role in Latin America, where Beijing promotes it as an alternative to the U.S.-led security order. Though the GSI has gained limited traction in the region, it was prominently featured by Xi Jinping at the May 2025 China-CELAC Forum, calling for a "Zone of Peace" in the Americas. The discussion will assess how the GSI frames China's security engagement—addressing terrorism, organized crime, cybersecurity, and disaster relief—and its strategic implications. For more information, see [The Dialogue].

Recent Book Releases

Lauren Benton, ***They Called It Peace: Worlds of Imperial Violence***, Princeton University Press, 304 pages, published February 13, 2024. For a review, see [LSE].

Eric Storm, ***Nationalism: A World History***, Princeton University Press, 496 pages, published October 29, 2025. For a review, see [LSE].

James DJ Brown, ***Cracking the Crab: Russian Espionage Against Japan, from Peter the Great to Richard Sorge***, Oxford University Press, 360 pages, published May, 2025. For a review, see [Asian Review of Books].

Rory Stewart, ***Politics on the Edge: A Memoir from Within***, Penguin Books, 464 pages, published July 15, 2025. For a review, see [Penguin Books].

Ernesto Che Guevara, ***Guerrilla Warfare: Authoritative, Revised, New Edition***, Seven Stories Press, 176 pages, published July 15, 2025. For a review, see [Penguin Books].

Calls

The **Ciceronian Society invites proposals for panels, paper presentations, and roundtables for its 2026 conference** to be held March 12-14, 2026. The deadline for abstract submission is September 1, 2025. For more information, see [Ciceronian Society].

The **United Nations University World Institute for Development (UNU-WIDER)** invites paper proposals for the ***"2026 WIDER Development Conference: Growth, governance, and geopolitics in a fractured world order,"*** to be held on 18–20 March 2026, in New Delhi, India. The deadline for abstract submission is September 1, 2025. For more information, see [UNU-WIDER].

Jobs and Positions

United Nations Secretariat - US is looking for an **Judicial Affairs Officer**. The deadline for application submission is July 25, 2025. For more information, see [UN].

United Nations Development Programme - Montenegro is looking for an **National Expert for the Law on the Protection of Competition**. The deadline for application submission is August 4, 2025. For more information, see [UNDP].

Welthungerhilfe -Syria is looking for an **Food Security and Livelihoods Project Manager**. The deadline for application submission is July 27, 2025. For more information, see [Welthungerhilfe].

United Nations Environment Programme - France is looking for an **Sustainable Public Procurement Expert – Latin America**. The deadline for application submission is July 25, 2025. For more information, see [UNEP].

United Nations Secretariat – Switzerland is looking for an **Human Rights Officer (Temporary Job Opening)**. The deadline for application submission is July 25, 2025. For more information, see [UN].

United Nations Economic Commission for Europe – Switzerland is looking for an **Economic Affairs Officer**. The deadline for application submission is August 1, 2025. For more information, see [UNECE].

United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific – Thailand is looking for an **Economic Affairs Officer**. The deadline for application submission is September 1, 2025. For more information, see [UNESCAP].

University of Reading is looking for an **Lecturer in Law**. The deadline for application submission is August 18, 2025. For more information, see [University of Reading].

Royal Holloway, University of London is looking for an **Lecturer in Criminology (Teaching Focus)**. The deadline for application submission is August 1, 2025. For more information, see [University of London].

University of Oxford is looking for an **Postdoctoral Researcher - Tibetan Law**. The deadline for application submission is September 3, 2025. For more information, see [University of Oxford].

University of Hertfordshire is looking for an **Lecturer in Law**. The deadline for application submission is July 31, 2025. For more information, see [University of Hertfordshire].

Leeds International Study Centre is looking for an **Law Tutor**. The deadline for application submission is August 14, 2025. For more information, see [Leeds International Study Centre].

Team:

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